

Introduction

A health-led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017-2025



Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery sets out the Government's strategy to address the harm caused by substance misuse in our society up to 2025.

It identifies a set of key actions to be delivered between 2017 and 2020, and provides an opportunity for the development of further actions from 2021 to 2025 to address needs that may emerge later on in the lifetime of the strategy.

The strategy aims to provide an integrated public health approach to substance misuse. Substance misuse means the harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol, illegal drugs and the abuse of prescription medicines.

The public consultation which informed the strategy highlighted changing attitudes towards people who use drugs, with calls for drug use to be treated first and foremost as a health issue.

Ireland's previous national drugs strategies covered the period from 2001 to 2008¹ and 2009 to 2016² respectively. Both strategies aimed to reduce the harm caused by the misuse of drugs, through a concerted focus on supply reduction, prevention, treatment, rehabilitation and research. The new strategy will also advocate a harm reduction approach, but will place a greater emphasis on supporting a health-led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland.

Partnership between the statutory, community and voluntary sectors was a major factor in the success of previous strategies, and will continue to be the cornerstone of the new strategy. Drug and Alcohol Task Forces (DATFs) will play a key role in coordinating interagency action at local level and supporting evidence-based approaches to problem substance use, including alcohol and illegal drugs. The new strategy will provide a way of measuring the collective response to the drug problem, through a performance measurement framework.

The Healthy Ireland Framework³ provides an overarching context for the development of this new strategy and its actions will contribute towards improving the health, wellbeing and safety of the population of Ireland in the coming years. The new strategy will foster a person-centred approach to those who develop drug or alcohol-related problems, while underlining the need for a whole-of-Government response to the socio-economic cultural and environmental risk factors contributing to the causes of substance misuse.

Vision

The vision of the strategy aims to create:

“A healthier and safer Ireland, where public health and safety is protected, and the harms caused to individuals, families and communities by substance misuse are reduced and every person affected by substance misuse is empowered to improve their health, wellbeing and quality of life.”

This vision recognises the importance of responding to the harms caused by substance misuse which impacts on individuals, families, communities and wider society, and helping those who develop drug or alcohol problems to address their personal health needs and improve their health, wellbeing and quality of life.

Values

The new strategy is guided and underpinned by the following values:

- Compassion
A humane, compassionate approach focused on harm reduction which recognises that substance misuse is a health care issue.
- Respect
Respect for the right of each individual to receive person-centred care based on his or her specific needs and to be involved in the development of their care plan.
- Equity
A commitment to ensuring people have access to high quality services and support regardless of where they live or who they are.
- Inclusion
Diversity is valued, the needs of particular groups are accommodated and wide-ranging participation is promoted.
- Partnership
Support for maintaining a partnership approach between statutory, community and voluntary bodies and wider society to address drug and alcohol issues.
- Evidence-informed
Support for the use of high quality evidence to inform effective policies and actions to address drug and alcohol problems.

Taken together, these values underpin the goals, objectives and actions in this strategy and reinforce the Government’s commitment to adopt a health-led approach to substance misuse and to provide the supports that are necessary to help people recover their health, wellbeing and quality of life.

Goals:

Goal 1

Promote and protect health and wellbeing

A healthy population is a major asset for society, and improving the health and wellbeing of the nation is a priority for the Government and the whole of society.

Healthy Ireland 3, Ireland's framework for improved health and wellbeing, aims to support people and communities in making more positive changes, to address the social determinants of health and thereby reduce health inequalities, and to influence the wider environment to enable healthier choices by everyone.

This strategy aims to protect the public from threats to health and wellbeing related to substance misuse by preventing early use of alcohol and other drugs among young people, influencing behaviour and challenging social norms and attitudes and providing targeted interventions aimed at minimising harm for those who have already started to use substances.

Goal 2

Minimise the harms caused by the use and misuse of substances and promote rehabilitation and recovery

This goal recognises the role of the individual in addressing his or her dependence on alcohol and other drugs, and that the context within which drug dependency develops has a fundamental impact on the type of response that is most appropriate to addressing it. It also acknowledges that substance misuse affects not only those who have developed a drug or alcohol problem, but also their families, the community and the wider society.

Therefore, interventions and supports are needed to target not only those who have developed a problem due to the misuse of substances, but also those harmed by another person's drug and alcohol use.

It is also important to provide tailored interventions to effectively address the needs of those who face a higher risk of substance misuse because of their lifestyle or because they belong to a specific group or community of interest.

Goal 3

Address the harms of drug markets and reduce access to drugs for harmful use

Protecting the public from dangerous or potentially dangerous substances and their harmful effects is a core objective of Ireland's drug control framework.

Gathering information and intelligence at national and international level is a vital part of the work involved in intercepting drugs destined for the Irish drug market. It strengthens the response to organised and gang-related crime, involved in the supply of drugs and related criminal activities.

Effective monitoring of the drugs situation, and the public health threats associated with the supply of illegal substances, including new drugs, is required to address the harms of the drug market and reduce access to drugs for harmful use. Addressing the harmful aspects of the drugs situation in communities, such as drug-dealing and drug-related crime and intimidation, requires a collaborative effort, across a range of agencies and sectors of society.

Goal 4

Support participation of individuals, families and communities

Building the capacity of communities to respond to the drugs situation is a key goal of Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery. Building social capital is seen as particularly important in those communities that are most impacted by socio-economic disadvantage, marginalisation and exclusion, as such communities may require more targeted interventions to address the issues they face.

The full involvement of all stakeholders, including people who use services and others affected by problem substance use, in the design, implementation and review of services, policies and strategies is also of vital importance.

Throughout this strategy, the term user is used to include people who use healthcare services, their parents, guardians, carers and families, organisations and communities that represent the interests of people who use health and social care services, as well as potential users of healthcare services such as people who currently use drugs. Family members have a particularly important role to play, as they may be involved in supporting a loved one with a drug problem and may be service users in their own right.

Goal 5

Develop sound and comprehensive evidence-informed policies and actions

Improving our knowledge and understanding of the drugs problem is a core objective of Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery. For this reason, a sound and comprehensive evidence base is needed for policies and actions. Information systems which monitor trends and patterns in drug use and availability, and evaluation of programmes and research into the causes and consequences of substance misuse will be supported under the new strategy.