



IASW

Irish Association of Social Workers  
Cumann na hÉireann um Oibrithe Sóisialta

## SUBMISSION TO THE CITIZENS ASSEMBLY ON DRUGS

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*“Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledges, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.” (IFSW, 2014).*

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## Introduction

### SOCIAL WORK IN IRELAND AND THE IRISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS

Social workers are regulated and registered by the Health and Social Care Professionals body (CORU). As of April 2023 there were 5,187 social workers registered in Ireland (CORU, 2023). Social workers practice in a broad range of areas including but not limited to; children and families, mental health, addiction, probation, older persons, disabilities, primary care, adoption, international protection, hospitals, policy, academia, NGO's, government, private practice. The Irish Association of Social Workers (IASW) is the national body representing social workers.

### NOTE FROM THE IASW CHAIR – VIVIAN GEIRAN

The negative impact of drug use is seen by social workers on a daily basis in their work, across all work settings. Of perhaps more concern, is the negative impact of so much of our *policy responses* to those who use drugs. These responses, whatever their intention, are often unhelpful and too often make bad situations worse. This is seen in the stigmatization of so many, connected in turn to poverty and wider socioeconomic issues. The Citizens Assembly process presents a unique opportunity to address and deal effectively with the challenges and to put right so much of what is wrong about our approach to drug use. This submission provides a brief outline of the social work contribution to the work of the Citizens Assembly on drugs.

### OVERVIEW

Social workers, through their national association, take the view that drugs should be viewed within a social and environmental context and as such, social work can offer key contributions and leadership on this issue. This submission highlights the following in particular;

- Poverty is a key factor in drug use and as such, responses to drug use should include responses to poverty as a key policy approach.
- Criminalization of drug use is harmful and contributes to stigmatization of people. That criminalization must be ended.
- Instead, social workers suggest a health and social led approach to drugs is more conducive to positive outcomes for individual people and communities.
- Reinvest in independent community development organizations and structures.
- Reinvest in independent youth work and youth services.
- Develop a “Think Family” approach to drugs policy.
- Develop a progressive public health response to drug use with multi-discipline teams, to include social work as core members, working from a health and social approach.
- Take a restorative justice approach to drug policy.
- Invest in holistic approaches to drugs policy based on people and community-led approaches, which take account of social networks, social solidarity and social wellbeing.
- There must be immediate implementation of existing harm-reduction policies, including for example the use of Safe Injecting Facilities and proper availability of anti-overdose measures.
- We must ensure that the experience and views of those with lived experience is sought and heard.

## Social work perspectives

### HARMFUL IMPACTS OF DRUGS USE ON INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES, AND WIDER SOCIETY

Drug use reflects poverty. Poverty is a key factor in drug use and as such, responses to drug use should include responses to poverty as a key policy approach. The long-defunded Combat Poverty Agency should be reconstituted with a key focus on leadership in developing understanding around the connections between poverty and drug use in communities.

Criminalization of drug use is harmful and indeed prevents people who use drugs coming forward for support i.e. increasing stigma instead of lessening it. The criminal justice system is not appropriate for dealing with the possession of drugs for personal use, drugs are a health and social issue and require health and social led responses. Criminalization is harmful because it compounds drug-related stigma and prevents people who use drugs from approaching services for support. Also, there is no evidence that decriminalization leads to an increase in drug use as the WHO states 'moves towards decriminalization are not associated with increased use'. To reduce the harm, it is essential to end the criminalization of drugs for personal use. This action reflects the vision of the current *National Drug Strategy: Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery* and its commitment to a health approach, indeed criminalization of drugs is contrary to the vision of the strategy.

The activity of social work holds a commitment to social justice and human rights. Social workers work from a wider ecological lens which brings a holistic approach to working with families/communities. As such, it is suggested that to resource social work in this role (e.g. in employment and training in statutory and NGO agencies), would tangibly contribute to an enhanced understanding of drug use from a broader, psychosocial lens.

### STATE ACTIONS REQUIRED TO SIGNIFICANTLY REDUCE THE HARMFUL IMPACTS OF DRUGS ON INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES, COMMUNITIES AND WIDER SOCIETY

A radically increased investment in basic drug related and addiction services across the spectrum of those needed to support and empower people and communities, is required. These services need to be fully resourced and multi-discipline in nature. They should be situated within communities and be staffed by people from diverse backgrounds and experiences. Services should be provided in a holistic manner with a 'Think Family' ethos e.g. fully-funded, flexible childcare services, provided near public transport routes, to ensure people requiring drug/addiction related services, can fully utilize all supports available to them without exclusion due to stigma, socio-economic disadvantage or other discriminatory practices.

