

*Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery*

**National Oversight Committee (NOC)**

**Agreed Minutes of the meeting of the 4<sup>th</sup> December 2020**

**Attendance:**

Minister Frank Feighan	Chair
Colm Desmond	Department of Health
Jim Walsh	Department of Health
Randall Plunkett	Department of Health
Ben Ryan	Department of Justice
Neville Kenny	Department of Education and Skills
Eamonn Waters	Dept of Housing, Planning and Local Government
Dr. Devesh Singh	Dept of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
Paul Geraghty	Department of Rural and Community Development
Peter Hogan	Dept of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport & Media
Asst Commissioner John O'Driscoll	An Garda Síochána
Angela Willis	An Garda Síochána
Seamus McCormack	An Garda Síochána
Caroline Jordan	TUSLA
Aisling Gillen	TUSLA
Dr. Eamon Keenan	HSE
Dr. Hamish Sinclair	HRB
Enda Kelly	Irish Prison Service
Anna Quigley	Community Sector
Pat Benson	Community Sector
Tony Duffin	National Voluntary Drug & Alcohol Treatment Sector
Margaret Nash	Voluntary Drug Treatment Network
Aoife Frances	National Family Support Network
Maria Otero Vazquez	UISCE
John Bennett	Local Drug & Alcohol Task Force Coordinators Network
Michael Lacey	Regional Drug & Alcohol Task Force Chairs Network
Brid Walsh	Regional Drug & Alcohol Task Force Coordinators Network
Dr. Gerry McCarney	College of Psychiatrists of Ireland
Prof. Catherine Comiskey	Academic Expert

**Presenters**

Ena Lynn	Health Research Board
Dr. Suzi Lyons	Health Research Board
Dairearca Ní Néill	Department of Health
Brian Dowling	Department of Health
Randall Plunkett	Department of Health
Tadhg Fallon	Department of Health
Karen O'Connor	Department of Health
Eva Devaney	Researcher

**Apologies:**

Margaret McCarthy	Dept. of Education and Skills
Pat Carey	Local Drug & Alcohol Task Force Chairs Network

**Secretariat**

Dairearca Ní Néill	DoH
Fiona Conroy	DoH
Gillian Treacy	DoH
Sinead Carson	DoH

**Introduction**

Minister Feighan opened the meeting by welcoming everyone. He pointed out that there were three substantial agenda items which were as follows:

1. Results of the Rapid Assessment and the SSC stakeholder engagement
2. Trends in drug poisoning deaths
3. Mid-term review of actions in the National Drugs Strategy

Before the Minister moved to the business items on the agenda, he paid tribute to a former member of this Committee, the late Fergus McCabe. He described Fergus as a veteran community and drugs campaigner for many years, who represented the community sector on the monitoring structures of the national drug strategy from the early days. The Minister acknowledged that Fergus' contribution to the development of the current strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, is hugely valued.

Fergus was passionate about his work – he was a doer, an activist, a campaigner, a mentor and a friend to many. He empowered and helped people and communities to find their voice.

The Minister extended condolences to Fergus' wife, Helena their children and grandchildren and his many friends.

Secondly, the Minister brought to the attention of the Committee a submission he made as Minister of State for the National Drug Strategy to the Review of the Criminal Justice (Spent Convictions and Certain Disclosures) Act 2016. This submission highlights a recommendation of the Working Group on alternative approaches to the possession of drugs for personal use. The group recommended a change to the Act so that all convictions for drug possession for personal use (Section 3 Misuse of Drugs Act) can be spent. In addition, the group recommended decreasing the seven year period to three years between the conviction and it becoming spent. At the time, the recommendation of the Working Group on spent convictions was not considered by Government. However, the Minister believes that it is now appropriate for this recommendation to be adopted, as part of a health-led approach to the use of drugs.

Thirdly, the Minister informed the Group that he had nominated Dr Gerry McCarney as the representative of the National Oversight Committee to the National Implementation Monitoring Committee for the new mental health policy, Sharing the Vision.

Finally, the Minister congratulated Prof Catherine Comiskey on her election as Chairperson of the Scientific Committee of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

## **1. Minutes of last meeting and matters arising**

The minutes of the last meeting had been circulated to the Committee. A number of issues were raised in relation to the minutes.

Michael Lacey said in relation to discussions of Covid-19 and Drug and Alcohol services, he wanted to commend the work of the AGS. He also said they had a vacancy for a coordinator in the Mid-West and had written to Jim Walsh about this. Jim said he will follow up on the letter.

