

Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery
National Oversight Committee (NOC)
Agreed Minutes of the meeting of the 5th March 2021

The list of attendees is at Appendix 1.

Introduction

Minister Feighan opened the meeting by welcoming everyone. He passed on apologies on behalf of Colm Desmond, Caroline Jordan, Ben Ryan, Eileen Leahy and Randall Plunkett.

1. Minutes of last meeting and matters arising

The Minister said that Hamish Sinclair, HRB, had suggested some amendments as follows to the minutes of the last meeting but these amendments had not yet been circulated.

The amendment refers to item 3 and in particular the following line:

“Anna Quigley said she would be interested to see if deaths are concentrated in particular socio-economic groups. Ena Lynn replied that they do collect such data and this information can be provided.”

Dr Sinclair advised that socio-economic status is not routinely available in the data sources for the NDRDI therefore the HRB do not have complete data in this area. Where information on socio-economic status is available in the source data it is collected, and it is this information that HRB can provide, albeit not complete for the whole data, if required. He accordingly proposed the following amendment:

“Ena Lynn replied that they do collect such data where it is recorded but this information would not be available for all deaths.”

Also under item 3 and in reference to the development of a homeless deaths index, Dr Sinclair proposed the following amendment, replacing

“Jim Walsh said that the HRB has been asked to develop a Homeless Deaths Index.”

With

“the HRB has been asked to conduct a one year pilot to develop a Homeless Deaths Index”.

Dr Sinclair advised that there is as yet no commitment to go beyond one year even if the pilot were successful and therefore the HRB did not wish to raise expectations or mislead people.

The above amendments were agreed and a revised version of the minutes will be circulated to the group.

In relation to the Drug and Alcohol Task Force handbook, Jim Walsh advised that DPU would be holding a meeting in the near future to complete work on the handbook with a number of volunteer task force coordinators assisted by GENIO. The priority is to develop a code of governance for Task Forces. Anna Quigley outlined that she was aware that the matter had been put on hold due to resource issues within the Department but was surprised to hear that there was a group working on it as she was not informed about this and she felt input was needed from representatives of the community sector to feed into the handbook. Jim Walsh clarified that a draft of the handbook had been developed by the previous working group, and the handbook was representative of task force views, and that the next step was to complete and finalise this work and get it published. Jim will send a pre-publication format to NOC members. Anna said they were members of the process and were not aware that the handbook had been finished and that this was not a partnership type of process. Jim said he would share draft with Anna and would get it from the Working Group. Anna indicated she was not happy with this as a process. The Minister said that Jim would discuss this with Anna after the meeting. Margaret Nash on behalf of the voluntary sector supported Anna's position, indicated that she also would like to have been part of the consultation process and would welcome a draft of the handbook.

2. EU Drugs Strategy

Minister Feighan advised members that he had issued a statement welcoming the new EU Drugs strategy which is reflective of our health-led approach. A copy of the statement had been issued to the Committee in advance of the meeting. The Minister thanked Jim Walsh, Karen O'Connor and colleagues in the Dept. of Justice for their contribution to this and for sharing good practice and learning between Member States.

Karen O'Connor, Dept of Health, then gave a presentation on the new EU Drugs Strategy. She said the process undertaken at the HDG to develop the Strategy is now finished as the document was agreed at the EU Council in December and published shortly after. Karen introduced the new document and went through some of the highlights in it as follows. The strategy sets out the political framework and priorities for EU drug policy in the period 2021-2025. This approved document reaffirmed the strong, evidence-based, comprehensive and balanced approach to drugs, that has been seen previously in the EU, with the preservation of human rights at its core. With regard to the broad range of topics covered in the document, such as health, family and social relations, to violence and money laundering, the Strategy aims to provide the tools to address these problems collectively.

The strategy includes a new, dedicated chapter on addressing drug related harms, so as to prevent or reduce the health and social risks for drug users. This includes measures to reduce the incidence of drug-related infectious diseases, to prevent overdoses and drug-related deaths and to provide alternatives to coercive sanctions. The strategy commits to protect and support people who use drugs from negative health outcomes. This takes the shape of encouraging innovative harm-reduction measures to reach high-risk populations, such as supervised drug consumption facilities. The strategy also speaks strongly to strengthen measures to prevent drug overdoses and other related deaths, such as the use of OST and Naloxone.

