

Submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use



Introduction

Depaul welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use. Depaul supports humane policies rooted in respect for people and their potential at every stage and fully supports the decriminalisation of the drug user. To see those affected by addiction as those who need a health intervention and not a justice response. Particularly as it relates to non-violent offences. Our position relates to the service users we work with who are some of the most complex and marginalised people in this society. This position has been informed by our management, staff and service users.

Depaul provides low threshold, specialist services and in 2022 supported 6,454 people who are homeless (who we refer to as service users), in the Republic of Ireland. We advocate for hard-to-reach groups and are willing to take risks to ensure the best possible outcomes in terms of housing and health.

At the launch of Ireland's national Drugs Strategy 2017-2025, the Taoiseach said that by 'treating substance abuse and drug addiction as a public health issue, rather than a criminal justice issue, helps individuals, helps families, and helps communities.'

We agree with the Taoiseach. Being a drug addict should not make you a criminal.

Government interventions to restrict supply have had limited success and Depaul calls upon the 'Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use' to recommend to the Government to leverage better life outcomes through healthcare interventions instead of costly and ineffective criminal convictions. Overcoming drug addiction can be a lifelong battle that requires time, patience, empathy and a pro-recovery environment to ensure better outcomes. We would ask that this policy be implemented by July 2024.

To inform our position and this submission, we hosted our own Citizens' Assembly with service users and staff. Our service users and staff were unanimous in their opinion that drug users should not be criminalised and instead given an option to avail of drug treatment.

We hope that this submission will contribute to the Citizens' Assembly work and facilitate the Government being in a position to change the current law that defines possession of drugs for personal use as a criminal offence.

Reducing overcrowding in prisons and cost to the exchequer

People who commit criminal offences and enter the criminal justice system and prisons report higher lifetime rates of drug use and more harmful patterns of use (including injecting) than the general population. We see day to day the impact of drug use on our service users and it's heart-breaking.

Drug-related offences make up much of the work of An Garda Siochana, courts and prisons. Many of these offences are for personal drug use and possession. One way to address this is through decriminalisation.

The Progress in the Penal System (PIPS) report identified rising numbers of people in prison as a move away from progress achieved over the past few years.⁽¹⁾ The Prison Service's current capacity in the system is 4,409 but 4,571 people are currently in custody, resulting in 167 prisoners having to be accommodated on the floors of cells with other inmates. By decriminalising drug users, we could alleviate the pressure on Irish prisons and the exchequer. In 2021, the average cost of an 'available, staffed prison space' was €80,335 during the calendar year which equates to €6,695 per month. Using these funds to treat individual's drug addiction, instead of imprisoning them, could go a long way to addressing the harmful impacts of drug use in Ireland.⁽²⁾

Stopping the war on drug addicts

Decriminalisation is not enough as a stand-alone policy and needs to happen alongside investment in drug treatment services for those in addiction.

Portugal's approach to decriminalisation places harm reduction as its core principle and saw an increase in the wrap-around social supports that were provided to help those addicted to drugs. This approach can reduce overdose deaths by connecting individuals to medically supervised injection centres, naloxone, overdose education and counselling.

Although decriminalisation in Portugal has not eliminated drug use, it has helped to better manage problem drug use, drug addiction and drug related harms and positive outcomes which we fully support. This reflects a renewed mind-set on addiction where it is treated as a disease, not as a burden to society. We advocate that a stronger emphasis be placed on reducing the harmful impacts of drugs on our fellow citizens who are in addiction here in Ireland.

As a low threshold service provider, everything we do is about reducing the impact of harm on our service users. We would like to see an increase in available treatment and support to help people out of drug addiction and to treat overdoses. In the last 12 months, 1,372 individuals were supported for addiction issues in Depaul homeless services. Wrap around support is essential for this particular cohort - ensuring that the right services are implemented at the right time and that this is a fluid process that can change regularly depending on service user needs. We know from experience that there are better outcomes for our service users to give them medical treatment instead of being brought through the criminal justice system. The threshold in prison is too high for many drug users to cope with and can cause more trauma. In 2020, there were 325 committals (311 male and 14 female)

to Irish prisons for controlled drug offences and the IPS estimates that approximately 70% of people come into prison with an addiction or substance abuse problem.(3)

Having services and people in the background has been shown to support service users when they stop using alcohol or drugs. It's a reassurance for them. Services can step in to prevent crises from occurring or support the service user when they do happen. We can mediate and advocate on their behalf when issues arise.

Safe Injection Rooms Save lives

Depaul would like to see the development of medically supervised injection centre's (MSIC) for all who require it. Service users who participated in our Depaul Citizens Assembly recalled feeling 'shame' and feeling 'dirty' when injecting heroin on the streets and would welcome a safer and more dignified environment for injection drug users.

The benefits of MSIC's are well established by numerous research studies, which have found that supervised injecting rooms save people's lives, take injecting off the streets and alleviate the burden on frontline health workers. In more than 120 injecting facilities operating around the world, to date there has not been a single overdose death. (4)

Supervised injection facilities would allow drug users a safe, clean, and compassionate environment where they will have access to medical and speciality services.

Despite the Government passing legislation in 2015 to approve the introduction of supervised injecting rooms, they still face public opposition. Internationally, safe injection sites have reduced the risk of overdose, death and the spread of infectious diseases, increased public safety and decreased public drug injection or nuisance

MSIC's have been cleaning up the streets in European cities where they have been introduced but many still believe that they will attract more drug users and problems in their community. In Denmark, as many as 10,000 syringes were found every week on the streets of Vesterbro, the Danish capital's former meatpacking district, prior to the consumption room opening in 2012. That figure fell below 1,000 within a year, as drug-taking in the city's main hotspot – where users would formerly inject behind bins, in stairwells, and on the street – became largely shielded from public view. (5)

We would recommend to the Citizens Assembly that the pilot project is opened before February 2024 and that the Government provide investment for a public information campaign to educate the public and raise awareness of the positive role an MSIC can have in our community. This could reduce further delays once the pilot phase is completed.

