

How academics and service providers are working together to inform drug policy in Ireland



Since 2015, the LSE's International Drug Policy Unit has been working with local partners the Ana Liffey Drug Project to help foster a new era of progressive drug policies in Ireland. [Tony Duffin](#) outlines the scale of Ireland's drug problem and how the project aims to help inform drug policy in the country from a solid evidence base.

In 2018 Ireland will continue on its path towards considering and implementing progressive drug policies. Ireland's Health Service Executive plans to implement a [pilot Medically Supervised Injecting Centre](#) in Dublin City Centre in 2018. Also, Catherine Byrne TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Public Health and the National Drug Strategy, has [established a working group](#) to consider the approaches taken in other jurisdictions to the possession of small quantities of drugs for personal use with a view to making recommendations on policy options. It is anticipated that the group will report back to the Minister towards the end of 2018. Hopefully what they recommend will reflect the growing international consensus that criminalisation of possession for personal use produces significant harms for little benefit.

Like many other countries, Ireland's history of drug law has been largely prohibitive, with the Misuse of Drugs Act, 1977 as the centrepiece for the last four decades. While use (with the odd exception of opium) is not criminalised, simple possession is. Around the same time as the Act was introduced, heroin was emerging as a serious problem in [North Inner City Dublin](#) – which is considered the birth place of Ireland's, now national, poly-drug use problem. Then came the global HIV/AIDS epidemic of the mid 1980s, and the clear public health implications it brought. Ireland's response to drugs and drug use has always been a mix of these perspectives – criminal justice on one side, health on the other.

Ireland is a relatively small country, meaning that 'bottom-up' approaches to developing policy can perhaps be used to better effect than in larger states. By comparison to some other jurisdictions, civil society actors in Ireland have very good access to politicians, to civil servants and to public servants. There are many examples of NGOs playing an important role in the development of [drug policy in Ireland](#).

Drug policy is about two things: what works; and what is acceptable to people. States have to be concerned about both – governments are formed by politicians who are in position by virtue of an electoral mandate. What is acceptable to the people that gave a mandate to that politician is important in that context. Civil society organisations, however, only have to concern themselves with what works – whether or not that course of action is popular with the general public is someone else's problem.

Or is it? To be effective as an advocate, it is vital to understand the motivations and key issues of others. While advocating for a policy is, of course, to do with convincing policy makers, it is also to do with bringing that debate to the public square. After all, it is the voting public who elect the policy makers. This is not always easy. Sometimes what works feels counterintuitive and people initially find it unacceptable as a result.



The LSE and Ana Liffey Drug Project have been working together to inform drug policy in Ireland from a solid evidence base. This partnership, between a world recognised third level institution and an Irish NGO drug service provider, has worked very well. Supported by the LSE's Knowledge Exchange and Impact (KEI) Fund, the partnership has informed and facilitated discussions on the introduction of a Supervised Injection Facility (SIF). These are legally sanctioned premises where people can inject pre-obtained drugs, with medical oversight and nursing supervision. They have also informed and facilitated discussions on the decriminalisation of small amounts of drugs for personal use.

In 2018, LSE and Ana Liffey will be working with [Hotpress](#), a fortnightly music and politics magazine based in [Dublin](#), to create a better understanding of the decriminalisation of small amounts of drugs for personal use as a policy option. We will engage through media and local meetings across the country about what this progressive drug policy is and what it is not. It is anticipated that a mixture of drug policy experts, local and national politicians, celebrities and other stakeholders will encourage people to engage with the subject.

Our focus is on bringing the evidence to people, and having the opportunity to discuss progressive policy choices openly. Ultimately, we hope that once people engage with the topic, they will realise that progressive drug policies work and hence support them as policy options. We can't solve Ireland's drug problem, but we can manage the situation better. The way to do that is to tailor our responses using the best available evidence.

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About the author



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Tony Duffin is the CEO of the [Ana Liffey Dug Project](#), a position he has held since 5th November 2005. Prior to this, he held a number of senior management roles in the addiction field, including playing a key role in opening Ireland's first emergency accommodation for young people who inject drugs; and Ireland's first wet residential service for entrenched street drinkers. He holds an MSc in 'Drug and Alcohol Policy' from Trinity College Dublin, and a Postgraduate Diploma in 'Research in Health Practice' through the University of Bath.