

## A Citizens Assembly on Drugs - Why do we need it now?

**Because we cannot afford to wait any longer for a change in our approach to drugs policy in Ireland, it is literally a matter of life and death:**

- ✗ **Drug deaths have increased by 225%** between 1998 and 2017 (by comparison road deaths over that period reduced by 68%);
- ✗ **10,549 people have been recorded as having died** from drug-related deaths in that time period and this is likely to be a significant underestimate of the actual number.
- ✗ As the most recent figures available are from 2017, the **total does not include the people who have died during 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021.**

### **We urgently need a wider public debate on drugs policy...**

The Community and Voluntary sectors have been making the case for many years now that, whatever the reason for drug use, making someone a criminal for using a drug brings no benefits and causes significant additional harms, and contributes significantly to drug related stigma. This position has been supported at Oireachtas level

- A **2015 report by the Oireachtas Justice Committee** showed a cross-party political consensus that Ireland needed to move away from criminalising people who are using drugs. A **Dept of Health Think Tank in July 2015** saw support across government departments and agencies to move in this direction.
- Research carried out for the **2019 report of the Working Group to consider Alternative Approaches** to Possession recommended depenalisation of the most minor drug possession offences such as cannabis or for a 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> offence and decriminalisation with targeted diversion for people at higher-risk.
- The scheme that was announced by government as the **Health Diversion Programme** is far more restrictive and limited in its scope than the research recommendation. In particular it does not decriminalise people at higher-risk who are likely to be found on multiple occasions in the possession of drugs for their own use.

## And more recently...

The report on [research into drug-related violence and intimidation carried out in Dublin North East Inner City in 2021](#) recommends opening up a discussion on changing the legal framework and that policy makers should consider whether the current regulatory framework under which substances are controlled is fit for purpose.

[Youth Workers Against Prohibition](#) is a network of people who are engaging in their day- to-day work with young people whose lives are significantly impacted by drug use and the drugs market, and they are calling for an open discussion on how we can develop a better response.

## Link between serious drug problems and poverty

- ✘ A Citizen's Assembly needs to consider the evidence of the strong and persistent link between serious drug problems and poverty, and the particularly damaging impact of those problems on the poorest communities. **Part of the brief for the Citizens Assembly must be to consider how the National Drugs Strategy can be part of a broader societal response to addressing poverty, inequality and marginalisation.**
- ✘ We know that evidence shows there is an uneven application of the law to different socio-economic groups and that the criminal law targets marginalised groups; the use of a criminal framework to address the drugs issue is compounding the drug policy harms to the poorest communities and there is an urgent need to reform this unjust and discriminatory policy approach.

## Why a Citizens Assembly?

Right now, there is nowhere within the official National Drugs Strategy (NDS) structures that discussion and debate on these crucial issues is being facilitated and, in this context, it is all the more urgent that the government delivers on its commitment to set up a Citizens Assembly on Drugs without further delay. The Citizens Assembly will provide a civic space to look at the evidence and agree the policy changes that are needed - as a society, we cannot afford to wait any longer for this debate to take place.

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