

Open Letter to the Irish Government

Taoiseach Michael Martin,
Leinster House,
Kildare Street,
Dublin 2

28th March 2022

Re: The urgent need to convene a Citizens' Assembly on drugs

Taoiseach,

Under Ireland's regime of drug criminalisation, harmful drug use has only increased. In the decade between 2008 and 2017, annual drug-related deaths in Ireland rose from 630 to 786.¹ We are now at a point where two people will die a drug-related death every day in Ireland. Every single one of these people are beloved family members and friends, and every single loss will be felt deeply by those left behind. But some communities will feel these losses far more than others. People from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas will be hugely overrepresented in these overdose deaths.

On a local level, areas of high socioeconomic deprivation have been the worst affected by drugs. The number of people accessing support through drug and alcohol task forces in Tallaght has doubled in the last 10 years.² There has been a 75 per cent increase in drug-related crime in Tallaght alone since 2018. Despite the steadily growing needs of local drug and alcohol task forces, funding for these services was slashed by almost 80 per cent between 2010 and 2015.³ To this day, their funding has still not been restored to pre-austerity levels. The Tallaght task force had a budget of €1.3 million in 2010, but only €1.2 million in 2021. It has called for an additional €1 million in funding to support its work, including its response to the crack cocaine epidemic which is now reaching breaking point. The failure to properly fund services in areas which need them most perpetuates profound harm to poorer communities. In Ireland's National Drugs and Alcohol Survey, those in the most deprived communities report being the worst impacted by drugs.

The underfunding of drug and alcohol services and supports has hit disadvantaged communities particularly hard, but the underfunding is clearly a national problem. Over 3,500 people were waiting for a drug or alcohol detox bed in Ireland, as of February 2021, with over 2,200 on the waiting list for at least nine months.⁴ Detox beds only exist in six of the nine HSE Community Health Organisation (CHO) areas.

We are joining our voices together to tell the Government very clearly that this is no longer acceptable. It is no longer acceptable for the Irish government to treat the issue of drug use in Ireland with such a lack of urgency. We are issuing a call to the Government to

¹ <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/31275/1/National%20Drug-Related%20Deaths%20Index%202008%20to%202017%20data.pdf>

² <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/extra-1m-in-funding-needed-to-support-tallaght-drugs-and-alcohol-task-force-1.4722958>

³ http://www.drugs.ie/news/article/local_drugs_taskforces_endure_budget_cuts_of_more_than_90

⁴ <https://www.thejournal.ie/detox-bed-waiting-list-5421391-Apr2021/>

immediately set a firm date for a Citizens' Assembly on drugs this year. We simply cannot wait any longer.

The issue of drugs is a priority for so many individuals, families, organisations, and groups. Why? Because drugs impact all sectors of society.

Drugs strongly impact on homeless people and homeless services. 70 per cent of the Dublin Simon Community's detox clients in 2020 cited addiction and substance abuse as their primary reason for becoming homeless.⁵ Problem drug use is higher among people who are homeless. Studies in 2015 indicated that around one-quarter of people in emergency accommodation or rough sleeping in Ireland had injected drugs within the past year.⁶ Survey responses suggested that polysubstance use was as high as 71 per cent in this population.

Not only is drug use often cited as a root cause of homelessness in Ireland, but homelessness itself often triggers problem drug use. In 2021, RTE Investigates surveyed 80 people sleeping rough in Dublin. 48 per cent of the 80 people surveyed said they were not addicted to drugs before becoming homeless. However, 50 per cent of those who weren't previously addicted to drugs ended up developing addiction problems while homeless, primarily with heroin.⁷

Drugs are increasingly becoming a women's issue, too. Women now account for 30 per cent of crack users engaging with drug support services in west Tallaght.⁸ A recent report by the Tallaght Drug and Alcohol Task Force warned that women experiencing addiction are particularly vulnerable to drug-related intimidation and forced behaviours.⁹ 1 in 6 of Dublin Simon Community's detox clients in 2020 were women. While men are generally overrepresented in drug-related deaths and detox beds in Ireland, the number of women experiencing problem drug use and drug-related harm is rising. The National Drug and Alcohol Survey report in 2021 showed that cocaine use increased almost six-fold in a five-year period, among women aged 15 to 24 years.¹⁰ As problem drug use among women increases, they will be vulnerable to a particular set of gendered risks.

