



Pre-consultation on  
**'New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and  
Drugs'**

Sinn Féin submission

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**September  
2019**

## **Sinn Féin submission to pre-consultation on New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs**

### **Introduction**

Sinn Féin welcomes the opportunity to respond to the pre-consultation on an Alcohol and Drugs strategy.

The pre-consultation process is important in considering the principles upon which a future Alcohol and Drugs strategy should be based and it must involve regular and meaningful engagement with stakeholders and service users from the outset.

Sinn Féin believes any future strategy should be about prevention, harm reduction, promoting recovery, supporting communities and ensuring high quality services.

### **Important considerations for future Alcohol and Drugs strategy**

- Rising Need-there is currently no demand analysis or evidence of work to monitor future need. This needs to be addressed.
- Health Inequality measures-the issue of deprivation and the socio-economic factors need to be considered as part of a future strategy.
- Ongoing research and monitoring-is needed into the prevalence of alcohol and drug use across the island, such as the All-Ireland prevalence study 2014/15<sup>1</sup>
- Impact of health system pressures-delays to receiving treatment can create an increased risk of dependency on medication.
- Enhanced 'social prescribing' where appropriate-the ability to provide suitable alternative non-medication based treatment options can help reduce the access and reliance to prescription medication.
- Workforce development-as part of the DoH's future Workforce Strategy, consideration of workforce need must be informed by future demand analysis.
- Consideration of a broader Substance Misuse Strategy.
- Dual Diagnosis-whereby a person has a co-existing alcohol/drugs addiction and mental ill health is a serious barrier to accessing services and needs to be addressed.
- The presence of alcohol and drugs in a large proportion of suicides, deaths and standardised admission rates needs to be acknowledged and tackled.
- A strategy must set out clear targeted actions to address alcohol, and drug, misuse.
- Outcomes and interventions must take account of the different causes of drugs and/or alcohol misuse
- Priority should be based on objective need and addressing health inequalities.
- West Belfast Drugs Panel-demonstrated partnership working involving statutory agencies and the Community & Voluntary Sector in developing its report and recommendations.

### **Partnership in designing and delivering new strategy**

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<sup>1</sup> [www.drugsandalcohol.ie/26364/1/Bulletin-1.pdf](http://www.drugsandalcohol.ie/26364/1/Bulletin-1.pdf)

Sinn Féin believes that only through statutory and community dialogue can we develop a sustainable and effective strategy to address substance misuse.

Sinn Féin would strongly support and encourage the development of a new alcohol and drugs strategy carried out under the principles co-design, or partnership. Involvement of service users, staff and communities from design stage to the implementation of a new strategy is vital. Sinn Féin urges the department to set out clearly how it plans to engage meaningfully with the relevant stakeholders in developing the new strategy.

We support the ongoing engagement and learning being taken from the recent West Belfast Drugs Panel as an effective model for engaging and involving all the relevant stakeholders. We are aware that discussions have taken place between the panel and health officials to inform a future strategy and Sinn Féin supports this engagement.

### **Useful sources in the development of a strategy**

Sinn Féin would like to highlight a number of documents as useful resources in the development of an Alcohol and Drugs Strategy.

- All-Ireland prevalence study ([www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/drug-prevalence-survey](http://www.health-ni.gov.uk/articles/drug-prevalence-survey))
- West Belfast Drugs Panel ([https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/doh-health-development-policy-branch/pre-consultation-exercise/supporting\\_documents/West%20Belfast%20Community%20Drugs%20Panel%20Report.pdf](https://consultations.nidirect.gov.uk/doh-health-development-policy-branch/pre-consultation-exercise/supporting_documents/West%20Belfast%20Community%20Drugs%20Panel%20Report.pdf) )
- Health Inequalities Annual Report 2019 (<https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/hscims-report-2019.pdf>)

### **Poly Substance Misuse**

Sinn Féin believes that consideration should be given to a broader substance misuse strategy, including drugs and alcohol misuse. It is important to recognise the growing trend of poly drug use where people are taking more than one type of substance, such as consuming alcohol with illicit drugs, or misused prescription medication.

### **Health Inequalities**

The ongoing issues of health inequalities needs to feature prominently in any future strategy. The related drugs and alcohol indicators within the 2019 health inequalities report for the north highlighted that *“Alcohol, smoking and drug related indicators continue to show some of the largest health inequalities monitored...”* (Pg 28, Health Inequalities Annual Report 2019)

### **Service Pressures**

It is clear that the current service provision is struggling to cope with demand. The range of services that are commissioned to address substance misuse are not sufficient to meet demand, with many coming under pressure to operate. For any new strategy to be successful it must be sufficiently resourced.

### **Additional Data**

To ensure that as many people as possible can contribute in a meaningful way to the consultation we would encourage the publication of the existing demand analysis and projections for service need into the future. It is good that this issue has been recognised in the October 2018 Final Review of the *New Strategic Direction* report. (Pg 36)

Sinn Féin would also call on future engagements providing data on the issue of those classed as “Did Not Attend” (DNA) for services. We believe this may provide insight into how currently some services are not structured to promote and enable access for those living chaotic lives. The recent West Belfast Drugs Panel report refers to approaches which seek to reduce barriers to accessing services.

*“Greater levels of flexibility need to be enabled within statutory and community mental health and addiction services regarding missed appointments. The current, restrictive policy regarding missed appointments does not take into consideration the complex and often-chaotic nature of the lives of the vulnerable people who need to access these services.”<sup>2</sup>*

### **Cross Sectorial Approach**

The impact of alcohol and drugs is felt right across society. Any future strategy needs to consider the complex presence it has across society. In particular, we would urge that work is carried out as to how other policy areas impact on substance misuse. For example the impact of ‘welfare reform’ and the perceived need for those in receipt of some benefits feeling the need to continue with a prescription medication as proof of a condition. If the medication is not actually needed it can either be a source of potential dependency or find its way on to the streets.

### **Dual Diagnosis**

Dual Diagnosis or dual treatment is a serious problem in Ireland, north and south. It is where people facing serious mental health problems face a denial of service because of co-existing drug and/or alcohol addiction. Alcohol or drug abuse can be a significant contributing factor for an individual’s mental ill health, or an individual’s alcohol or drug addiction may be connected to underlying mental health problems. Given the interconnectedness of mental health and substance abuse, they cannot be looked at in isolation.

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<sup>2</sup> *West Belfast Community Drugs Panel: Summary Report*

## **Harm Reduction**

Sinn Féin believes efforts towards harm reduction should also consider the impact within communities. The principles<sup>3</sup> of harm reduction need to consider the individual but also the public health and communities.

## **Primary and Community Services**

Sinn Féin believes investing in primary and community services is vital. This needs to be based on a detailed analysis of need. An example of how this investment could be realised is through additional resources through the Multi-Disciplinary Teams supporting local GPs and primary care.

## **Conclusion**

Sinn Féin believes there is a need to revisit the existing strategy and a future Alcohol and Drugs strategy must be about prevention, harm reduction, promoting recovery, supporting communities and ensuring high quality services for those who need it.

A new strategy must be evidence based, properly funded and designed and implemented in partnership with the statutory sector, those who deliver addiction services and support, and those who use the services and their families. Given the complex nature of alcohol and drug addiction all relevant stakeholders must be involved in developing a strategy to address it.

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<sup>3</sup> [www.hri.global/what-is-harm-reduction](http://www.hri.global/what-is-harm-reduction)