Everyday our frontline staff are providing lifesaving interventions to people who are homeless and in addiction. In 2022, 161 lives were saved through the administration of Naloxone by Depaul's frontline staff.

We would welcome members of the Citizens Assembly into our services to hear first hand how drug addiction is impacting them.

Trauma Informed Environments

Experiencing trauma is known to increase the risk of life threatening health problems including alcohol and drug abuse. Implementing trauma-informed approaches to care may help health care providers engage their patients more effectively, thereby offering the potential to improve outcomes and reduce avoidable costs for both health care providers and our service users.

Substance use is more prevalent among people who are homeless than in the general population, and providing support services and drug treatment in a safe environment is crucial.

Although all emergency beds are supposed to be drug-free, the reality is that they are not and it can be difficult for service users to stay off drugs when experiencing homelessness. A safe, supportive and informed environment can help individuals in treatment for substance use disorder explore their trauma, its effects, and how to overcome it alongside their recovery.

Depaul recognises the need for longer term support with this cohort and supports a housing led philosophy in dealing with complex lives in particular those who suffer from addictions and co-morbidity. The Housing First model is grounded in the idea that harm reduction is an effective approach to tackle problematic drug and alcohol use. Housing First recognises the importance of this support.

With this in mind, Depaul would call for further expansion of the Housing First Programme so all homeless organisations can work in a housing first, housing led environment. Increased support on all levels for those in homelessness is essential to improve the life outcomes of our most vulnerable citizens.

Fiona's story (48) - 'the criminalisation of drug users is part of a stigma and a shame culture'.

Fiona has been homeless for 19 years and has been addicted to drugs since she was 28 years old. After enduring numerous traumas in her life, unsupported and alone, she became addicted to prescription tablets. Then heroin. Then crack cocaine. Like many drug addicts, Fiona resorted to selling drugs to feed her habit. She never got arrested but was always terrified of prison. One of the things that scared her the most was becoming very sick because of the immediate withdrawal from drugs without any therapeutic support.

At one of our city centre services, Fiona is sharing a bedroom with four other women and admits this makes it harder for her to avoid drugs, especially if other women in the room are using which has been the case. She has been on the housing list since 2004 but still hasn't her own door accommodation. Fiona would settle for her own bedroom in homeless accommodation at this rate, just to be able to create her own safe space and environment free from drugs.

Fiona has gone into rehab twice and is off heroin for 12 years but it's hard for her to stay clean in an environment where temptation stares her in the face every morning and night. She might have crack once a week but says she can control this, unlike heroin. If she had her own house she said it would be easier for her to come off drugs completely, get a job and probably come off methadone.

Fiona has gone to many dark places during her time in addiction and recovery and has endured more than you or I can ever imagine. She says addiction is a sickness that people need help with just like any other disease.

Fiona has made it through addiction without a criminal conviction and would like to ask that the Citizens Assembly recommend to Government that drug users are offered medical help instead of a conviction.

Fiona is determined to stay clean in spite of all the barriers. All she wants is a safe space to call home, where she can have her grandkids over, get a job and start to live again.

Depaul's Citizens Assembly

Our service users are at the forefront of everything we do at Depaul and everything we stand for. By hosting our own Citizens Assembly, we were able to keep them central to this discussion. Depaul Citizens Assembly for staff and service users has informed us of our position.

Here's what they said...

"I think that the decriminalising of the drug user is a great idea because drug users will more than likely use more drugs in jail and still be addicted to them when they get out. To help and support drug users who reach out for help from the services should be the main priority.

"The team agrees with the decriminalising of the SU. And agree with the health resolution of drug users rather than judicial. Decriminalising of Class B & C drugs which would free up resources for judicial and addiction resources."

"I agree with decriminalising drugs. addicts should not be seen as criminals. Addicts should feel that you're looking out for them and getting personalised supports. Services should put more trust in their service users as they are people and should not be turned away from hospital if they have health problems regardless if they are intoxicated have faith in them."

"I'd like to see greater investment from government to provide housing and counselling for addicts. Collaborative approach, Mental health service/treatment services/GPs etc in a nonjudgmental supportive approach, structured guidelines and policies, routines, supporting a path to follow ie education employment, life skills and health issues."

"Yes because drug addiction can cause problems for people in all walks of life both for their own physical and mental health and can also cause problems in relation to their relationships with family and friends."

“Yes... because the physical consequences of repeated substance abuse often require high levels of medical and psychological support that are not available to service users in a judicial model of addiction.”

Yes, absolutely. Substance use has a detrimental effect on people's health and wellbeing. People who use drugs need to continue to take drugs to feel well - get them back to baseline. People who use drugs cannot just stop using drugs as they are physically dependent on them. Addiction can also lead to very poor mental health and wellbeing. It is also very likely that people who use drugs are doing so to ease emotional or mental anguish (caused by trauma they've experienced) and it is possible that some people who use and rely on substances have underlying and undiagnosed mental health conditions.

References:

- 1) Irish Prison Service Annual Report 2021
- 2) <https://www.iprt.ie/prison-facts/3-in-2018-the-average-cost-of-an-available-staffed-prison-space-was-eur73-802/>
- 3) <https://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/25265/#:~:text=The%20IPS%20estimates%20that%20approximately,addiction%20or%20substance%20abuse%20problem.>
- 4) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2018/nov/21/fixing-rooms-saving-lives-drug-addicts>)
- 5) (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2018/nov/21/fixing-rooms-saving-lives-drug-addicts>)