Children experience hidden harm due to drug abuse. Tusla has estimated that 1 in 11 children or young people across Ireland are living in a situation where alcohol or drug use is a problem.¹¹ Many studies have indicated that parental substance abuse is detrimental to child well-being, with these negative effects being most pronounced for parental drug abuse.¹²

⁵ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/addiction-and-substance-abuse-primary-reason-for-homelessness-says-charity-1.4682122>

⁶

https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/2_Plugin_related_files/Publications/2021_publications/2021_HIE/Evidence_Centre/Evidence_review_of_drug_treatment_services_for_people_who_are_homeless_and_use_drugs.pdf

⁷ <https://www.rte.ie/news/investigations-unit/2021/01/17/1190250-stuck-in-the-rough-sleeping-homelessness-dublin/>

⁸ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/crack-cocaine-in-west-tallaght-this-epidemic-is-so-new-and-came-so-fast-1.4721957>

⁹ https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/35103/1/TDATF_Research_Report-FINAL.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/six-fold-increase-in-cocaine-use-among-young-women-1.4608115>

¹¹ https://www.tusla.ie/uploads/content/Leaflet_Jan_16th.pdf

¹² <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/development-and-psychopathology/article/enduring-effects-of-parental-alcohol-tobacco-and-drug-use-on-child-wellbeing-a-multilevel-metaanalysis/CBDF7A2308D3F37B2AE20079C4834B7A>

Adolescents are increasingly affected by drugs, whether through their own problem use, or through being groomed into dealing themselves. In 2021, the HSE Adolescent Addiction Service reported an 80 per cent increase in the number of referrals from the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, and a 25 per cent increase in referrals overall.¹³ It noted that many young people had been drawn into drug dealing or money laundering.

We also know that there is a significant overlap between drug abuse and mental health difficulty. Co-occurrence in this context is often referred to as 'dual diagnosis', and it's prevalence is increasingly understood as more the norm than the exception. While specific data regarding the prevalence of dual diagnosis is sparse in Ireland, the Mental Health Commission has estimated that dual diagnosis among people in Ireland could be between 30% and 80%, while the Health Reform Board's 2013 report on Irish psychiatric units and hospitals found that 12.8% of all 2013 inpatient admissions presented with a primary diagnosis of alcohol or other drug disorder¹⁴.

The statistics outlined above are a damning indictment of Ireland's drug policy, its failure to adequately fund health interventions and supports, and the profound harm this has caused to individuals, families, and communities. Taoiseach, Ireland's war on drugs has failed. Drug use and drug-related harm has only increased in Ireland under prohibition, and drugs are now driving certain communities to breaking point. Every day that passes, organisations like ours struggle to mitigate the harmful effects of drug abuse in Ireland, and more and more individuals experience harm and die from drug use. Each day that we wait for drug policy reform is measured in precious lives lost.

This is why we are collectively calling on the Government to convene a Citizens' Assembly on drugs so that the Irish people have an opportunity to consider drug policy reform. We are calling on the Department of the Taoiseach to take responsibility for its delivery. The Assembly would allow participants to examine the international, European, national, and local research on drug use and drug policy. The Assembly would present an opportunity to consider the perspectives of representative groups, advocacy groups, experts, and drug policy makers. It would also, importantly, allow the Irish people to consider the many contributing factors to drug use and addiction. We are calling for an Assembly which will consider drug use, policy, and reform broadly. It's essential that the Assembly is not too limited in scope or restricted to a healthcare framework.

In the most recent National Drugs and Alcohol Survey, respondents were asked how they perceived a person who is addicted to drugs. 46.6 per cent of people said they viewed them "more as a patient", with only 8.8 per cent saying they viewed them "more as a criminal".¹⁵ While the binary option offered to respondents was disappointing in its use of limiting and paternalistic language, the responses indicate that the Irish people do not believe in criminalisation or prohibition. If that is indeed the case, they deserve to be offered a chance to consider alternatives to Ireland's policy of drug criminalisation. A Citizens' Assembly would give them this opportunity.

