



Minister Catherine Byrne T.D.
Dept. of Health
Hawkins House
Dublin 2

8th December 2017

RE: WORKING GROUP ON ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO POSSESSION OF DRUGS FOR PERSONAL USE

Dear Minister

On behalf of Citywide, we very much welcome the establishment of the Working Group to consider alternative approaches to the possession of drugs for personal use and the appointment of a highly skilled and experienced Chairperson in the person of retired Judge Garrett Sheehan. We also welcome the significant expertise from across the statutory sector that will be represented on the Group and, in particular, welcome the engagement of representatives of people who have used drugs, which is a very positive development. However, as the group who led out on the inclusion of this action in the new NDS, we are taken aback that the significant expertise and experience on this issue that we have developed over many years will not be used for the benefit of the Working Group through inclusion of Citywide as members.

Citywide has played a lead role in opening up and informing the debate in our communities on treating drug use as a health issue rather than a criminal justice one. Through our engagement over many years, we have developed a broad and comprehensive understanding of the concerns and considerations that arise as part of the debate and this has informed our work in helping to shape public opinion. If we look back ten years ago or more, the members of our community networks, living and working in the communities most affected by problematic drug use, were reluctant to discuss an approach that meant reducing criminal sanctions in relation to drugs. But over time the debate began to emerge around how criminalising people who use drugs was only making things worse for them and putting up barriers for the local services who were trying to support them in moving on in their lives. Through a combination of lived experience and independent evidence, our community networks have come to support an approach which no longer deals with people who use drugs as criminals.

This led to a recommendation in the 2012 Citywide Policy Document that we participate in an open debate on issues of decriminalisation of people who use drugs and we have been actively engaged

since then in facilitating the debate and developing the evidence base. In May 2013 Citywide organised a national conference “Criminalising Addiction – is there another way?” with expert speakers from the HRB and from the UK who presented an overview of the available evidence. This was the first time that all of the stakeholders in Irish drugs policy across statutory, community and voluntary sectors came together to discuss issues around alternatives to criminalisation for drug use.

Our follow up work to the seminar involved two main elements: developing our own knowledge of the evidence base through international contacts and research and promoting discussion and debate on the issues through ongoing activities, including local community meetings, national family support meetings, inputs to seminars and drug awareness events. Citywide has met with politicians of all parties and groupings to brief them on the issues and has continued to provide information to them on an ongoing basis.

In July 2015 Citywide was invited to present on the issue of alternatives to criminalisation at a Think Tank organised by Minister Aodhán Ó Ríordáin and the Drugs Policy Unit in the Dept. of Health. This event was attended by all stakeholders in the National Drugs Strategy across statutory departments and agencies, Drug Task Forces and the voluntary and community sectors. In October 2015 Citywide was invited to make an oral presentation to the Oireachtas Justice Committee on alternative approaches to possession. In November 2015 Citywide organised a workshop at its national conference which discussed and debated the Oireachtas Justice Committee report in the context of the international evidence. At a follow up conference one year later in November 2016 international speakers provided updates on the most recent policy developments at an international level.

In May 2017 Citywide was invited by Senator Lynn Ruane to present at an Oireachtas briefing on a Private Members Bill on removal of criminal sanctions for possession which received significant support in principle across all political parties. Through our membership of the EU Civil Society Forum on Drugs for the last ten years and our involvement with the International Drugs Policy Consortium (IDPC) we have gained significant insights in to the experiences of other countries and have developed a wide range of international contacts who have extensive expertise in the drug policy area. Citywide has also done significant work to make the evidence base more accessible to the general public through the development of a resource on our website. The development of the resource was overseen by professional researchers and a recent HRB Drugs Net article provides an overview of the content.

As members of the NDS National Oversight Committee and the Standing Sub-committee on Implementation we are committed to actively supporting the effective delivery of all actions in the National Drugs Strategy *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery*. In relation to the Working Group that has now been established in line with Action 3.1.35, it is clear that our experience and expertise on this issue, as set out in this letter, fully equips us to participate as members of the Group and that our membership would be of significant benefit to it.

Yours sincerely

Fergus McCabe

Anna Quigley

NDS Community Representatives