Anna Quigley also paid tribute to Fergus McCabe. She said he was the first Chairperson of Citywide and was involved from the start with numerous Committees and Task Forces. Both the President and the Taoiseach had paid tribute to him and he will be missed. Anna also asked that the draft minutes be amended in relation to her comments about the UBU scheme. She clarified that the UBU scheme is a new version of the older Scheme, the YPFSF. The UBU programme is run by DCYA as part of NDS Action 1.2.8. There was a presentation on it at the SSC and she thanked the Chairs for their ongoing support. It was agreed to amend the minutes to reflect Anna's comments.

Michael Lacey questioned why the handbook for Task Forces was not included in discussions. He said the handbook was needed for the recruitment process and queried the delay in completing

same. Brid Walsh said the matter of the handbook had arisen in the Regional Coordinators meeting on the previous day and there were concerns that it was taking a long time to come about. She suggested that if it was a human resources issue, both she and other people working in this area would be prepared to offer their help and support in preparing the handbook. They had the necessary experience to do so. It was suggested that in the absence of a handbook, there are no standardised guidelines or framework for the regional groups. Minister Feighan thanked Brid for her input.

Jim Walsh and Brian Dowling updated that due to resourcing issues, it was not possible to complete the handbook this year. Colm Desmond responded by saying that it was a really challenging year for the Unit and the resources have had to be spread very thinly. Colm acknowledged the need for the handbook and said that we will find some means of moving this forward. The offers being made to assist are very helpful and he will look at the options.

Colm also asked to clarify the issue in the minutes in relation to the policy on Sharing the Vision.

Jim Walsh referred to the Health Diversion Programme. He stated there was progress being made on it and it should be noted as an agenda item for the next meeting.

The Minister agreed with the above amendments and suggestions.

## **2. Results of the Rapid Assessment and the SSC stakeholder engagement**

Jim Walsh presented on the impact of Covid-19 on Drug and Alcohol services. Those who engage in drug-taking activity are at high risk of Covid-19 due to a weaker immune system. Rapid Assessment is a methodology developed by EMCDDA to identify what the issues are and to begin to address them. It consists of (a) an Evidence Review, (b) an EU web survey, (c) Case Studies and (d) Survey service providers. The Evidence Review looked at the impact of Covid-19 in other jurisdictions such as NSW, Scotland, NY State and British Colombia.

600 people from Ireland answered the survey which was carried out. Most of these were drug users. Local case studies were carried out in the MW and Ballymun. These studies were really interesting in how they responded at local level in highlighting the very disruptive impact Covid-19 has and identifying the importance of collaboration and partnership.

Enda Kelly, IPS thanked Jim for a very insightful presentation and suggested that the NOC Group write to NPHET in support of drug users and their future use of the Covid-19 vaccine. The Minister said this was a very useful and informative proposal. Colm Desmond said this would be very timely. Asst Commissioner John O'Driscoll said that while they weren't aware they would participate in the Rapid Assessment, they play a lead role in the Pompidou Group. They increased the manpower in every Drug Unit throughout the country and have had huge drug seizures in recent

months. The Commissioner appointed Seamus McCormack to replace Brian Woods who was promoted.

Anna Quigley agreed with Margaret Nash and said it was very important for the lessons of Covid-19 to be taken on board. She said that Jim's reference to a collaborative approach was significant – we need to use that collaborative approach as everyone has something to contribute.

Jim Walsh said that user data published by the IGEES required some work to be done on the case studies and analysis by HRB. Enda Kelly asked if it was too late to include the Prison Service in the case study. Jim said it was too late but he would discuss the matter with Enda.

### **3. Drug-Related Deaths Index – HRB presentation**

Dr Suzi Lyons introduced her colleague Ena Lynn who presented on some new work on the NDRDI index and the impact of age and gender. Ena gave a brief overview of trends in drug poisoning deaths stratified by sex and based on age-standardised rates. She pointed out that there was a significant increase in drug deaths among men but not as many among women. There was no significant increase or decrease involving heroin during this period (2004 – 2017). Benzos were the second most common drug group involved in drug poisoning deaths in Ireland. There has however been a significant increase in both men and women and rates of drug poisoning deaths involving antidepressants. However, there has been a decrease in drug poisoning deaths involving alcohol, particularly among women. 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 where this is recorded, but this information would not be available for all deaths. Eamon Keenan asked about the role of licit drugs. The Medical Council is aware that private prescriptions may be playing a role here. The Minister said that the Medical Council has been very helpful. Catherine Comiskey said the presentation was really informative. The statistics are very good and are relevant as people age.

