



Response on behalf of young clients on the Substance Use Strategy

Key Point:

The term Drug Strategy on every occasion, had to be broken down into terminology that the young person understood. It was repackaged as:

“What could those working with you, social workers, counsellors, support staff, do differently that would be more helpful to you?”

“Based on your experience, imagine you were in the control seat and made the decisions about what things you could do for your friends who have alcohol and drug problems, what would you do?”

“What works and what does not work? If they could remove services tomorrow, what would you miss and what would you not miss?”

Responses:

- There are so many labels and stigmas attached to life as a young person today and services (unintentionally) can reinforce that stigma with how they are established or operate. If you go into a certain building you are a 'druggie' or 'your head is away'. It can be so difficult for young people to have the courage to take that step to access the services they need.
- Targeted services should be there before the label is applied or can support the young person to access that courage and take that step towards change.
“Professionals need to stop looking at me as if I am no good because I use drugs. I need their help, not judgement. I have an illness. I’m addicted. I’ve been like this since I was 13. Often, they look at me like I’m a scumbag’.
- Need for residential rehab and detox services that have longevity. *“I’d put the money into rehab centres, out in the country, away from everything, you go away for 3 or 4 months, get treated, get new skills, learn meditation and stuff, then come back home sorted”.*
- When someone is using drugs and/or alcohol in an unhealthy way, they need compassion and treatment, rather than with criminalisation.
- A universal, early intervention service needs to be established to support young people before they use drugs and/or alcohol in a problematic or harmful way. There is a need for easily accessible early intervention services that are readily available to all young people, ideally in every town and school in Northern Ireland. Such a service would play a crucial role alongside targeted intervention services that are needed when a young person is misusing drugs and/or alcohol.

- Young people are managing a multitude of issues, pressures, and transitions as they grow and develop. These include health & well-being, mental health, physical health, education, employment or unemployment, ability, body image, self-confidence, self-esteem, identity, sexual orientation, family, relationships, sexual health, suicide, community, traumatic experiences, poverty and bereavement/loss. Some young people have excellent support systems in place that help to manage and navigate all this. Others lack strong support systems and the opportunities to talk to caring adults or peers about what they are dealing with. Without these consistent, empathetic, and available support systems young people can really struggle and the risk of drug and/or alcohol use can escalate.
- Services need to provide a safe and accessible space for all young people to help them talk - when they are ready and before it gets to the stage of crisis and targeted interventions. The mental health of young people can come under enormous strain and having a safe space to be yourself can make a positive difference. This safe space could be a dedicated building, delivered as part of a Youth Club or in a school - wherever young people are.
- There is frustration and concern over the three-strike rule in statutory services. At times young people do not have the money or motivation to attend appointments and may not have anyway of cancelling appointments.
- More intense support is needed especially in times of relapse.
- Face to face support is key, but other options should also be available. When many young people are using substances, they are often at their loneliest and most vulnerable. It's easy not to answer a phone. Forging a real connection with a worker can be the difference between survival and destruction.
- Drugs should be legalised so as they could be then regulated properly.
- Schools need to increase their understanding of addiction issues and look at how they can support young people and not further exclude them.
- Substance misuse needs to be addressed alongside other factors such as family, where you live, poverty, deprivation, rurality, mental health, loneliness.
- There is a need to be taken seriously when a young person presents at hospital following overdose and mental health issues. Being discharged that night or the next day with no additional support or even attempt to understand what had happen just leaves young people feeling more hopeless.
- The importance of funded and accessible pro-social opportunities such as the gym, art, cooking, meditation, yoga, sports. These allow young people to stay motivated and connected. This has a positive impact on positive mental health and physical well-being.
- Available services should be tailored to suit the needs and lifestyles of young people.
- Services should be consistent in their availability over time (not just for a few weeks) and be available to all young people whether using substances or not.
- Support needs to be given to young people to help change and to have hope for the future.
- Young people must be involved in the decisions regarding service delivery and their recovery journey.