

SPEECH BY
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AT THE
DUBLIN CORPORATION FORUM
“DRUGS IN DUBLIN - WORKING TOGETHER
WE CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE”
DUBLIN CASTLE CONFERENCE CENTRE
FRIDAY 7 FEBRUARY, 1997

Importance of the Drugs Forum

I would like to thank Dublin Corporation for affording me the opportunity to address this important Forum.

To effectively tackle the drug problem, to rebuild communities, to improve them in terms of their physical and social infrastructures, and revitalise them economically we need to create a new dynamic between statutory agencies and local communities. That is why events such as this Conference are so important and I was delighted to have been able to financially assist this project.

The Problem in Dublin

The **Ministerial Task Force on Measures to Reduce the Demand for Drugs**, of which I am a member, found conclusively that heroin abuse is overwhelmingly a Dublin problem, and Dublin's opiates problem is the main national drugs problem.

In fact, 10 of the 11 priority areas identified by the Task Force are in Dublin - the other is in North Cork City.

Coming to grips with the problem is made difficult by the lack of hard data on the extent of drug misuse in the capital. This of course in part reflects the illegal nature of the problem.

Data recently published by the **Health Research Board for 1995** give an indication of the scale of drug abuse. The data confirms that in Greater Dublin the total number of cases presenting for treatment in 1995 was **3,593 - 21 per cent up on 1994.**

While the provision of better treatment services may account to some extent for the growth in numbers presenting for treatment, the numbers actually misusing drugs is certainly greatly in excess of this figure. The report also concluded that the profile of the drug misuser in treatment in Greater Dublin is that of a young, unemployed male who has left school early and is misusing an opiate, most likely heroin, possibly injecting it.

Health Boards are now in the process of setting up information databases in their areas of operation. In its Report, the Task Force recommended that these databases be established as quickly as possible and that information be exchanged between Health Boards.

The link between large-scale drug addiction and social and economic disadvantage and deprivation is clearly established. What is required is an integrated, multi-dimensional response which addresses issues of **supply** and **demand**, and the **economic and social factors** which aggravate the problem.

These issues have been targeted for action by the Government and our recommendations in the areas of **treatment, education/prevention and rehabilitation** are now in the process of being implemented. Consultation was an important feature of the work of the Task Force which received submissions from many organisations and individuals. As a member of the Task Force, I would like to personally thank them for making submissions and to assure them that their views were fully considered in the preparation of the first report.

The demand for heroin in Dublin is a reflection of the underlying pattern of disadvantage and social exclusion. Many of the submissions received underpinned this point.

However it is important to make clear that the majority of families and young people living in, even the worst affected areas, are not drug abusers. What they want is to improve the quality of their lives and their children's lives and to ensure a future for themselves and their communities.

New Structures - A Partnership Approach

New structures have been put in place to ensure that the drugs problem is tackled in a coherent and integrated manner. It is essential that those involved in combating the drugs problem at local level have a say in determining policy. Therefore, a three tier approach has been adopted.

The commitment to overcome drugs extends to the highest political level. It is for this reason that a **Cabinet Drugs Committee**, chaired by the Taoiseach, has been established to give overall political leadership in the fight against drugs. This committee also comprises the Ministers for Health, Environment, Education, Justice and the Minister of State to the Government.

At a second level, we have established a **National Drugs Strategy Team** comprising officials from relevant Government Departments, the Eastern Health Board, the Gardai and members with experience of working in the voluntary and community sectors. Their primary objective is to ensure that the Government's drug strategy is implemented effectively.

The Strategy Team will also ensure effective co-ordination between agencies and oversee the establishment of the third layer in the strategy to provide an effective response to the drugs crisis - that is the Local Drugs Task Forces. The Strategy Team will work closely with these Task Forces, ensuring that the problems and priorities of the communities in their areas are continually monitored and addressed at central Government level.

A number of the Local Task Forces are now in place and have begun the important work of drawing up local development plans for their areas. This is an important process which brings the voluntary, community and statutory sectors together in **partnership** to develop strategies to combat the drugs problem at local level.

It acknowledges the central role of community groups but it also puts the onus on all sectors to co-operate fully. It will only succeed if everyone moves outside of their demarcation lines and commits to genuine partnership.