Eamon Waters referred to deaths in homeless settings. Two deaths of homeless people occurred in Waterford the previous night and this needs to be addressed. The Minister said that Sharing the Vision had secured very good funding and that Minister Butler was considering a range of nominees for the National Implementation Monitoring Committee for the new mental health policy, Sharing the Vision. Jim Walsh added that the HRB has been asked to conduct a 1 year pilot to develop a Homeless Deaths Index.

### **4. Mid-term review**

Dairearca Ní Néill presented on the mid-term review of the National Drugs Strategy. She said that the national drug strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, sets out government policy on drug and alcohol use until 2025. The strategy aims to provide an integrated public health approach to drug and alcohol use, focused on reducing the harms for individuals, families and communities and promoting rehabilitation and recovery.

The strategy contains 50 actions for delivery between 2017 and 2020. The implementation of these actions is monitored through the national oversight structures, supported by the coordinated system of monitoring, research and evaluation set out in the strategy. A report outlining the progress during 2019 and planned activity for 2020, was presented to the NOC on 18 September 2020.

The Department is carrying out a review of the actions contained in the strategy. This will provide an opportunity to reflect on progress in implementing the strategy, with scope to develop further actions between 2021 and 2025 to address emerging needs and new challenges. The findings of the review will be presented to the National Oversight Committee, and the next meeting will focus on a discussion on the review.

In response to a query, Dairearca advised that the Progress Report for 2019 is on the Dept's website and a link can be sent around to the membership. Anna Quigley said she had sent a letter to the Minister to say the process needs to be more collaborative and that there is a huge amount of work going on which is not reflected in the Progress Report as it only involves the lead agencies. Maria Otero Vazquez reiterated Anna's comments saying it is important to consult with people who use the services. Dairearca replied by saying that all stakeholders will have an opportunity to input. Anna said that the Community Crime Impact happened with strong support and participation from AGS and she would like to hear their views, particularly in relation to engagement with ethnic communities.

## 5. Updates

- **Standing Sub-Committee** – Brian Dowling said there were four meetings of the Committee this year and that the November meeting focused on the Rapid Assessment Review. They are currently planning their work programme for 2021 and would welcome ideas for next year's meetings.
- **EWET**- Randall Plunkett said the EWET had a meeting earlier that week and welcomed Seamus McCormack, AGS (who is replacing Brian Woods) and UISCE as new members to the meeting. Randall said the main trends were an increased use of cannabis, increase in use of zopiclone tablets and an increase in house parties due to the closure of pubs and clubs. There were 5 MDMA overdoses this year (some linked to polydrug use) and 900,000 ketamine tablets were seized. There was a move towards a variety of cannabis-based products such as edibles. He pointed out that the Medical Bureau of Road Safety continue to advocate the testing for drug drivers. In addition, a surgeon in Beaumont Hospital had indicated there was an abuse of alcohol hand gels. When the EWET minutes are finalised, they will be circulated to NOC members.
- **Framework for restoration of services** – Brian Dowling said that the Department is heading up a working group in relation to restoring drug and alcohol services. Every Task Force had to apply before the end of November for their €20,000 allocation for drug and

alcohol services. He thanked Task Force and HSE colleagues for their co-operation in compiling the report and said the Rapid Evidence Assessment had fed into the Framework document.

- **EU Drugs Strategy** – Karen O'Connor thanked the members for the comments sent to her before her last EU meeting. A lot of the suggested changes were taken on board and some new text on governance and co-ordination was drafted. In relation to the provision of resources to implement the strategy, many changes were taken on board in the last document. Complex needs and social determinants of health are important as well. Prisoners and their health needs are to be included in the new strategy. It is hoped that the document can be signed off this year.

Jim Walsh said the Department has been very actively engaged in the European Strategy and has worked with Enda Kelly, Irish Prison Service on prisoners and their health needs which will be a theme in the new strategy.

- **Budget 2021 Measures** – Jim Walsh said that €25m was secured for Drugs and Alcohol and Homelessness Expenditure in 2021. This would be distributed as follows:
  - (a) Continued treatment of additional OSD clients,
  - (b) To meet the needs of people who are homeless,
  - (c) New developments in drug and alcohol services and Inclusion Health,
  - (d) €1m to target drug and alcohol initiatives through Task Forces.

Jim said that these measures will be outlined in the HSE's National Service Plan and we may have a presentation from them at the next meeting. Catherine Comiskey asked if there was any budget for research. Jim said there wasn't a specific budget for research.

## 6. Dates of next meetings

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

**Friday 5<sup>th</sup> March 2021**

**Friday 4<sup>th</sup> June 2021**

**Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2021**

**Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2021.**

The Minister concluded the meeting by wishing all members a happy and peaceful Christmas and New Year.