

Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery

National Oversight Committee (NOC)

Final Minutes of the meeting of the 18th September 2020

Attendance:

Minister Frank Feighan	
Colm Desmond	Department of Health
Jim Walsh	Department of Health
Asst Commissioner	
John O'Driscoll	An Garda Síochána
Angela Willis	An Garda Síochána
Anna Quigley	Community Sector
Pat Benson	Community Sector
Aoife Frances	National Family Support Network
Déaglán O'Briain	Department of Justice and Equality
Micheál Durcan	Regional Drug & Alcohol Task Force Coordinators Network
Caroline Jordan	TUSLA
Aisling Gillen	TUSLA
Catherine Comiskey	Academic Expert
Devesh Singh	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
Tony McGovern	Department of An Taoiseach
Paul Geraghty	Department of Rural and Community Development
Jim Mullery	Regional Drug & Alcohol Task Force Chairs Network
Eamon Keenan	HSE
Brian Galvin	Health Research Board
John Bennett	Local Drug & Alcohol Task Force Coordinators Network
Maria Vasquez	UISCE
Tony Duffin	National Voluntary Drug & Alcohol Treatment Sector
Neville Kenny	Department of Education and Skills
Tadhg Fallon	Department of Health
Gerry McCarney	College of Psychiatrists of Ireland

Presenters

Asst Commissioner	
John O'Driscoll	An Garda Síochána
Dairearca Ní Néill	DoH
Karen O'Connor	DoH
Brian Dowling	DoH

Randall Plunkett	DoH
Tom O'Brien	DoH

Apologies:

Aine Hall	International Nurses Society on Addiction
Bairbre Nic Aongusa	Dept of Rural & Community Development
Michael Lacey	Regional Drug & Alcohol Task Force Chairs Network
Dr. Íde Delargy	Irish College of General Practitioners

Secretariat

Dairearca Ní Néill	DoH
Fiona Conroy	DoH
Gillian Treacy	DoH
Fiona Wheeler	DoH

Introduction

Minister Feighan opened the meeting by introducing himself as the Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health, Wellbeing and National Drugs Strategy. He was aware of the political significance of the National Drugs Strategy, as a multi-agency strategy that addresses a key challenge for Irish society and especially, for the individuals, families and communities that are impacted by drugs and alcohol misuse.

While it was not possible for him to greet members in a face-to-face manner, the Minister hoped he would have the opportunity to meet with stakeholders on an individual basis over the next few weeks, beginning with the Drug and Alcohol task forces the following week. He also said he would have the opportunity to visit drug and alcohol services.

The Minister pointed out that Covid-19 has posed a major challenge to the provision of drug and alcohol services, as well as highlighting the health and social vulnerabilities of people who use drugs. The Minister commended the hard work of all those involved on the frontline.

The Minister went on to say that the meeting had a full agenda covering issues relevant to the strategy.

1. Minutes of last meeting and matters arising

The minutes of the last meeting had been circulated to the Committee. The minutes as circulated were agreed.

2. Discussion on Covid 19 and Drug and Alcohol services -

- **Assessment study**

Karen O'Connor, Drugs Policy Unit, Dept. of Health made a short presentation outlining the fact that the Department has undertaken an assessment of the impact Covid-19 has had on drugs and

drug services across the country. She said this was conducted so we could get a picture of the challenges that have been brought to the country, and services, so we can better inform our policy and practice for the future, as this pandemic will be with us for a substantial time to come. This work has involved a literature review, which has been conducted with the HRB, a Data review, particularly focussing on some of the Data collected by the EMCDDA earlier this year. They are also conducting Case Studies in two areas in Ireland, one in the Midwest for a rural understanding, and another in Dublin for the urban study. These are in the field at the moment and should take around 8-10 weeks. The key element of this study is the National Survey of drug services across the country. This was sent to services in August across the country, they have gotten 157 responses and analysis is currently underway. This survey covered trends, challenges to services, and to people who use drugs, and also questions about what our future may look like living with this pandemic. The results are vital and will be used to inform our next steps. Once everything is complete, a final report will be made to the NOC. Jim Walsh outlined that a stakeholder meeting will be held in relation to the survey.

- **Framework for the Restoration of services**

Brian Dowling, Drugs Policy Unit, Dept. of Health then presented on a report which had been published that week. The report involved representatives from Voluntary Task Forces, HSE and Drug & Alcohol sector. This represents a key area where people can find more information in relation to Drug and Alcohol services. The Group undertook a survey of the 24 Task Forces. While their services didn't stop due to Covid-19, they did operate differently. For example, with regard to the holding of addiction meetings, the Minister organised an exemption from crowd gatherings for these meetings. He also announced a support package for these groups.

