





Chair's Foreword

This report summarises the activities of the BIC Drugs and Alcohol Work Sector 2021-2024. The period has been a time of great disruption due to the Covid-19 pandemic, which not alone restricted the activities of the work sector, but presented new challenges for the provision of drug and alcohol services. It was appropriate, therefore, that the first action in the work plan was to reflect on the response to Covid-19 by drug and alcohol services across the BIC's Member Administrations. The rapid response to Covid-19 demonstrated the resourcefulness of drugs and alcohol sectors in the face of adversity.

The devastating impact of drugs on individuals and families was examined by the group, led by the Scottish Government. As well as comparing the extent of drug deaths across the BIC Member Administrations, the comparative report developed documents the variety of policy priorities and approaches to reducing drug-related deaths.

The in-person symposium in Dublin on drug and alcohol use among people experiencing homelessness was innovative in a number of ways. First, it was a joint event with the BIC Housing Work Sector (led by the Northern Ireland Executive) and second, it included representatives of civil society. The event broadened the pool of BIC officials and citizens involved in discussions about drug and alcohol dependency and homelessness, and highlighted shared interests in tackling these complex issues.

The evidence on the impact of minimum unit pricing for alcohol products was featured in an online webinar. Minimum unit pricing is a

live policy experiment, with some BIC Member Administrations at various stages in implementing this approach. The workshop was a unique opportunity to share learning on this experiment and to highlight emerging findings, as well as implementation challenges. The involvement of WHO Europe brought an international perspective on alcohol pricing evidence.

Finally, the UK Government hosted a meeting on the role of community and voluntary organisations in the provision of drug services. The event included inputs from community and voluntary organisations on the challenges and enablers in recognising the role, knowledge and expertise of the sector in drug policy and service delivery. Further dialogue is planned under the future work plan for the group.

This report demonstrates the relevance of the British-Irish Council to policy concerns about alcohol and drug use across the Member Administrations. There has been a richness and vibrancy to the discussions and analyses of the work sector over the last three years, which would not have occurred without the structure of the Council. I want to conclude with a sincere thanks to the BIC Secretariat which has supported the work sector, and officials from across the Member Administrations, including the Government of Ireland team.

Jim Walsh
Government of Ireland representative
and Official Chair of the Drugs and
Alcohol Work Sector

Introduction

The BIC Drugs and Alcohol Work Sector is led by the Government of Ireland and has been a topic under consideration of the Council since its establishment in 1999. Over the years, Member Administrations have acknowledged that drug and alcohol services can: save lives with treatment being a protective factor against overdose; help people to recover and break the cycle of addiction; and reduce crime and prevent the spread of addiction.

Member Administrations have highlighted that working together within the BIC provides an opportunity to share emerging good practice, and nurture new connections with others who are working on addressing common challenges. The importance of collaboration formally or informally is key in learning from each other and exchanging information on best practice.



At the last Ministerial meeting in 2021, Ministers agreed the work plan for the Drugs and Alcohol Work Sector. This plan focussed on five key themes:

1. Lessons from Covid-19 on drug and alcohol services;
2. Reduction to risk of drug-related deaths;
3. Reduction of alcohol related harms through the use of financial mechanisms;
4. Approaches to meeting the health and social needs of people who are homeless and use drugs/alcohol (in conjunction with the BIC Housing Work Sector); and
5. Engagement with the voluntary and community sectors to consider their role in the provision of drug and alcohol services and in the development and monitoring of policy.

This paper summarises the activities of the BIC Drugs and Alcohol Work Sector in delivering its agreed Forward Work Plan for 2021-2024. As part of this delivery, the group held a series of events and visits, working closely with other relevant BIC work sectors, and engaging with external stakeholders and third sector organisations to provide a broader perspective on its work.

Theme 1: Lessons from Covid-19 on the design and delivery of drug and alcohol services

The Covid-19 pandemic increased the risk for users and services alike. The crisis highlighted the health inequalities faced by people who use drugs and/or alcohol, including vulnerability to infection, difficulties in accessing services, risks of harm and overdose, and underlying health inequalities. Factors such as these need to be considered in the context of ensuring effective policy and healthcare responses, and it was agreed that the public health focus on the needs of people who use drugs and alcohol should continue.

Member Administrations had to introduce rapid and agile changes to their services to comply with safety and public health measures. Factors such as these need to be considered in the context of ensuring effective policy and healthcare responses.