¹³ <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/arid-40804188.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.dualdiagnosis.ie/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/No-wrong-Door-Proposal-Tippeary.pdf>

¹⁵ NDAS 2021 - Chapter 8
https://www.hrb.ie/fileadmin/2_Plugin_related_files/Publications/2021_publications/2021_HIE/Evidence_Centre/The_2019-20_Irish_National_Drug_and_Alcohol_Survey_Main_findings.pdf

Ireland deserves a better future than the one we have been offered. Every day that we wait to reform Ireland's approach to drug use, another two people will die a drug-related death. This doesn't even take into account the other socioeconomic harms of drugs and drug-related crime. With every day that passes, our communities suffer.

Taoiseach, it is time for a Citizen's Assembly on drugs. This issue is a priority for us, and it should be a priority for your Government too. We call on you as Taoiseach to take responsibility for this within your own department, and to deliver the Assembly without delay.

Signatories

1. Senator Lynn Ruane
2. Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin TD
3. Deputy Holly Cairns TD
4. Deputy Neasa Hourigan TD
5. Liam Herrick, Executive Director, Irish Council for Civil Liberties
6. Fiona Coyle, CEO, Mental Health Reform
7. The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI)
8. Fr. Peter McVerry, the Peter McVerry Trust
9. Stuart Clark, Hot Press Magazine
10. Dr Peter Kelly, The Ireland Chapter of The International Nurses Society on Addictions
11. Nicola Byrne, CEO, Shine
12. Anna Quigley, Citywide Drugs Crisis Campaign
13. Breda Fell, SER Family Support Network
14. Danielle McKenna, Rialto Youth Project
15. Tommy Coombes, Bluebell Community Development Project
16. Siân Muldowney, Inner-City Organisations Network
17. Michael Williams, Sankalpa Addiction Treatment Services
18. Carol Hyland, CORE Youth Service
19. Gary Broderick, SAOL Project
20. Gerry Ryan, Tolka River Project
21. Dr Garrett McGovern, Clinical Lead HSE Addiction Services Louth, Meath & The Midlands
22. Trevor Keogh, Turas Training
23. Kathy Watts, Fusion CPL
24. Joseph Kearney, Meath Opportunities for Training
25. Lyndsey McCarthy, Southside CBDI
26. Austin Campbell, Robert Emmet Community Development Project
27. Jackie Myler, Frontline Project, Waterford & South Tipperary
28. Eve Tunstall, Core Youth Service
29. Alan Cleere, Rialto Community Drug Team
30. Colm O'Gorman, CEO, Amnesty International, Ireland
31. Emma Culhane, Children's Grief Centre
32. Bernard Joyce, CEO, Irish Traveller Movement
33. Bulelani Mfaco, MASI
34. John Davis, Walkinstown Greenhills Resource Centre CLG
35. Dr Ger Doherty, Canal Communities Regional Addiction Service
36. Adam Shanley, MPOWER

