

**SUPPORTING COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND
COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION ON
DRUG AND ALCOHOL TASK FORCES (DATF)**



A COMMUNITY RESOURCE DOCUMENT TO SUPPORT THE DATF
HANDBOOK

July 2021

Community Development Response to Community Drug Problems

Problem drug use impacts in the first place on the individuals and families who are experiencing it and it also becomes an issue that impacts on the wider community. Serious problem drug use in Ireland first emerged in communities experiencing large-scale social and economic deprivation and marginalisation and the drugs problem in these economically marginalised communities has become chronic, deep-rooted and embedded, impacting negatively on all aspects of community life.

At the same time, the impact of the drugs problem has now extended across the country into other cities, towns and rural areas, and we are hearing from our communities about the growing drug problems in small towns and villages and the often-hidden drug use in rural

A community drug problem develops when there is a high concentration of drug problems in a particular area and a lack of resources to address

areas. [‘Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery’](#) recognises and reaffirms the community development approach that underpins the National Drugs Strategy with a specific commitment to engaging 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.

The Drug Task Force structures were set up to deliver a flexible approach that allows for responses that meet local needs in different community settings, to enable decision-making at local and regional level about the actions required and draw up plans to implement these actions. The Drug Task Force model has been recognised both nationally and internationally as an innovative and effective approach and a core element of the model is recognising the value of community expertise in our responses to the impact of the drugs problem.

What is Community Expertise?



Community Expertise is the knowledge and understanding that people have of what it's like to live in their community and of the impact the drugs problem is having on people's lives and on their quality of life.

What is Community Engagement?



Community Engagement is about what we do to make sure that we recognise and build on this Community Expertise by having an independent community voice as a core part of our response to the drugs problem.

Community Engagement is essential to the delivery of the NDS and it is a key responsibility of the overall DATF to support and facilitate community engagement in its work. **DATF Community Reps** have a formal and official role on the DATF as equal partners with all of the other DATF members and the Community Reps are supported by the DATF to play the lead role on actions in relation to community engagement and to ensure that all aspects of the work of the DATF are informed by Community Expertise. Representatives of People who use Drugs and of Family members of People who use Drugs are also included in community membership of the DATF, although Community Reps are reporting that currently there are a limited number of DATFs where this representation is in place.

With increasing diversity in our communities there is a need to make sure that we are including people who are part of specific communities of identity i.e. Travellers, Black and Ethnic minorities, LGBTI+ as an additional part of our community representation. Again, current engagement of representatives from these communities on DATFs is limited and this is recognised as a challenge that needs to be addressed.

What does Community Engagement look like?

The ideal situation is that the DATF is linked into the wider community through a **community network structure** that brings together people from a wide range of community groups and organisations. The Community Network can provide a mechanism both for nomination of the DATF Community Rep and for supporting the Community Rep in their role through ongoing engagement and feedback on issues relating to drugs in the community.

A strong community network can support increased engagement with family support groups and representatives of people who use drugs and also provides a great opportunity to include and support members of minority communities and their representative groups.



A crucial feature of community engagement is to have a community voice that is supported by the DATF to be independent. The EU Civil Society Forum on Drugs has produced a Document on Quality Standards for Civil Society Involvement In Drug Policy which sets out this key principle of EU Drug Policy "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."

Do we have the Community Networks in place to carry out this role?

Experience is very varied across different areas but the current reality as reported by Community Reps is that many areas do not have active community networks/fora or that where there is a network/forum in place it may not have a focus on the drugs issue. Some areas did have active networks in the past but they are either no longer in place or are less effective due to a lack of resources for community development and community networking activities. Some networks that are still in place continue to engage in the DATF nomination process but have less resources to do so.

In some regional areas the PPN is involved in nominating the Community Reps, while in other areas it is not active in this role. It is generally reported by Regional Community Reps that the drugs issue is not on the agenda at PPN meetings and that there are no PPN Linkage Groups in place that have a specific focus on the drugs issue.



So, we recognise that, in the absence in many areas of strong and well-resourced community networks, Task Forces and communities are facing a challenge in meeting the responsibility to support community engagement. It is crucial to the effectiveness of the Task Forces that this challenge is met.

The role of the DATFs in supporting Community Engagement

In all of our communities, we have many people who are actively engaged with groups, clubs and projects, and who are willing to volunteer their time to take part in local activities and events. In real life the drugs issue crosses over with a whole load of other issues so people who are active on other issues can have a lot to offer through their community knowledge and experience.

We also have significant numbers of people who are living with the impact of drugs, whether through personal or family experience and/or people whose quality of life is impacted by issues in the community relating to drug use and the drugs trade. We need to be aware that the people most impacted by drug use can be experiencing levels of stigma and fear that will stop them from engaging and the DATF has a responsibility to do all it can to ensure that these voices are heard.

