

**Opening Statement by Paul Reid, Chair of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use,
to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Drugs Use**

Committee Room 4, Leinster House, Thursday June 13th 2024

Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirligh.

Chairperson, Deputies and Senators, on behalf of the members of the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use, thank you for the invitation to meet your Committee.

Our delegation includes several people who were closely involved in the work of the Citizens' Assembly.

Cathal O'Regan is the Secretary to the Citizens' Assembly, and headed up the team that designed and ran the Assembly.

We also have two members of our Advisory Support Group - Professor Jo-Hanna Ivers, of Trinity College Dublin, one of Europe's leading experts in relation to drugs and addiction, and Brian Galvin, the Health Research Board's Programme Manager for Drug and Alcohol Research.

I'm delighted also to be joined by two members of the Citizens' Assembly, Céire Moynihan and Graham O'Neill, both of whom served on the Steering Group.

The Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use has been an example of deliberative democracy at its very best.

Our Terms of Reference asked us to consider "*the legislative, policy and operational changes that the State could make to significantly reduce the harmful impacts of illicit drugs on individuals, families, communities and wider society*".

I'm pleased to report that we completed our mission, in full and on schedule.

Before you today is the end-result: a two-volume report that sets out what I believe to be the most thorough and far-reaching examination of drug use ever undertaken in this State.

The report reflects the reality that the causes, and consequences, of drug use are multi-faceted. It also emphasises the need for the State to respond to these challenges with urgency and ambition.

The Citizens' Assembly recommendations support specific measures for implementation, including, for example:

- A decriminalised model, pivoting from a reliance on a criminal justice response to a comprehensive health-led response. We have described this as an “Irish model” for the Irish problem on illicit drugs.
- Strengthened political oversight and accountability, through the establishment of a dedicated Cabinet Committee on Drugs, chaired by the Taoiseach;
- Prioritisation of supports for marginalised groups and disadvantaged communities;
- Enhanced funding, including additional and new sources of funding;
- A greater focus on prevention and recovery;
- Greater supports for families and children impacted by drug use;
- Strengthened services, including the expansion of harm reduction measures and treatment and recovery services, both in prison and at community level;
- Supply reduction, supporting the continued efforts of An Garda Síochána, while strengthening the response to drug-related intimidation and violence by organised crime gangs.

The report documents the many important contributions to the Citizens' Assembly made by experts, practitioners, stakeholders, and, very importantly, service users and people with lived experience of drug use.

We learned that, while drug use is prevalent in all parts of the country, and among all socio-economic groups, we can clearly tell that vulnerable groups and disadvantaged communities suffer disproportionately.

We learned how addiction and dependency can destroy lives.

We heard that organised crime gangs are inflicting drug-related intimidation and violence in cities, towns and villages across Ireland, and are luring vulnerable young people into criminality at an early age.

We heard, also, about the limitations of the State’s response, which has not substantively evolved in several decades. We were stunned by the length of time it takes to introduce even modest changes.

The Assembly members were frustrated and disappointed that even the modest proposals for a Health Diversion programme, signalled in the 2017 National Drugs Strategy and in the current Programme for Government, have still not been implemented. This would at least have been a starting point for a health-led approach.

We were concerned by the inadequate provision of drug services in community settings and in the prison system.

We heard how shame and stigma compounds the harms experienced by individuals and families affected by drug use.

And, time and again, we heard that simply criminalising people is no way to deal with the problem.

In response, the Citizens' Assembly has recommended a comprehensive package of 36 measures. These aim to ensure that the State, and other stakeholders, respond urgently, effectively and decisively to the full range of issues. We firmly believe that all 36 recommendations need to be adopted. Tackling issues in isolation will simply not work.

We fully respect the role of this Oireachtas Committee in the next stage of this process. But we would call for urgency from Government, and believe that our recommendations could, and should, be implemented in full.

We are acutely aware that, for tens of thousands of people in this country who are affected by drug use, the clock is ticking. People's lives and futures are on the line. There is no time to waste.

We believe that this report offers a new paradigm. We have, I hope, broadened out the national conversation about drugs from a narrow focus on debates about legalisation and decriminalisation.

The Assembly consisted of 100 members, 99 of whom were randomly selected from the general public, and myself as independent Chair.

Our demographic profile perfectly mirrored wider Irish society in terms of age, gender and location. The group was also diverse in terms of socio-economic profile, nationality and disability status.