Currently the HDG meetings are focused on the development of a new draft EU drugs action which will set out concrete measures to achieve the priorities in the EU Drugs Strategy.

Participation civil society forum

Karen said that The European Commission has opened the call for applications for participation in the expert group Civil Society Forum on Drugs in the EU from 2021-2023. Applications will be accepted until the 14th of April 2021. Details for the call are available on the EU Commission site. The link will be sent to all NOC members.

https://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regexpert/index.cfm?do=calls.calls_for_app

Karen said she would very strongly encourage applications for this as this forum has a strong voice at an EU level and is an important part of the policy formation in the EU. We have previously had a strong Irish voice here and it would be great to continue this.

Anna Quigley thanked Karen for her presentation and said the contribution of the Irish team seems to be very positive. Catherine Comiskey received a copy of the Strategy through the EMCDDA. She encouraged people to continue the good work and to be sure that evidence is kept to the forefront. Angela Willis thanked Karen for all her hard work and said this whole-of-the-EU approach is a huge benefit both from the supply end and from an international collaboration point of view.

3. Mid-term review

Dairearca Ní Néill presented on the mid-term review of the National Drugs Strategy and in particular two aspects of the review. The strategy contains 50 actions for delivery between 2017 and 2020 and a draft of the 2020 Progress Report, outlining progress across each of these actions was circulated to all NOC members in advance of the meeting. The members attention was drawn to the overview or summary of the progress, which outlined as follows that 8 actions have been identified as fully completed, 17 are on-track and being delivered, 18 actions are progressing but with a minor delivery issue and 7 actions have been delayed significantly. Some minor delivery issues have arisen due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Dairearca then updated on progress on the review itself. In relation to stakeholder engagement, most stakeholders have contributed at this stage and the remaining few stakeholders will be contributing in the coming weeks. She reminded the committee that the consultation was centred around three questions. In relation to feedback to date, most stakeholders felt there was good collaboration across sectors, that the strategy was progressing well even with Covid-19 difficulties and many were focussed on examining priorities for the next 4 years. There had been some discussion about intersectionality, where a number of strategies cross each other or target the same groups, an example being people who are homeless and in addiction, or those who are in addiction and have mental health issues ie Dual Diagnosis. It is intended to reference the different strategies in the upcoming actions plans.

In terms of priority areas going forward, Dairearca said that the focus would be on the next steps, e.g. in the case of the current action 3.1.35 – an alternative to criminal sanctions; the working group has reported to the Minister as was required under the strategy. Work in this area has progressed with the HDP. The new action plan could reflect developments since 2017.

The plan is to have a draft report of the review in early May for consideration by the NOC members and a special meeting will be held with NOC members at this time.

Enda Kelly said this was a very comprehensive review of the Report. He appreciated the reference to Dual Diagnosis. Anna Quigley thanked Dairearca for her overview and all the work that had gone into this review. She said it was not just about each Agency focusing on its own areas but that there was enormous experience in this group. Dr. Gerry McCarney pointed out that by looking at programmes such as the Garda Diversion Programme we could work collaboratively together.

Jim Walsh said he had sat in on the consultative meetings and the engagement was very positive. He noticed there were not enough opportunities for collaborative work. However, they can focus on a number of cross-cutting themes, e.g. the whole area of drug use. Huge work is being done in the Department on the North East Inner City (NEIC) initiative and they share with other areas where problems arise, e.g. Drogheda, Tallaght, Coolock and Darndale. A coherent programme like this could be built on. He referred to Catherine Comiskey's point on monitoring and evaluation and said this is definitely on the agenda – we need a more focused set of actions.

Catherine Comiskey replied by saying that research costs a lot of money but the research budget hasn't been increased. Europe has learned from us, e.g. EMCDDA and Pompidou Group have been looking at research carried out previously by us. She would urge us to put a new focus on research. Anna Quigley agreed with what Catherine said and welcomed Jim's points re engagement, etc. She said it was good to hear these links are being made to the Drugs Strategy. Dave Raftis reiterated what Anna had said re engagement and participation. He said people are willing to engage if there is progress and he would like to see a little more progress.