- **Standing Sub-Committee**

Brian advised that the Standing Sub Committee has met 3 times this year. One of the meetings was on Covid-19 and this meeting was hosted by the Department on Microsoft Teams. A number of issues were raised – this was an opportunity for HSE/Task Forces etc. to discuss the impact of Covid-19 and the groundwork that has to be done.

Tony Duffin, Ana Liffey Drug Project, asked for some guidance on the work that is now being done. While he respects group work and confidentiality, he said there are a couple of issues with the prisons. Anna Quigley, Citywide came in on this point and said it would be great to have this area looked at.

Jim Walsh, Drugs Policy Unit, Dept. of Health said the Mid-Term Review is a piece of work which has to be addressed between now and the end of the year. This matter will be brought to the NOC, possibly in the New Year. Anna Quigley said it would be useful for the NOC to hear other people's views.

John Bennett said there seemed to be an issue across local Task Forces in relation to the consistency in approach of An Garda Síochána and asked if some guidance could be provided in relation to this.

Tony Duffin asked what the situation is with regard to the restoration of pay for Section 39 employees. Anna Quigley said that some of the issues which Tony raised would be addressed at a meeting which would take place on the following Monday.

3. Progress Report 2019 for RHSR

Dairearca Ní Néill, Drugs Policy & Social Inclusion Unit, Dept. of Health, presented on the Progress Report 2019 for RHSR. She explained that the strategy contains 50 actions for delivery between 2017 and 2020 and that the implementation of these actions are monitored through national structures. A number of Progress Reports have already been published. On examining the overview page, 5 actions were completely finished at the end of 2019 and over 20 actions were broadly on track. Some actions have significant delivery issues. While this progress report focuses on 2019, and outlines the planned activity for 2020, there were a number of delays arising due to Covid-19.

Lead depts were invited to provide any further information, by the end of the following week, as it is intended to publish the document within 2 weeks.

4. The drugs economy - issues for Ireland EMCDDA / Europol publication

This topic was presented by Asst. Commissioner John O'Driscoll, AGS. He referred to the Voluntary Centre for Drugs Addiction – the money generated in the local economy from terrorism, drug traffickers and terrorist organisations. He referred to the work of the Organised Crime Drugs Bureau and said there were significant traffickers of drugs involved in networks throughout the country. The Bureau aims to target them and seize the drugs but they are subject to intimidating behaviour. The Criminal Assets Bureau (CAB) is based on knowledge of drugs intimidation. For example, in West Cork, the Southern Star – the Gardaí took assets and withdrew powers from the drug barons. FSN, along with AGS, have developed the facilities they have and these issues are being highlighted. Minister Feighan asked how has Covid-19 impacted on the drugs economy/industry. Asst. Commissioner O'Driscoll replied that a supply chain existed for a while to get drugs in and out of ports. Crime in general tends to be internet-based crime where people are being targeted for very large sums of money.

Anna Quigley said the DCYA report is a really useful report which linked in to a discussion at the last SSC. There was a discussion on the Garda Diversion Programme and the Dept. of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) presented on this to the SSC. DCYA and Dept. of Justice representatives were working with young people at the last meeting to ensure that both programmes worked together – the Garda programme and the DCYA one. Catherine Comiskey commented that there had been an increase in darknet/cyber crime.

Asst Commissioner O'Driscoll said that while the impact continues, in some ways, they have been successful in recent months. Gerry McCarney, College of Psychiatry commented that while he

hasn't seen the DCYA report yet, he is engaged in working with young people involved with drugs and these people want to change their behaviour.

5. EU Drug agenda and Action Plan on Drugs 2021 – 2025

Karen O'Connor, Drugs Policy Unit presented on the new EU Agenda and Action Plan on Drugs, which was published by the European Commission on the 24th of July. The European Commission developed this document through a range of consultations with various stakeholders and evaluations of the previous EU Drugs Strategy, to produce a document that is grounded in evidence. Ireland had input via HDG and a Fiche for Ireland, which spoke somewhat about the future, but was more so an evaluation process. This Agenda on Drugs puts forward the political framework and priorities for EU drugs policy over the next five years – a shorter period as the previous strategy was for 7 years. The aim of the EU Agenda on Drugs is to protect citizens through better coordinated measures.

The Commission has stated that this new EU Agenda and Action Plan on Drugs is evidence based, integrated, multidisciplinary and balanced, addressing relevant security and health trends and threats as well as scientific, environmental, social and technological aspects. Internal and external aspects are covered together. The Commission has positioned this Agenda against the background of a serious situation in drug trafficking and in the use of illicit drugs in Europe.

They have placed EU responses to organised crime and drugs problems at the centre of the EU policy agenda this year, steering a new strategic approach on drugs. Historically, the plan has been more evenly divided between security and public health issues. The agenda is accompanied by an Action Plan covering concrete operational steps and activities. There are 53 actions that integrate all aspects covered by the Agenda.

