

Dear Ms Reilly,

The National Drugs Strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, 'A health-led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017-2025', sets out a health-led approach to drug use. It promotes a more compassionate and humane approach to people who use drugs, with drug use treated first and foremost as a public health issue. The Programme for Government endorses this health-led approach. By treating the use of substances as a public health issue, rather than solely as a criminal issue, we can better help individuals, their families and the communities in which we live.

Six strategic priorities have been identified for the remaining years of the national drugs strategy, 2022-2025. These priorities strengthen the health-led approach to drug use, as set out in the Programme for Government. The fifth strategic priority is to promote alternatives to coercive sanctions for drug related offences. The focus of this priority will be on the rollout of the health diversion programme, which will offer compassion not punishment for people found to be in possession of drugs for personal use. This priority aligns with the EU Drugs Strategy and Action Plan.

In February 2023, the Government agreed to establish a Citizens' Assembly on Drug Use to consider the legislative, policy and operational changes the State could make to significantly reduce the harmful impacts of illicit drugs on individuals, families, communities and wider society, and to bring forward recommendations. The Citizens' Assembly on Drugs Use commenced in April 2023 and will conclude its work by the end of the year.

The Citizens Assembly will inform the government's health-led response to drug use; drug use affects all members of society, whether directly or indirectly, and imposes very significant social and financial costs. Involving citizens in decision-making on drugs policy is therefore appropriate.

Prevention and education for children and young people regarding drug use is another crucial element of the remaining years of the national drugs strategy. A €1.5 million allocation for a three-year drug and alcohol prevention and education programme was recently announced. This funding program is a key deliverable under the national drug strategy, which aims to strengthen the prevention of drug and alcohol use, and related harm among children and young people.

The Government established a working group to consider alternative approaches to the possession of drugs for personal use in December 2017. The work programme of the group consisted of meetings with experts from other countries, commissioning research on other jurisdictions and undertaking a public consultation. The consultation process received a response of over 20,000 people and included the views of many people who use drugs.

The working group examined the option of decriminalising drugs. The report did not deem this an appropriate option in the Irish context due to legal difficulties (which could lead to the de facto legalisation of drugs), and operational problems for An Garda Síochána. The report of the working group was published in 2019 and is available [here](#).

The Government accepted the views of the working group on the decriminalisation of drugs. Accordingly, there are no plans to decriminalise drugs.

We cannot be complacent about the risk to health posed by illicit drugs. The Government is committed to a public health approach to drug use, that will lead to better outcomes for individuals and society.

Yours sincerely,

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Eimear Kavanagh

Private Secretary