**Proposal to broaden and deepen Civil Society participation**

**on the national oversight structures for the national drugs strategy**

*Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery*

Arising from the mid-term review of national drugs strategy, *Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery; A health-led response to drug and alcohol use*, six strategic priorities have been identified for the period 2021-2025. New structures are being put in place to support the implementation of these priorities. There will be an enhanced role for civil society organisations in the new structures, in line with actions 39 and 44 of the strategy.

This paper sets out the proposal to broaden and deepen the involvement of Civil Society organisations, including NGOs and networks, including those representing people who use drugs, in the structures supporting the implementation of the strategy and in policy implementation and development. The aim is to facilitate participation in the oversight structures and to support the involvement of civil society in policy formulation and implementation.

**Strategic priorities for 2021-2025**

The national drugs strategy, *Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery,* is guided and underpinned by a number of values, including partnership and inclusion. This provides for maintaining a partnership approach between statutory, community and voluntary bodies and wider society to address drug and alcohol issues, and states that diversity is valued and the needs of particular groups are accommodated and wide-ranging participation is promoted.

Partnership between the statutory, community and voluntary sectors has been a major factor in the success of previous strategies and continue to be the cornerstone of the new strategy. The strategy further recognises that there are a great variety of community and voluntary organisations whose commitment and knowledge of drug concerns helps to build our capacity to respond with flexibility and sensitivity. These organisations play a valuable role in promoting positive social change, in partnership with service users, families and local communities.

Following the mid-term review, the Minister has revised the oversight structures to drive the implementation of the strategic priorities for 2021-2025.  The National Oversight committee has been streamlined and 6 strategic implementation groups have been established to support the implementation of the strategic priorities. These strategic priorities are:

1. Strengthen the prevention of drug and alcohol use and the associated harms among children and young people;
2. Enhance access to and delivery of drug and alcohol services in the community;
3. Develop integrated care pathways for high-risk drug users to achieve better health outcomes;
4. Address the social determinants and consequences of drug use in disadvantaged communities;
5. Promote alternatives to coercive sanctions for drug-related offences; and
6. Strengthen evidence-informed and outcomes-focused practice, services, policies, and strategy implementation.

**Civil Society**

Civil society actors in the field of drug and alcohol policy include professional service providers, advocacy groups and organisations led by the most affected communities, such as people who use drugs and their relatives. Further, ‘civil society’ itself was conceptualised in the Commission Green Paper on the role of civil society in drugs policy in the EU as: “the associational life operating in the space between the state and market, including individual participation, and the activities of non-governmental, voluntary and community organisations”.

Civil society participation in the policy process should be balanced with regard to services, geographic representation, gender and age. It should also pro-actively involve people who use drugs and those who are most affected by drug use, including children, families and communities. What makes civil society involvement a high quality, meaningful exercise is mutual openness, transparency, and respect.

**Proposal**

The Department of Health proposes to broaden and deepen Civil Society representation in the structures of the strategy. Civil Society will have 4 representatives on the National Oversight Committee and 2 on each of the SIGs, i.e., 16 places in all. Three of the places on the NOC are allocated to Citywide, NVDAS and UISCE, with a fourth position currently vacant. In addition to these Civil Society positions, drug and alcohol task forces have been allocated a further 14 places. The proposal seeks

* to enhance the interaction and engagement of Civil Society organisation, networks and representative groups, in implementing the National Drugs Strategy,
* to coordinate the contribution of civil society to effective responses to the drug and alcohol situation, and
* to broaden civil society involvement in the structures of the strategy.

As a first step, the Department of Health is seeking expressions of interest to participate in the strategic implementation groups, using the expression of interest form attached. Civil Society organisations representing a variety of fields of drug and alcohol policy and service provision are invited to submit expressions of interest. The criteria for selection are:-

* provide a voice for those affected by drug and alcohol use, including service users, children and families, and local communities
* are committed to the values and strategic objectives of the national drugs strategy
* support equality, diversity and inclusion in their work and reflect a diversity of urban and rural experiences.
* have governance structures in line with good practice set out by the charities regulator.

Expressions of interest should be submitted to [dpu@health.gov.ie](mailto:dpu@health.gov.ie) by the closing of business on 19th March. Queries should be address to Dairearca Ní Néill.

Subsequently, it is intended that the representatives will form a Civil Society Group on drugs. This will provide transparency in representation for all involved at civil society level in the operation of the strategy.  The Department has had initial discussions with Civil Society organisation in relation to the proposal for a Civil Society Group. These consultations are ongoing.

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