Member Administrations agreed to examine and share perspectives on the collective responses developed by policy makers and service providers in response to Covid-19, demonstrating the agility of the Council to share learning during an unprecedented public health crisis. This work resulted in a discussion paper considering approaches to short and longer-term policy and service adaptations, and measures that might be continued in the ‘post-pandemic’ context. The Government of Ireland was the lead administration in collating this paper, which is

based on the rich content provided by Member Administrations, and informed by the valuable conversations and information exchanges on the topic. As documented, many service innovations and improvements were introduced during the pandemic, which can now be mainstreamed in service delivery, be it in terms of additional resources, improved capacity or better ways of working. The work sector will continue to share learnings on these approaches and innovations as they continue to be implemented.



“Overall we believe that being a part of BIC Drugs and Alcohol Work Sector gives us access to a reliable, skilled cadre of experience which we can tap into at need.”

Theme 2: Reduction to risk of drug-related deaths

Drug-related deaths have been recognised as a major public health concern across the BIC's Member Administrations. In 2021, Member Administrations agreed to include this topic as an area of focus in the Drugs and Alcohol Work Sector to share information on approaches to improving health outcomes for their populations that use drugs.

Throughout the course of this work, Member Administrations have shared information on the

underlying factors identified in drug deaths, and the innovative and ambitious responses to address these, including on drug consumption trends; harm reduction measures; and treatment delivery. This information sharing activity resulted in the development of a discussion paper, led by the Scottish Government, looking at initiatives implemented across the BIC administrations, and examining the experience of public health officials and drug users in this implementation.

Work Sector visit to Glasgow

In October 2022, the BIC Drugs and Alcohol Work Sector officials travelled to Glasgow to consider a number of supports and services aimed at promoting safer consumption. The programme included a visit to the Managed Alcohol Programme (MAP). Managed



Alcohol Programmes (MAPs) were identified as an intervention of interest within **Rights, Respect, Recovery**, the Scottish Government's alcohol and drug treatment strategy, published in November 2018. MAPs are harm reduction programmes that offer regularly dispensed and/or administered sources of alcohol alongside accommodation,

and other support. MAPs aim to prevent alcohol related harms and premature death by reducing dangerous/chaotic consumption of alcohol, binge drinking as well as addressing anti-social behaviours. The group received an insight into how the programme was being piloted in Glasgow in partnership with the Simon Community, the necessary resource allocations, and the early results of the programme, while also hearing the direct experience of engaged individuals.

The group also engaged with the team from the Enhanced Drug Treatment Service (EDTS), a facility in Glasgow established in November 2019, which is Scotland's only current service providing heroin-assisted treatment (HAT) in the form of prescribed diamorphine and enhanced support to people whose problem drug use persists, even after they have received conventional treatment and care services. The group heard from the clinical lead for the programme, and discussed the experience in setting up the service, results from the programme, and intended next steps in further developing the service.

Theme 3: Reduction of alcohol-related harms through the use of financial mechanisms



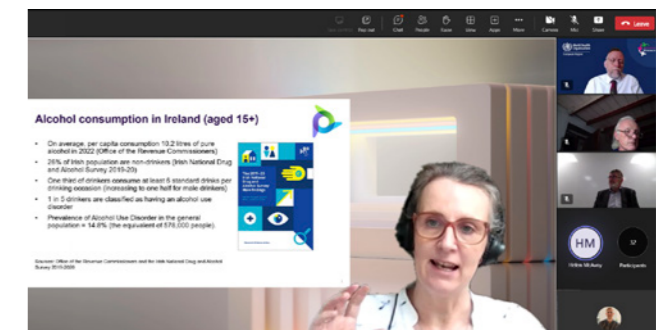
Many BIC Member Administrations have identified high levels of alcohol consumption and harmful drinking patterns which have significant health, social and economic costs and there is a general consensus that the pricing and promotions of alcohol are major policy levers influencing consumption. In 2021, it was agreed that the Drugs and Alcohol Work Sector would collectively consider financial mechanisms to reduce alcohol-related harms, recognising the evidence that purchasing behaviour in relation to alcohol is price sensitive.

In implementing this area of work, in June 2023, the work sector facilitated an online workshop to collectively consider policy approaches to Minimum Unit Pricing (MUP) as a policy lever to reducing alcohol consumption. The workshop brought together officials and relevant stakeholders to consider the experience of a number of BIC Member Administrations in introducing and implementing MUP.

Participants heard from the World Health Organisation on the recently published Alcohol Framework Programme, looking specifically at the alcohol pricing objective and the strong evidence base for financial measures, their effective implementation, opposition from the alcohol industry and interlinkages between measures such as MUP and taxation.

Administrations including the Welsh Government, the Scottish Government and the Government of Ireland also shared their experience of introducing the financial mechanism, as well as looking at the initial results of evaluations carried out to monitor their effectiveness, including in terms of harm-reduction mechanisms, particularly in relation to service users.