4. Written updates

Dairearca Ní Néill advised written updates on the Health Diversion Programme (HDP) and the Framework for Restoration of Drug and Alcohol Services had been circulated to the committee in advance of the meeting. In addition, she advised that EWET minutes will be circulated to members early the coming week.

Following the Government decision to adopt a health-led approach to the possession of drugs for personal use, an interdepartmental group was established to implement the Health Diversion Programme in October 2019. The group is chaired by the Department of Health and membership includes the Department of Justice and Equality, An Garda Síochána (AGS) and the Health Service Executive (HSE). The group is tasked with examining the need for legislative change, the phasing of the implementation, and to look in more detail at the costs involved. The group has met monthly since October 2019.

The Health Diversion Programme offers a compassionate approach, not punishment, to people who use drugs. It will connect participants with appropriate health services and supports, and will provide a pathway to treatment and recovery where there is problematic drug use. It will also allow participants to avoid a criminal conviction, which can have far-reaching consequences for people, particularly younger people. Jim Walsh said that the HDP pilot mentions five areas – two in Dublin and three provincial areas.

Tony Duffin said the HDP is very significant. A communications plan to engage with all stakeholders is being developed. Tony said NVDAS would like to be part of the planning for this to make it a success as early as possible. Anna Quigley followed on from what Tony had said by saying there is huge interest in the Health Diversion Programme and said the more engagement there is, the better it is. Catherine Comiskey suggested the SAOR model be considered as this is very effective. Eamon Keenan said they have engaged with Queen's University, Belfast in terms of setting up a SAOR model for Diversion Programme and it is hoped to progress work over the next 2 months.

5. Dates of next meetings

The Minister outlined the dates for the next meetings of the Committee which are as follows:

Friday 4th June 2021

Friday 3rd September 2021

Friday 3rd December 2021.

Minister Feighan concluded the meeting by thanking everyone for their help, support and views.

Appendix 1

Attendance:

Minister Frank Feighan
Jim Walsh
Neville Kenny
Eamonn Waters
Dr. Devesh Singh
Peter Hogan

Asst Commissioner John O'Driscoll
Angela Willis
Seamus McCormack
Aisling Gillen
Dr. Eamon Keenan
Aine Hall
Déaglán O'Briain
Paul Fay
Brenda Boylan
Dr. Hamish Sinclair
Enda Kelly
Anna Quigley
Dave Raftis
Tony Duffin
Margaret Nash
Aoife Frances
Maria Otero Vazquez
John Bennett
Michael Lacey
Brid Walsh

Dr. Gerry McCarney
Prof. Catherine Comiskey
Michael Gilligan
Conor Brennan
Brian Dowling
Tadhg Fallon
Mary-Jane Trimble

Presenters

Dairearca Ní Néill
Karen O'Connor

Chair, Dept. of Health
Dept. of Health
Dept. of Education and Skills
Dept. of Housing, Planning & Local Government
Dept. of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
Dept. of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport & Media
An Garda Síochána
An Garda Síochána
An Garda Síochána
TUSLA
HSE
INTSNA
Dept. of Justice
Dept. of Children and Equality
Dept. of An Taoiseach
HRB
Irish Prison Service
Community Sector
Community Sector
National Voluntary Drug & Alcohol Treatment Sector
Voluntary Drug Treatment Network
National Family Support Network
UISCE
Local Drug & Alcohol Task Force Coordinators Network
Regional Drug & Alcohol Task Force Chairs Network
Regional Drug & Alcohol Task Force Coordinators Network
College of Psychiatrists of Ireland
Academic Expert
Revenue
Dept. of Health
Dept. of Health
Dept. of Health
Dept. of Health

Dept. of Health
Dept. of Health

Apologies:

Colm Desmond
Paul Geraghty
Randall Plunkett
Ben Ryan
Caroline Jordan
Eileen Leahy
Ciara Mellett
John Clancy

Dept. of Health
Dept. of Rural and Community Development
Dept. of Health
Dept. of Justice
Tusla
Dept. of Justice
Dept. of Health
Revenue

Secretariat

Dairearca Ní Néill
Fiona Conroy
Gillian Treacy
Sinead Carson

DoH
DoH
DoH
DoH