The agenda was presented to the HDG as a communication from the Commission. It was discussed at the meeting on the 9th of September. Most member states contributed fully. The EU Agenda generally impacts and influences National Drugs Strategies. Ireland participates in the EMCDDA, including on the management board, and via the HDG, which can create opportunities to share experiences.

Karen said that Ireland have already spoken at the HDG, but plan on submitting a written submission outlining our queries regarding balance and the need for clarity surrounding Agenda's link to National Drugs Strategies. There has already been input from a few different avenues, and Karen has already gotten preliminary input from some stakeholders. But at this stage Karen would welcome more input. Information should be sent to her in the next week as the next HDG is on the 29th of September.

Jim Walsh raised the issue of prisoners as there is a big focus on drugs and prisoners. He said that maybe we'll reflect on that a bit more as the Irish Prison Service may have some views.

6. Updates:

- **Early Warning Emerging Trends subcommittee**

Randall Plunkett, DoH Controlled Drugs Division presented on this topic. He pointed out that due to Covid-19, EWET held their last meeting in February 2020. He said that HPRA was awaiting further information from the UK and would be reporting on this.

Enforcement Intelligence Group has been liaising with the national and local Garda drugs units and have identified Xanax tablets falsified with Etizolam as being a trend. The National Crime Agency in the UK seized 28million such tablets in an underground laboratory earlier this year. It is the belief of the HPRA that underground laboratories do not exist in Ireland due to the cheap availability of these tablets in the UK and the Netherlands.

Local Garda drugs units are reporting the availability of Cannabis infused sweets and chocolate bars.

In 2019 Cannabis and Cocaine were still most prevalent in drivers, Cocaine has gone from 24% Jan to 39% in April and down to 24% in July 2019 - Annual 36%.

The EMCDDA members are undertaking a European web survey on drug use in early 2021. The HRB and HSE are currently working on the Irish survey. The survey will measure patterns of use among those who use cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine, methamphetamine, and new psychoactive substances. Countries can also include a module on a topic of their choice, and the Irish survey will contain a number of questions on patterns of use of nitrous oxide among drug users.

In summer 2019 Nitrous oxide use was not emerging as a trend. A survey in Blanchardstown of U-18, indicated a small level of use.

UISCE reiterated their interest in actively participating in the EWET to provide information and feedback from the community of PWUD. She advised that the minutes of previous meetings and draft actions state that Medicines Unit would contact UISCE to discuss membership, but this has yet to happen. Randall undertook to follow-up on this matter.

- **Mental Health Strategy**

Tom O'Brien, Mental Health Unit, Dept. of Health presented on the new Mental Health Strategy "Sharing the Vision" which was published in June 2020. He said there are lots of factors for individuals in Mental Health. He looked at promotion, prevention and early intervention and looked at how individuals with mental health issues are discussed in the context of mental health. He said people with complex mental health issues should have access to counselling and CBT. Mental health issues are sometimes linked to addiction. A model called Pathways was introduced whereby people could self-refer or be admitted from different areas such as Primary Care Centres, Hospital Emergency, etc. The main recommendation themes of "Sharing the Vision" Policy were

Digital Health interventions such as developing telepsychiatry services and consideration of 0 -25. Drug and alcohol problems often exist along with Mental Health.

Gerry McCarney commented that the document was a bit short on details relating to timelines and funding. Colm Desmond said that “Sharing the Vision” has moved on to another level of dealing with mental health. They will be looking at the allocation to mental health services in the forthcoming Estimates.

In response to a question from Tony Duffin, Minister Feighan explained that the presentation on Dual Diagnosis had been deferred until the next meeting. Anna Quigley said the urgency of this issue “on the ground” is emerging with mental health issues.

- **Health Diversion Programme Implementation Group**

Colm Desmond said that this programme is a very good co-operative programme – Tadhg Fallon, Drugs Policy Unit has recently joined the Group. Colm welcomed the co-operation of the HSE and AGS on the Group and welcomed the very significant work that’s gone ahead on the ground.

- **Preparation for Estimates 2021**

Colm Desmond said there are a lot of demands on the Exchequer due to Covid-19. They have secured funding for Homelessness and Drugs issues in the Winter Plan. They will be hoping to make a provision to get funding in the new Budget.

Déaglán O’Brian, Dept. of Justice referred to the work taking place on the new Justice Strategy.

- **Date of next meeting 4th December 2020**

The date of the next meeting was set for 4th December 2020.

- **AOB**

Anna Quigley paid tribute to Ray Henry (formerly Dept. of An Taoiseach) who passed away the previous week. She acknowledged his contribution to the National Drug Strategy.

The meeting concluded.