37. Cllr. Darragh Moriarty, South West Inner City
38. Kevin Burn, CEO, Exchange House Ireland
39. John Church, ISPC
40. Marina Cunningham, Meath Travellers Workshop
41. Molly Joyce, Interim CEO, Irish Penal Reform Trust
42. Andy O'Hara, UISCE, Advocacy for People Who Use Drugs
43. Corrine Doyle, Pavee Point Traveller and Roma Centre
44. Dr Patrick J Burke, CEO, Youth Work Ireland
45. Dr Sharon Lambert, Department of Applied Psychology UCC
46. Josepha Quin, Limerick City Network
47. Deborah Jordan, East Coast Area Drugs and Alcohol Task Force
48. Vivian Geiran, Chairperson, Irish Association of Social Workers
49. Aoife Bairéad, Independent Social Worker, Minds in Mind
50. Dr Katharina Swirak, Department of Sociology and Criminology UCC
51. Danny Denton, Author
52. Paul O'Donnell, Churchfield Community Trust CLG
53. Dr Robert King, School of Applied Psychology UCC
54. Irene Crawley, HOPE (Hands on Peer Education)
55. Joe Kirby, Cork Local Drug and Alcohol Task Force
56. Tony Blinston, Community Representative, Cork Local Drug and Alcohol Taskforce
57. Thomas Maughan, Cavan Traveller Movement
58. Norah Byrne, Canal Communities Regional Addiction Service
59. Zoe Fallon, Youth Worker, Core Youth Service
60. Paul Duff, Recovery Academy Ireland
61. Fiona O Reilly, Safetynet Primary Care
62. Ann Murphy, North Wall CDP
63. Tanya Ward, CEO, Children's Rights Alliance
64. Ciara Cunningham, SWAN Youth Service
65. Dr Marcin Szczerbinski, School of Applied Psychology UCC
66. Dr Kieran Harkin
67. Dr Muireann De Paor
68. Dr Ciaran McCullagh, Adjunct Professor, School of Law, University of Limerick
69. Collette Kelleher, Chair, Cork Local Drug and Alcohol Task Force
70. Sinead Burke, Primary Health Care Project Coordinator, Balbriggan Traveller Project
71. Eddie Farnan, Canal Communities Regional Addiction Services
72. Ellen Doyle, Social Care Worker, Crosscare
73. Deirde Dowdall, HSE Addiction Services
74. Noel Smith, Swan Youth Service
75. Debbie O' Rourke, Community and Youth Worker
76. Dr Michael Barron, The Rowan Trust
77. Gráinne Foy, Social Inclusion Coordinator, National Women's Council of Ireland
78. Kate McCaughey, HSCL, St. Mary's Primary School, Dublin 7
79. Gay Health Network Ireland
80. Sinead Mahon, Coordinator, NCCWN - Women Together Tallaght Network
81. Eithne Dunne, Development Worker, NCCWN - Women Together Tallaght Network
82. Phillip Keegan, Chairperson, Safer Blanchardstown
83. Jim McCarthy, Community Restorative Justice Ireland - Belfast
84. Ewan Morgan, Community Restorative Justice Ireland - Newry & Armagh
85. Martin Connolly, Community Restorative Justice Ireland - Derry
86. Gabby Conway, Community Restorative Justice Ireland - Lurgan

87. Moninne Griffith, CEO, BeLonG To Youth Services
88. John McFadden, Ballymun Youth Block Youth Diversion Project
89. Damien Peelo, CEO, Treoir
90. Julie McKenna, Novas Mid-West Health & Recovery Services
91. Shane Hamilton, Coordinator, JADD Project
92. Martin Hayes, Manager, Waterford & South Tipperary Community & Youth Service
93. Debbie O' Rourke, Community & Youth Worker, Waterford & South Tipperary Community & Youth Service
94. Nicola Perry, Service Manager, Community Response
95. Megan Gannon, Youth Worker, Finglas Youth Resource Centre
96. Gerard Roe, Youth Workers Against Prohibition
97. Paula Kearney, Service Users Rights in Action
98. Richard Healy, Service Users Rights in Action
99. Members of Canal Communities Drug and Alcohol Task Force
100. Brendan O'Connell, former President, Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI)
101. Nuala Martin, Nuala Martin, Family Learning Coordinator, Tipperary Traveller Project
102. Dr Orfhlaith Campbell
103. Deputy Patrick Costello TD
104. Senator Alice-Mary Higgins
105. Senator Frances Black
106. Senator Eileen Flynn
107. Senator Rebecca Moynihan
108. Senator Annie Hoey
109. Senator Marie Sherlock
110. Senator Mark Wall
111. Senator Paul Gavan
112. Senator Victor Boyhan
113. Senator Gerard Craughwell
114. Senator Sharon Keoghan
115. Senator Catherine Ardagh
116. Deputy Joan Collins TD
117. Deputy Thomas Pringle TD
118. Deputy Gino Kenny TD
119. Deputy Catherine Connolly TD
120. Deputy Duncan Smith TD
121. Deputy Ivana Bacik TD
122. Deputy Alan Kelly TD
123. Deputy Brendan Howlin TD
124. Deputy Ged Nash TD
125. Deputy Sean Sherlock TD
126. Deputy Brid Smith TD
127. Deputy Paul Murphy TD
128. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett TD
129. Deputy Cian O'Callaghan TD
130. Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne TD
131. Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice TD
132. Deputy Marian Harkin TD