

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar T.D.
Government Buildings
Merrion St.
Dublin 2

31st July 2017

Dear Taoiseach

RE: EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF NEW NATIONAL DRUGS STRATEGY

On behalf of the community representatives involved in the National Drugs Strategy, we welcome your attendance as Taoiseach at the recent launch of the new NDS and the restatement of the government commitment that partnership will continue to be the cornerstone of the Strategy. In particular, we welcome your comment that the Strategy recognises the importance of supporting the participation of communities in key decision making structures, so that their experience and knowledge informs the development of solutions to solve problems related to substance misuse in their areas.

What is crucially important for us in your statement is the reference to “decision making” structures. In the earlier years of the National Drugs Strategy, when it had strong political support and high-level engagement from the Dept. of an Taoiseach, the structures of the NDS at local, regional and national level did have a real decision-making role. All government agencies and departments did of course maintain their statutory powers and responsibilities in implementing programmes within their remit; however, as part of this remit, they were obliged to bring proposals to the interagency structures for discussion and agreement. This was to ensure that there was cohesion and integration across service delivery and also to ensure that proposed programmes were actually meeting the needs on the ground, supported by the knowledge and experience of community reps.

For the last number of years, as community representatives on the NDS structures, we have been consistently pointing out that key policy proposals are no longer being brought to the NDS interagency structures on which communities, voluntary services and other relevant statutory agencies are represented, but are being decided instead within the confines of specific government departments and agencies. At the same time, there are examples of agencies making unilateral decisions not to attend Drug and Alcohol Task Force meetings on a regular basis, or not at all. This has brought us back to the situation that preceded the setting up of NDS structures, with a lack of cohesion and integration in our approach to the drugs issue, and ultimately this leads to policy decisions in one department or agency that are incompatible or contradictory with those of another.

In our experience, the leadership of the Dept. of an Taoiseach is essential to ensuring that agencies and departments engage in a meaningful way in the structures of the NDS by bringing policy and service proposals to the table for discussion and agreement. We look forward to your support as Taoiseach, and the support of your department, in ensuring that the new structures, as outlined in the NDS document, will operate effectively as key decision making structures in the implementation of the new NDS at local, regional and national level. Making these structures work is the key to ensuring that communities have a real voice in the decision-making process, so that their experience and knowledge informs the development of solutions to solve problems related to substance misuse in their areas.

We look forward to engaging with you, and with Ministers Simon Harris and Catherine Byrne, on these issues in the year ahead, as the new NDS structures are put in place and implementation of the NDS actions proceeds.

Yours sincerely

Fergus McCabe

Anna Quigley

National Community Representatives, NDS