So how can we support the role of the DATFs in engaging both with people in the wider community and with the people who are most affected by the impact of drugs?



The key point in every community is to start from where you are at. Where there is a Community Network in place, the DATF Community Reps and the Network can work in partnership. Where there is no network in place, the DATF Community Reps can take the lead.

Most DATFs are engaging in the following activities on an ongoing basis:

- Drawing on the local knowledge of current Community Reps and the information arising from the DATF community mapping process
- Targeting people active in the community with an interest in the drugs issue or related issues
- Engaging with people who are active in the community on general issues other than drugs
- Targeting Communities of Interest in partnership with their representative groups
- Engaging with Young People in partnership with Youth Services, including outreach services

Our experience shows that we need to support and facilitate different levels of community engagement so that people can get involved in a way that works for them, ranging from an informal and/or occasional role to the formal role of DATF Community Rep.

Four levels of Community Engagement



Engagement at Level 1 - Community Messenger

1 There are people who are active on the ground in our communities but who are not interested in going to meetings or being part of committees. But they can still be a resource for the DATF in acting as a link with the wider community – they often have huge knowledge and insight around what is going on in the community and can be in a position to reach people that the DATF would not otherwise be reaching. They are out and about and known to and connected with a lot of people in the area. The Community Reps will know who these people are in their own communities and they can link in with them on an informal basis and look for their help in “getting the word out”, by chatting to their neighbours about what the TF does, circulating information on its services, identifying public places for leaving info, posters etc., doing leaflet drops. The role should not involve a lot of additional work as it can be done as part of the engagement people already have with their neighbours and friends.

Engagement at Level 2 - Attending public/general meeting of the DATF

2 There should be an opportunity for people in the community to attend at least one General Community Meeting per year on the drugs issue; this meeting can be organised by a network where there is one active, if not, it can be organised by the DATF.

The General Community meeting will have the following objectives

- To facilitate an area based public meeting open to all in the community who are interested in the drugs issue
- To facilitate and support the inclusion of members of minority communities in the meeting
- To provide information on what the DATF does and how it works
- To get feedback from people on their issues and concerns

- To set out the process for selection of Community Reps and support new Community Reps to come forward

The DATF will engage with its Community Reps Group, including reps from Communities of Interest, on the planning, organising and promoting of the public meeting and will provide the resources that are required.

In the current context of drug-related intimidation and fear many people in the community do not want to be identified as speaking up on the drugs issue and in some specific areas, Community Reps do not see a public meeting on the drugs issue as a viable option. *Where this is the case, the option of a Restricted Forum may be considered, where an invitation list is put together by the TF and the Community Reps.*

Our experience as a result of Covid 19 has shown us that Zoom and other online platforms can be used to facilitate both public and restricted meetings and this is an important additional tool to support community engagement on an ongoing basis. It can be of particular value in a regional area where it may be the case that there is no one venue that will work for people from across different parts of a county or across counties due to the distances that people have to travel.

Engagement at level 3 - Participate in ongoing meetings

3

As public meetings are unlikely to happen more than once a year, it is important for the DATF to provide a space for people in the community who are interested in being involved on a more regular basis in discussions on drug-related issues.

It is also important for the Community Reps that there is a group of people from the community who can come together on a regular basis to support the reps in carrying out their role on the Task Force.

This type of group is often called a Community Advisory Group and will include the DATF Community Reps and other community members who express an interest at the general meeting or who are contacted as a result of their activity in the community.

The Community Advisory Group will have the following objectives:

- To provide a space where the current Community Reps and members of the community who have an interest in becoming involved can come together.
- To include people from areas of the community that are not currently engaged with the DTF.
- To give people a better understanding of the role of the community rep on the Task Force and to encourage them to become involved, with the option of initially engaging as sub-committee members if they so choose.

- To identify how the necessary support and skills and knowledge will be provided for people willing to become involved.
- To provide an ongoing forum for discussion of issues affecting the community as a support to the Community Reps, ideally meeting monthly in advance of each Task Force meeting.

Engagement at Level 4 - Becoming a Community Rep

4

Through engagement at Levels 1, 2 and 3, people will emerge with the interest and potential to become involved as Community Reps. Positions can be advertised or promoted in tandem with the annual public meeting or at any other time when there is a position vacant. People can be nominated for the role if they have an understanding of the role (p7) and meet the criteria (p8). Nominations can be brought forward in a number of ways, according to the arrangement agreed with the DATF– examples include nomination by a community network, nomination from a general meeting or from a Community Advisory Group, nomination from a specific community organisation, nomination by existing Community Reps.

How do we make sure we include the hardest to reach?

As stated earlier, formal structures and meetings tend to end up excluding the people most affected and by definition the hardest to reach. This is why the criteria for the role of Community Rep includes having knowledge and experience of local drug issues either through personal experience, involvement in local community or working in a drugs project, so the Community Reps are in a position to work with the DATF to reach the people most affected.

