

The Fergus McCabe Memorial Summer School 1st Sept 2025

Report from Discussions and Actions Identified



The amount of knowledge, experience, struggle, and achievement shared by the people in this room is incredible and we should be really proud of our collective history and the community campaigning we have been involved in over the last 30 years.

It is very easy to feel despondent when the current policy environment has become so hostile to the practice of Community Development, but we should not allow the current attitude of the state to be what defines us now.

Through our work to implement a Community Development approach to Drugs over the last 30 years, we have demonstrated that this approach works, and the evidence of this still stands, regardless of whether the state is prepared to acknowledge it or not.

We have already brought about really significant and meaningful change through our community activism to date, even though we don't often acknowledge this achievement or feel that we have made much progress. We need to collectively recognise and celebrate how much we have achieved, as it gives us hope for what more we can, and will, do in the future and helps us to find the energy to do it!

The class analysis that has been central to the community response to the drugs issue is still valid - the evidence shows us that, while there is a recognition now that people across all walks of life are using drugs, it is still the case that the worst impacts of drug-related harms continue to be in the most disadvantaged communities.

“There is little difference in the levels of drug use between areas that are most and least deprived, but it won't be a surprise to hear that **communities with high levels of deprivation are disproportionately impacted** by the negative effects of drug use activities in their local area.” HRB National Drugs Survey

We know that the 'law and order' response that still underpins our drugs policy is hugely shaped by issues of class, with the 'problem' being framed as being about individuals and individual failures and so keeping it away from broader conversations about social justice and equality. The evidence is absolutely clear that this approach has never worked and never will.

Action:

Write up the story of our Community Campaign as a case study in the power of Community Development and produce for wide circulation to a general audience

Decriminalisation

As we look back on our history as a community campaign, we can recognise how far we have come in our own analysis of drugs policy. Thirty years ago, not only were we not talking about decriminalisation, we actually thought that we didn't agree with it, but gradually we began to understand why we were wrong about this and that we needed to do something about it. We need to acknowledge how far we have come in our thinking and, as a result, how effective we have been in influencing the wider public debate. It's a hugely significant and important achievement to have reached a point where we now have the genuine possibility of real and meaningful change in the law that makes criminals of people for using drugs.

Acknowledging the extent of this achievement is also about giving ourselves the energy and the momentum to continue these conversations to the next stage, so that we can make absolutely sure that what is now the possibility of real change actually moves from a possibility to a reality.

Negative and unsupportive responses by the state can often make us lose focus on what it is we are trying to achieve, as we are too busy just trying to survive. A quote – 'the misery of dashed hope can be a real challenge, like losing an All-Ireland final!' When we face this kind of challenge, we don't have to allow it to define us, instead, we keep our focus on the change that we want to bring about. And let's remind ourselves, the evidence is overwhelmingly on our side.

Action:

Set out what we want to see as the model for implementing decriminalisation and identify the next steps in making it happen

Community role in decision making

A crucial element of the structures set up as a result of community campaigning and activism in the 1990s was that decision-making power was decentralised out of government departments and agencies, with the DATFs being given the autonomy to develop their own local plans based on local needs. In recent years we have seen that power being recentralised, resulting in a situation now where existing structures provide us with an illusion of having access to power but are really about us being expected to rubber-stamp decisions that have already been made elsewhere by others.

Decision-making in relation to drugs policy is currently dominated by centres of power within the Health and Justice departments, who define the issues according to their analysis and make the decisions about what will happen in response. This centralised and controlled approach is not the model that has been set out for us in RHR and we should be clear that we do not accept it, not because we are being difficult or unco-operative, but because it is not an effective approach in meeting the needs in our communities.

The question was raised that, if we are not involved in the formal structures, how do we ensure our communities have a place in the conversation and in the decision-making? With non-participation in structures as an option, do we have to look at finding alternative ways to have a meaningful voice in drugs policy and think about how to build alternative structures???

Action:

Campaign to have the 3 National Community Networks – Citywide, UISCE and FARI – appointed to the Steering Group to develop the next NDS so that we are involved in shaping its analysis, its actions and its structures.

Citizens’ Assembly & the Oireachtas Committee on Drugs

As well as drawing motivation from our history to date, we are also constantly on the lookout for new ways of doing things and new tools we can use to support our work. There is a really significant resource available to us now with the recommendations from the Citizen’s Assembly and the Interim Report of the Oireachtas Committee. It is interesting to note that while the two consultation processes were different in nature – one engaging with a representative selection of ordinary citizens and the other engaging with national politicians – the two sets of recommendations strongly support and validate each other. This strengthens our case when we say, very clearly, that the Evidence is on our side!

Action:

Prepare a document that sets out the key recommendations of the Citizens’ Assembly and the Oireachtas Committee and draw up a plan for actively highlighting them as part of our campaigning

Right to dissent

Knowing the evidence is on our side is one thing, but we also have to acknowledge the real and valid concerns that Community Organisations and Activists have about the possible consequences of being too vocal about it. A recent report by ICCL¹ has drawn attention to this situation, talking about how the Community and Voluntary sector is frequently shut down by being told “that’s not your role”. The fear that people feel in this regard is a justified fear and there is a real threat of consequences if an organisation is seen to be getting too “cheeky”. We need to start naming this reality and calling it out. Collective solidarity is essential and organisations that dissent need to have everyone’s backing.