The Government is playing its part. It adopted all of the report's recommendations and immediately set aside **£10 million** this year to support the implementation of development plans which will be drawn up by the Local Task Forces. **A further £3 million** has been provided to enable my Department to introduce an Estate Improvement Programme, to which I will return later.

Reducing the supply of illegal drugs

Measures to tackle the demand for drugs are matched by those designed to shrink their supply. Changes in the law are exposing those who deal in the death and misery of our young people. The Criminal Assets Bureau is a new statutory body, with staff drawn from the gardai, the Revenue Commissioners and Department of Social Welfare. It has the capacity to mount a sustained and focused attack on the illegally acquired assets of criminals involved in serious crime and forms a central part of the Government's anti-crime measures.

In July 1996 the Government announced a further package to deal with crime and drugs. These initiatives will result in increases in Garda numbers, recruitment of further civilians to release Gardai from administrative duties, a review of Garda efficiency and cost-effectiveness, creation of further prison places, the appointment of additional judges and arrangements for extra sittings of the Central Criminal Court and the Circuit Court, a number of law reform measures including the recent referendum on bail and additional staffing resources in the Forensic Science Laboratory where drug seizures are analysed.

A package of tough legislation including measures to seize the assets of the drug barons and tackle their networks head on has recently been passed including

- * **The Proceeds of Crime Act, 1996** provides a powerful new mechanism for the freezing and forfeiture of the proceeds of crime.
- * **The Criminal Justice Act, 1996** provides for detention for up to 7 days for drug trafficking offenses, allows for the presence of Customs Officers at interviews of suspects, and allows inferences to be drawn by a Court from the failure of an accused to mention particular facts when being questioned by a Garda.
- * **The Disclosure of Certain Information for Taxation and Other Purposes Act, 1996** provides for more effective exchange of information between the Gardai and the Revenue.

Taken together, these measures greatly enhance the powers of the State in dealing with the drugs menace.

The Gardai are also playing their part. **Operation Dochas** has been in operation over the past few months in all Dublin Garda Districts and involves more than 500 uniformed and plain clothes Gardai.

Economic Aspects

Efforts to address the problems of supply and demand are not enough. Social and economic conditions, including unemployment are key factors in the high levels of drug addiction in Dublin. Our success as a government in achieving unprecedented job creation levels does not deflect us in any way from a determination to tackle in particular the corrosive nature of long-term unemployment.

Estate Improvement Programme

We know that much of the crime and anti-social behaviour associated with illegal drug dealing is carried on in some local authority housing estates and flat complexes and this presents significant problems for the Corporation. As a Minister with responsibility for housing, this is of particular concern to me.

I was pleased that the Task Force recognised the interdependence of a good physical environment and quality of life for tenants and recommended that the Department of the Environment should introduce an Estate Improvement Programme to assist local authorities in tackling environmental and related problems of severely run-down urban housing estates and flat complexes.

The Programme will focus on enhancing, upgrading and making safe the living environment of communities as well as improving estate management. It is not a question of simply asking local authorities to do more without additional resources. I believe that the allocation of £3m to the Programme over the next two years will have a very real impact in the worst affected housing estates and flat complexes.

I have stressed to the authorities concerned the importance of adopting an integrated approach which actively involves tenants in the drawing up of proposals for projects. I have also asked them to explore what contribution, financial or otherwise, can be made by other statutory agencies, business interests, Partnership Companies and tenants themselves. The implementation of this Programme presents local authorities with a further opportunity to develop partnerships and build bridges with local communities, and I want to see these opportunities availed of to the greatest possible extent.

To date, I have given approval in principle to proposals from Fingal County Council for a project in Blanchardstown and have allocated a grant of £500,000 for this project. I have also approved a grant of £750,000 to South Dublin County Council.

Today, I am pleased to announce a grant of £1.25 million to Dublin Corporation for a programme of works in areas which they have identified for priority action. In each case, the grants will be matched by authorities from their own resources.