Community Reps and the DATF will work together to consider the following questions and to develop effective channels of communication that will work best in the local setting:

- ➔ Who are the people who are most affected?
- ➔ Where are they located?
- ➔ Who are they connected to?
- ➔ How do they want to be heard?

Pages 11-14 set out the role of the DATF Community Rep as outlined in the Citywide Resource Pack.

Task Force Supports for Community Engagement

What supports can the DATF provide for Community Engagement?

It is important that engaging with the wider community is seen as part of the overall role of the Task Force and not just as the responsibility of the Community Reps. The Community Reps should be supported in their engagement with the community by all of the Task Force members and by the overall Task Force.

Community Awareness Activities

As part of the DATF role to promote a strong profile for the DATF in the community, these are examples of DATF activities that all members can engage with:

- TF Open Days/Exhibitions
- School/Youth competitions
- Drug and Alcohol Awareness sessions in schools, youth services, parents' groups etc.
- Creative Drama and Arts events
- Public events e.g. Memorials, Award ceremonies
- Newsletter – house drop
- Flyers in public places e.g. Council, SW, GPs, HSE, Libraries, Supermarkets, Post Office
- Engagement with local media

DATF Community Engagement Plan

The DATF has responsibility for implementation of NDS Action 4.1.39 in its area and the DATF Strategic Plan will include specific actions on community engagement and identify the resources required to deliver on these actions. The Strategy will also take account of the Public Sector Duty to set out a pro-active approach to engaging with minority groups.

Expenses

The DATF should ensure it has a timely and user-friendly system in place for reimbursement of travel and other expenses that may be incurred by Community Reps as a result of their DATF role and as part of networking activities with Community Reps from other DATFs.

Addiction Studies Course

Addiction Studies Courses have in the past attracted a range of people from different backgrounds and varying life experiences. As well as increasing knowledge and understanding of the drugs issue in the community generally, they have been an effective way of identifying and recruiting DATF Community Reps. Due to funding constraints, only a limited number of DATFs can still offer access to Addiction Studies Courses.

Small Grants Fund

DATFs are no longer allowed to operate the Small Grant Fund, which in the past enabled DATFs to use local knowledge to allocate small sums of money in ways that made a real difference. It helped to increase awareness of the DATF, support its community profile and build community

solidarity, representing really good value for money. The feasibility of restoring a similar type of Fund should be looked at a national level.

Who will take on role of co-ordinating/facilitating implementation of the Community Engagement Plan?

Experience to date shows the importance of having a specific dedicated worker in each DATF area assigned to the role of working with the DATF Community Reps to support community engagement. A number of DATFs employ Development Workers who carry out this role and the ideal would be for this to be standard practice. In other areas, the role is being carried out in different ways, often according to what community development roles are already in place locally. Current examples include an employee of the Local Development Company, a SICAP project or another Community project.

What elements will require additional funding?

The National Community Development Plan sets out a role for the Dept of Health and the DATFs to support the delivery of a community development approach as part of the implementation of the NDS. This requires targeted resources to be made available for community networking initiatives that will support community engagement and part of the DATFs role is to advocate for these additional resources, which cannot be provided from their current limited budgets.

External Supports for Community Engagement

Citywide/Urrús Community Reps training

This training is for current and potential community representatives on local and regional drug and alcohol task forces. The programme will give learners the opportunity to understand how task force and national drug policy structures function. The programme will also provide learners with the opportunity to explore their roles and responsibilities as community representatives and to develop the necessary skills to represent local community issues at these structures.

Citywide role in networking and representation

Networking for community representatives is a key support for the role and needs to be encouraged. A crucial part of that role is their coming together to identify issues of common concern, so as to have a joint input and impact on policy development. Citywide facilitates and supports networking of Community Reps from across the DATFs through general meetings, issue-specific meetings, seminars and workshops. It also works with the Community Reps network in drafting submissions and discussion documents, and in circulating relevant information. As set out in RHSR, Citywide represents the Community Sector on the National Oversight Committee for the NDS, with two national reps in place, one specifically from the regional areas.

Drug Task Force Community Representatives

The overall objective of having Community Representatives on Drug Task Forces is to ensure that the work of the Task Forces is based on and informed by:

- the reality of drug use and how it impacts on our communities and
- the need to identify the most appropriate, relevant and timely responses for those communities.

Overall Role of a Drug Task Force Community Representative is:

- To bring the benefit of your own local knowledge and experience of the drugs issue to the Task Force.
- To act as a representative on behalf of the community at the Task Force.

Your role in the community

- To provide information to the community on the work of the Task Force.
- To organise and facilitate discussion and debate in the community.
- Provide feedback to the Task Force from the community discussion and debate.