¹ [Thats-Not-Your-Role-WEB.pdf](#)

The EU Civil Society Forum on Drugs has produced a ***Document on Quality Standards for Civil Society Involvement in Drug Policy*** which sets out the following...

“Involving civil society is not a cherry-picking and box-ticking exercise and it should not be used to rubber stamp decisions. **The autonomy and right of dissent of civil society actors is an essential and integral part of meaningful engagement in democracies and should be both expected and respected as part of the process.** The purpose of dissent is to ensure that policy is informed by views and experiences that are wider than those of the state actors alone and it should be seen in this light as a constructive contribution to the policy-making process.”

Action:

We need to openly claim the Right to Dissent as a core principle in the next NDS and continue to link in with the work that ICCL is doing to highlight the issue

Developing a Human Rights Perspective

The voice of those with living and lived experience of using drugs is a core part of the community voice and, in theory, people within the system want to hear these voices but, in practice, this is often conditional. Structures will make space for those who used drugs in the past, while excluding the voices of people who are currently using. We need to be clear that this is not acceptable, it is not up to anyone else to decide for people who use drugs who will speak on their behalf. And it's also clear that you can't get the full story of drug use experience unless you are including both people who have used in the past and people who are currently using.

UISCE is working to bring about the conditions that allow people who use drugs to discuss and explore the drugs issue through their own living experiences, giving them space to create their own analysis and develop demands and ideas based on that analysis. People who use drugs are often asked or expected to provide stories of personal trauma, without it being acknowledged that they have the knowledge and experience that can inform and play a key part of our political and policy thinking.

We recognise that the human rights element of the drugs issue is underdeveloped in our conversations to date and we need to increase our understanding around how drug policy can be framed as a human rights issue. A starting point for these conversations is, for example, to look at the potential for human rights precedents at European level to have significant relevance for the drugs issue.

Action:

We need to develop our understanding of how drugs policy can be framed as a Human Rights issue and link in with IHREC for further discussions

Young People

We recognise the need for us to engage with young people who are involved in the sale and supply of drugs and listen to their voices and their experience. The activities the young people are involved in can lead to them being seen in the local community as ‘profiteering’ and not caring about the damage they might be causing to the community they live in. The reality is that most are involved in the drugs trade for economic reasons and often do not believe they are doing any harm, this is just how their world works. We are being inconsistent in our analysis if we continue to exclude these young people’s voices from the conversation just because they have been involved in selling drugs.

Action:

Look at a follow up piece of work on a key recommendation on engagement with young people from our previous research on Young People’s Involvement in the Drugs Trade

Women

The existing structures can be particularly toxic for women who are using drugs, who often face additional levels of trauma around issues such as abuse and sex work, and this in turn results in many extra barriers in moving towards recovery. There is a need for us to develop more targeted supports that can facilitate genuine inclusion of women’s voices, such as specific working groups and focus groups that provide appropriate and safe spaces for women to have conversations and present their own ideas and proposals.

Action:

In conjunction with launching the Research on Women and the Drugs Trade, we can look at how a more in-depth discussion on the issue of safe spaces for women can be facilitated

Task Forces

The Task Force Chairpersons’ Network have a key role to play in lobbying and campaigning and in mobilising the capacity of the Task Forces to influence the public debate. As Community Reps, we should aim to engage more actively and strategically with them, so we can carry out joint initiatives and support each other’s work. Over the years we have been involved in developing materials for lobbying TDs and Councillors and sometimes it can feel like just going through the motions, so we need to look now at how we energise that work again. We need to develop a more focused and consistent Communications Strategy so that we can engage more effectively with our existing allies in the media and also develop new allies.

Action:

Start a conversation and engage with/build the relationship with the Task Force Chairpersons' Network

Community Research

Our community organisations have carried out and used research really effectively over the years, covering a wide range of issues and topics relating to drugs. We should continue to identify opportunities to do our own community research and capitalise on how powerful research can be as a tool for public communication and policy development.

Community Research can also play a really important role in opening up more spaces where we can bring people together for real conversations and meaningful analysis in a way that feels safe, helping us to break out of silos and build a collective power that will enable us to protect and promote a Community Development approach to drugs.

Action:

Identify a number of key topics for community research and develop a research programme for the next couple of years that is realistic and realisable.

Examples of good practise involving state actors

Even though the overall environment is not supportive of Community Development, there are still examples of where a Community Development process is being supported by state actors in our communities and there was interest in hearing about where this might be happening.

An example was given of a recent experience in Co. Wicklow from which positive lessons can be taken. Community groups were reluctant to engage after being ignored for years, but through an engagement with a member of staff at Wicklow County Council a process has been successfully established that has resulted in a diverse range of voices being heard.

Action:

We can look in more detail to identify what makes this particular example work. Let us know of any other examples of good practice that might be out there...?

Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign

8 October 2025