Recognising the challenges in implementing these measures, the workshop's conclusions found that effective MUP policy is important to reducing alcohol-related harms, but needs to sit alongside a comprehensive alcohol policy with a holistic approach to treatment. In addition, regularly reviewing implementation and evaluation will continue to be important and the current context associated with cost-of-living crisis and the longer-term impacts of Covid-19 have created a challenging environment.



“It was a high quality and policy rich event. A illustration of the real time value of BIC.”

“We have found the BIC Drug and Alcohol Work Sector an excellent source of contacts with all the other administrations. In particular, the enhanced contacts we made around MUP have been extremely helpful in our own policy making.”

Theme 4: Meeting the health and social needs of people who are homeless and use drugs and/or alcohol



Building on earlier consideration of the links between homelessness and substance use, the Drugs and Alcohol Work Sector agreed to look in-depth at approaches to meeting the health and social needs of people who are homeless and use drugs and/or alcohol. In recognising the clear cross-sectoral aspect of this work, the work sector collaborated with the BIC Housing Work Sector to deliver a flagship symposium in Dublin in May 2022.

The symposium looked at approaches to supporting people who are homeless and use drugs and/or alcohol, who have many complex needs that require a joined up approach between housing and health services. The programme provided an opportunity for those working in the housing, drugs and alcohol, health, and homelessness sectors to come together to share learning on how to better meet the needs of those who experience homelessness, particularly for those also dealing with substance use related harm.

Policy makers, service providers, voluntary and community organisations and people with lived experience came together over two days to consider how to better align responses and ensure improved outcomes, looking at initiatives underway across Member Administrations to address these complex interlinked issues including models such as Housing First; Inclusion Health; delivering patient focused Addiction services; learning from Covid-19; addressing gender issues; and reducing stigma. A report on the symposium will be published later in 2024.

The discussions and workshops were wide ranging, thought provoking and in many cases inspirational, with the focus on developing solutions in terms of how responses and services can be better aligned to ensure improved outcomes for this vulnerable group. The event provided the eight BIC Member Administrations with useful insights which will assist policy makers and service providers shape interventions in years to come.



“One of the workshops led by Action for Children (Guernsey) resulted in us later introducing Action for Children to our Young Person’s Substance Misuse Team in Jersey, and learning from their approaches to school based education and early intervention has helped us with our own planning on this area.”

Work Sector visit to Merchants Quay, Ireland



In May 2022, participants at the Dublin symposium also had the opportunity to visit Merchants Quay Ireland (MQI), which is a national voluntary organisation that carries out activities for social justice for homeless persons and people who use drugs. MQI provide frontline services, practical supports, pathways towards recovery and innovative responses to the issues of drug use and homelessness in Ireland. Services incorporate the provision of meals, drug services, crisis intervention, needle exchange, rehabilitation and detox services, together with day programmes, aftercare and training. The visit included a tour and an overview of the service activities and officials were also shown the proposed site for the planned (and now approved) Supervised Injecting Facility.



“Overall we thoroughly enjoyed the visit and found it extremely relevant and beneficial not only to the work of the Drugs and Alcohol Work Sector and the joint symposium, but also of direct benefit to ongoing policy work around substance use services in our administration.”

Theme 5: Engagement with the voluntary and community sectors to consider their role in the provision of drug and alcohol services and in the development and monitoring of policy

Recognising the role voluntary bodies play in advocacy for, and the delivery of, drug and alcohol services, the work sector agreed to facilitate a dialogue with representatives of the voluntary sectors involved in the design and delivery of drug and alcohol services across the BIC administrations. Taking into account the unique experience of service users, the work sector was also keen to ensure their involvement in developing services and interventions. In this context, the work sector delivered a number of events and visits which engaged the voluntary

and community sector representatives, as well as incorporating the direct experience of service users. This included visits to Dublin and Glasgow, and the programme of the Joint Symposium on Homelessness and Health.

This involvement resulted in an enriched discussion on the development of services that have a broader remit, incorporating a whole system approach which address the wider determinants of health such as inequalities, deprivation, housing and employment.

Work Sector visit to London



In October 2023, the work sector also travelled to London for a workshop specifically on engagement with the voluntary and community sectors to consider their role in the provision of drug and alcohol services and in the development and monitoring of policy. The group heard about the approach from the UK Government and from Pete Burkinshaw, Alcohol and Drug Treatment and Recovery Lead, Office of Health, Improvement and Disparities (OHID) on the role voluntary and community sectors have played in treatment in England, focusing on how the market has evolved and recent work to better integrate lived experience led recovery organisations. The officials also heard from Jess Mullen, the Chief Executive Officer from [Collective Voice](#) – a national charity working to improve England’s drug and alcohol treatment and recovery system on the contribution of third sector organisations in England and plans and priorities for future development.