Support for Housing Management

Dublin Corporation is adopting a progressive approach to estate management. A welcome feature of this approach is the deployment of some thirty Executive Housing Officers to work closely with local communities. They will be available to meet with tenants each day in estates so that problems can be dealt with immediately as they arise. You will hear more of this tomorrow from Vincent Norton. Since taking office, one of my main objectives has been to assist local authorities to improve their estate management performance in view of the crucial importance of the housing service and its effect on the lives of tenants.

To support local authorities in this respect, I have introduced a number of initiatives including a **housing management grants scheme** and the setting up of a Housing Management Group to promote best practice in housing management. Authorities are also being assisted to undertake a programme of training and development for their tenants.

The Housing Management Group has prepared **Best Practice Guidelines** in Housing Management and workshops are currently being held for local authority officials.

Improving communication between the authority and its tenants is a particular priority if the management of the housing service is to be made more responsive to individual needs. One means of achieving this objective is through publication of a **tenant's handbook** which provides a wide range of information on the services provided by the authority and which clearly sets out the respective responsibilities of the authority and its tenants. Earlier this week, the Corporation launched such a handbook and a copy is included with the documentation you have received. This is a very worthwhile initiative by the Corporation and I was pleased to have been able to make a financial contribution towards the cost of compiling the handbook.

I am also very impressed with the resource pack which has been provided to each Corporation household and which aims at advising people, and parents in particular, what help is available if someone they know is using drugs.

The Corporation deserve credit for their approach to developing housing management and other initiatives. This has required a cultural change and new thinking which will ultimately benefit the authority and its tenants.

Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, 1996

The initiatives we have introduced to support local authority housing management cannot, on their own, succeed in tackling crime and anti-social behaviour in local authority estates. The Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, 1996, published in December, is designed to give local authorities improved legal powers to deal with problems arising on their estates from drug dealing and serious anti-social behaviour.

I want to make clear that anti-social behaviour is carefully defined for the purposes of the Bill in relation to drug dealing and other related serious activities such as personal intimidation or violence.

One of the most important provisions of the Bill is for a new “excluding order” procedure against those occupants of a local authority house who are directly involved in anti-social behaviour. This will allow a more targeted response than is currently available. Up to now, the only action a local authority could take in cases of serious anti-social behaviour was to seek to have the entire household evicted with, as it were, both the innocent and the guilty subject to the same legal sanction.

Local authorities are also being given power in the Bill to refuse to house an applicant whom they are aware is engaged in drug dealing or related activity. They will also have the right to refuse, on the same grounds, to sell a dwelling under a tenant purchase scheme or to consent to resale of a tenant purchase dwelling.

In order to help avoid problems with build up of rent arrears there will be a new procedure under the Bill enabling local authority rents to be deducted from social welfare incomes in cases of serious arrears.

There are a number of other provisions in the Bill to improve the speed and effectiveness of various procedures such as the issuing and service of summonses; evidence by Gardai, local authority and health board officials in Court cases where witnesses would be intimidated; exchange of information between relevant authorities; and measures against intimidation of local authority or health board staff and witnesses. It also gives health boards discretion to refuse or withdraw supplementary welfare assistance as well as dealing with the problem of squatting where anti-social behaviour is involved.

The Bill reflects a number of new approaches, designed to meet serious problems that have arisen in some cases. Their use will be exceptional but it is important that they’re available where needed to protect communities from the ravages of drug dealers.

Conclusion

As we approach the millenium the drugs problem is one of the most serious challenges facing this city. The Government has demonstrated that is committed to fighting the problem of drug misuse. We have recognised its seriousness and have put considerable resources at the disposal of the relevant authorities. We have put new structures in place to ensure that the marginalised communities will no longer be ignored nor abandoned.

Our approach is based on an understanding of the drugs crisis. It is also based on the understanding that here in this room and beyond in the wider community we share a common resolve to face this challenge.

In conclusion, I want to commend Dublin Corporation for hosting this event, and to congratulate, particularly, the Lord Mayor Brendan Lynch and the members of the Corporation's Prevention of Crime Committee for initiating the idea. The range of speakers on the programme, and the participative nature of the workshop format, reflects the degree of commitment which all of you have to tackling perhaps the most serious issues confronting our society as the twentieth century draws to a close.

Thank you very much.