A plethora of policy changes are required urgently. At a minimum, progressive policy change should focus on decriminalization of drug use, regulation of drug use, a focus on health and social approaches to addressing drug use. We suggest to continue on the same policy paths employed to date, will continue to medicalize what social workers suggest, is a health and social issue. We ask for consideration, therefore, for investment in social approaches to addressing the impact of drugs on people. Social work is well placed to offer leadership and expertise on how this might look in practice on individual, familial, community and societal levels. There are many excellent examples of progressive addiction services, holistic approaches and person-centred approaches to drug use dotted around the country. We suggest that it is imperative to build on what is working and to use the expertise built up in these services and organisations, and to replicate these nationally in an equitable, sustainable and community-led way.

## LEGISLATION, POLICY AND SERVICE DELIVERY - WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T

We suggest that a “war on drugs” approach does not work and criminalization does not work. All these approaches do is to target poor, marginalized and oppressed populations. A more useful and sustainable approach might be to focus on prevention, empowerment and sustainability. These goals could be achieved, in part, by targeting reinvestment in community development, reinvest in youth work and youth services and through reimagining what works in other areas e.g. the national family resource centre programme works well in the child and family/child welfare area and in the same area, the Barnahus model is being piloted currently and offers a potential for adaption to the area of drugs.

## INCREASING RESILIENCE, HEALTH, AND WELL-BEING

Substantial investment in public-health services through the development of multi-discipline public health teams, of which social work should be a core member, should be prioritized, as per the recent Institute of Public Health discussion paper (March 2023).

## Key issues to consider

### **POVERTY**

The connections between poverty and drug use and the social work knowledge base around this. Economic stability is a cornerstone of wellbeing stability.

### **FAMILY FOCUSED PRACTICE**

It is essential to provide services and supports to the wider social support network. The social work skill-base is key to the successful embedding of this approach to any policy change and to the implementation process. Quality of health and social services is a key factor in a reimagined national drugs policy approach and we stress the importance of providing these to all populations in an equitable way, founded on a social justice-focused approach.

### **SOCIAL AND COMMUNITY**

It is vital to provide services to people in culturally inclusive ways that understand and acknowledge difference and diversity.

### **EDUCATION**

Equitable, justice-focused access to education can interact with drugs and drug use in an individual, familial, community and structural way. This is why social workers stress the importance of investing in equitable access to education and the provision of universal, state-funded education to all.

### **PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT**

The impact of housing (or lack thereof) on people psychosocially can have a profound impact on their interactions and their experiences of drugs. The expertise and knowledge-base of social work in respect of the trauma experienced by individuals, families, and communities due to inadequate, sub-standard housing, lack of investment in housing, and discriminatory housing policies should not be overlooked in this regard.

### **STRENGTHS BASED APPROACHES**

Strengths / solution focused approaches should underpin all responses from individual to systemic. The social work knowledge-base is under-pinned by these approaches as core social work skills.

## Recommendations

### THINK PEOPLE

Social workers are in favour of a more humane and less harmful approach to drug policy in Ireland and as such we recommend the decriminalization of possession of drugs for personal use. The “war on drugs” type approach has devastated people, families and communities, mostly those from marginalized and oppressed communities. As such, social workers recommend that a restorative justice approach to drug policy is taken. This needs to include the greater recognition and involvement of those with lived experience in this area.

### THINK PUBLIC HEALTH

Social workers strongly recommend the adoption of a public health-led approach to drugs, which diverts people *from* rather than channelling them *into* the criminal justice system and the resulting criminalization and multiple layers of damage that approach causes individual people, families and communities. Social workers should form part of public health multidiscipline teams focused on providing a holistic multi-level approach to a reimagined approach to drug policy implementation. A public-health approach should take a holistic view and acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of the impact of drugs on people and communities, from a social determinants of health lens. There must also be better implementation of existing harm-reduction policies, such as Safe Injecting Facilities and overdose prevention (e.g. Naloxone).

### THINK FAMILY

People exist in social contexts and environments. Social workers recommend investment in holistic approaches to drugs policy based on people and community-led approaches, which take account of social networks, social solidarity and social wellbeing.

### THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX AND INSIDE THE COMMUNITY

People and communities thrive when they lead changes that are meaningful to them and when supports can be accessed locally, holistically and contextualized to the needs of the population. Models of support already exist which are based on principles of collaboration, mutuality, partnership, embedded in communities and developed in a co-produced way by services and the populations they serve. The Family Resource Centre programme and the Barnahus model are two such options to consider when seeking to reimagine our approach to drug policy.

### THINK SOCIAL WORK

As experts in the field of psychosocial approaches to health and wellbeing, social workers are incredibly well placed to provide leadership, training, education, knowledge and skills towards the realization of a new vision on drugs policy in Ireland. Working in meaningful partnership with communities, social work can support change from the ground up and can tangibly support change in a rights-based and co-produced way.

## References

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