Importantly, our members held diverse perspectives on drug use. We had people from all walks of life, coming with various levels of experience of drugs and addiction.

Irrespective of their backgrounds and personal experiences, each and every member made an invaluable contribution, and ensured that the Assembly was informed by a wide spectrum of opinions, reflective of Irish society generally.

We had six weekend meetings, heard from 130 presenters, had over 15 hours of Questions and Answers, and 250 hours of roundtable discussions. We also received almost 800 submissions to our public consultation.

We heard from eminent experts at international, EU and national level. We grounded our deliberations in empirical evidence, including from the Health Research Board and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. Most importantly, we included practitioners, service providers and people with lived, and living, experience, throughout the proceedings.

Despite the diverse profile of our members, there was a very strong consensus in support of most of the recommendations. Of the 36 recommendations, 31 were

supported by over 90% of members while another 4 were supported by over 80% of members.

The only issue which revealed a significant divergence of perspectives was in relation to the possession of cannabis for personal use. Even then, there was a strong consensus that the status quo is not working, and that we need to adopt a new approach.

Chair, if I may, I'd like to briefly summarise our recommendations.

Recommendations **1 to 6** focus on the need for urgent, decisive action by the State, and for drugs policy to be prioritised by Government. Among other things, they call for a dedicated Cabinet Committee on Drugs, chaired by the Taoiseach.

Recommendations **7 to 10** focus on a whole-of-government, whole-of-society response to drugs use, with a new National Drugs Strategy built on a partnership between the State and other stakeholders.

Recommendations **11 to 14** focus on policy and services for people with underlying drug problems who are engaged with the criminal justice system. They call for more community-based and residential drug services to give the judiciary greater options to divert people away from convictions and custodial sentences towards appropriate help. They also call for more drug treatment services within the prison system.

Recommendations **15 and 16** focus on improving service delivery, and providing targeted services for vulnerable and marginalised groups.

Recommendation **17** relates to how the State should deal with the possession of drugs for personal use. The Assembly has recommended a 'Comprehensive health-led approach', informed by international examples including Portugal and Austria. While possession of controlled drugs would remain illegal and prohibited by law, anyone found in possession of drugs for personal use would be afforded, first and foremost, extensive opportunities to engage with health-led services.

Recommendations **18 to 21** focus on funding of services, and include a recommendation to examine potential novel sources of funding.

Recommendations **22 and 23** focus on workforce development and providing trauma-informed training to key personnel.

Recommendation **24** calls for continued focus on the efforts of law enforcement to reduce supply of drugs, working at international, EU, national and local levels;

Recommendation **25** focuses on community development responses to drugs use.

Recommendation **26** calls for a zero-tolerance approach to drug-related intimidation and violence, and a continued strategic focus on tackling this issue at community level;

Recommendations **27 and 28** focus on prevention, emphasising the need for Ireland to improve its approach to primary, secondary and tertiary prevention.

Recommendation **29** calls for a public health communications strategy focusing on reducing shame and stigmatisation, drug prevention, risk mitigation and advertising drug services.

Recommendation **30** calls for a systemic approach to recovery, with funding for evidence-based innovation in the provision of residential and community-based recovery services.

Recommendation **31** calls for a strategy to enhance resilience, mental health, well-being and prevention capital across the population, including therapeutic supports for children and young people.

Recommendations **32 and 33** focus on improving the State's approach to drugs use through innovation, evidence and data.

Recommendation **34** refers the submissions received by the Citizens' Assembly to the Department of Health in the context of its work in preparing the next iteration of the National Drugs Strategy.

Recommendation **35** refers onwards to the appropriate regulatory authorities submissions received by the Citizens' Assembly which relate to the potential therapeutic benefits of cannabis and plant-based psychedelic substances.

Finally, Recommendation **36** calls for more widespread use and rapid adoption of evidence-based approaches to harm reduction.

In conclusion, Chairman, we believe that the Citizens Assembly has been the most comprehensive, inclusive, transparent and informed examination of illicit drug use that has ever taken place in this State.

This is why I urge the Oireachtas, and the Government, to embrace this new paradigm. With the right ambition, resourcing, leadership, strategic direction and determination, we can fundamentally transform how Ireland deals with drugs now, and into the future.

Thank you.

Ends