The Supports you need for this role

- ✓ A Structure in the community to allow you to feedback information and to identify issues; this can happen through an existing community network or may require a new networking group to deal specifically with the drugs issue. The key principle is that there should be a structure in place that is open to everyone in the community that has an interest in the drugs issue and that wants to participate.
- ✓ Shared responsibility with the Task Force and other community people; community reps are not responsible on their own for ensuring there is a community feedback structure in place, your Task Force and other local community groups also have a role to play.
- ✓ Shared responsibility with other Task Force members for the work of the Task Force; all Task Force members are in place to facilitate a more effective response to the drug problem in your area.

Your role in the Task Force

- Shared responsibility with other Task Force members for the work of the Task Force; all Task Force members are in place to facilitate a more effective response to the drug problem in your area.
- Actively participate in full Task Force meetings and sub-group or Working Groups and ensure you have a say in the decision-making process
- Ask questions if there is any issue that you are not clear about or if you need more information.
- Go through the documentation that is circulated in advance of Task Force meetings, there can be a lot of it.
- Meet in advance of all Task Force meetings with the other community representatives on your Task Force to discuss the agenda and to develop common objectives and approaches on behalf of the community.



The Practical Supports you need for this role

- ✓ Timely delivery of all relevant documentation
- ✓ Access to administration and office facilities
- ✓ Email and social media access, including Zoom etc.
- ✓ Technical assistance and training, including remote access
- ✓ Timely payment for Expenses incurred as part of the role
- ✓ Access to training on relevant issues

Criteria for Community Representatives

- Live in the area from which they are nominated;
- Are fully committed to the aims and objectives of the DATF;
- Are able to give an undertaking of the necessary time commitment to carry out the role effectively;
- Have a track record of involvement in the local community;
- Have knowledge and experience of local drug issues either through personal experience, involvement in local community or working in a drugs project.

Guidelines for Community Representatives

- Community reps are nominated as people who can represent the interests of the wider community (through whatever kind of community structure/network is in place in your community). Their role, therefore, is to bring the view of the wider community to the Task Force and to keep their community informed on the Task Force's work.
- Community representatives are **not** members of the Task Force as individuals and they are **not** there to represent the interests of any particular organisation.
- It is often the case that local residents who have an interest in and knowledge of the drugs issue will also be involved with a local organisation, either as a volunteer or a worker. In situations where a person selected as a community rep is also either a worker or Board member of a project that is funded by the Task Force, he/she should be made aware of the standard conflict of interest procedures that apply when he/she takes on the role of the Community Rep.
- Nominations should be for a period of at least two years and can be subject to review by the Community Network after that time period.
- The general principle is that there should be a balance on the overall Community Reps group between people who have experience of the role, having been in it for a while, and people who are newer to it.

Communities of Interest

In addition to area-based communities, there are non-geographic communities who experience specific exclusion and disadvantage. These specific communities of interest should be included in the work of the Task Force as community members and their participation should be facilitated by the Task Force. Communities of interest include:

- People who use Drugs
- Family members of people who use drugs
- Members of the Traveller community
- Members of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender (LGBTI+) community
- Members of Black and Ethnic Minority and migrant communities.

Each Task Force is responsible for facilitating and supporting the engagement of communities of interest and the Community Reps can work with the DATF in looking at how groups representing communities of interest can be engaged, taking into account existing relationships with representatives of these communities and/or the need to build new relationships. We have already noted that Community Networks can play a key role in supporting this engagement.

Voice for Young People

Young people provide essential insights into how drug-related issues are impacting on their lives and the lives of their peers and can help shape the responses that are needed. We need to change the situation where issues relating to young people and drugs are usually discussed without the engagement of young people and the voices of young people should be heard and facilitated at the Task Force.

Community Reps and the DATF can engage with the Youth Services in there are to agree a way to facilitate engagement – examples include at least one of the area reps being a young person aged 18 to 25 or having specific youth representation in addition to the area reps.

The Task Force Community Reps Group

One of the key supports for the role of the Community Rep is participation in the DATF Community Reps Group. This provides the opportunity to meet in advance of all Task Force meetings with the other community representatives on your Task Force to discuss the agenda and to develop common approaches.

Overall Aim of Community Reps Group:

To ensure that the voice of the community is represented at Task Force meetings and that the focus of the underlying causes of drug use, such as inequality and social disadvantage, remain central to the mission of the Task Force.

Objectives:

To provide solidarity and support for each other

To provide a forum for community reps to meet and collectively consider upcoming agenda items of the TF in order to be able to effectively respond

To provide a forum for community reps to discuss and prepare input on specific areas/themes relevant to the community that are important for discussion at TF meetings

To provide a forum for support amongst community reps that is independent of the Task Force itself and identify further supports and training required.

Membership:

Membership of the Community Reps Group will comprise of both the geographical Community Reps and the Community of Interest Reps.