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Drug abuse to be taken off the streets and into Dublin's new injection facility

A decision made by An Bord Pleanála on Christmas Eve of 2019 could see Ireland's very first Medically Supervised Injection Facility (MSIF) opening in Dublin's inner-city area of the Liberties. Merchant's Quay Ireland (MQI), a homelessness and addiction charity that was given charitable status in 2011, first put forward plans to An Bord Pleanála in 2017 to build such a facility in the basement of the charity's Riverbank Centre, where they already offer emergency shelter and rehabilitation services for those sleeping rough in Dublin.

MSIF's were first made legal in Ireland in 2017, as part of the government's promise to tackle the country's substance abuse issues. The planning department of Dublin City Council (DCC) first rejected MQI's request for planning permission in July of last year due to over ninety-nine objections by local people and businesses, concerned that the injection facility would negatively impact trade in the area. MQI appealed the decision just two months later and, after providing detailed plans of the daily governance of the site, planning permission was granted on December 24th, 2019.

This decision by DCC has sparked nationwide debate on the issue, many people unsure of the implications on life in the city, where instances of drug abuse can be seen around nearly every corner. Derek Parker, the day service manager at MQI highlighted the impact the clinic will have on drug users themselves; "This facility aims to reduce risk of death by overdose and increase uptake in healthcare and treatment services." As well as the obvious safety benefits of clean needles and trained medical staff at hand, the users of the site will also be engaged with treatment options to help them recover from their addiction. According to research done by MQI, there was a 30% increase in the uptake of treatment services associated with the use of MSIF's around the world. He described the MSIF as a "clean, clinical and compassionate site."

One of the local stakeholders that objected heavily to the charity's plans is the Board of Management at St. Audoen's primary school on Cook Street. Eilish Meagher is the principal of St. Audoen's, which is located a mere three hundred meters from MQI's proposed site for the facility. Ms. Meagher's main concern is the proposed location of the site. She, as an educator, believes that having such a service so close to a childcare setting could pose a threat to the

safety of children in the care of the school. When speaking on behalf of the whole school community regarding this issue, Ms. Meagher was sure to stress that; “We are objecting to this proposed location, not arguing government health policy.” She argues that “it is the responsibility of our government and the HSE to develop an integrated and well managed response to our national drug problem without continuously over saturating and marginalising specific areas and communities.” This school representative, as well as many local business owners are concerned that there will be an increase in antisocial and illegal behaviour due to huge quantity of addiction services already located in the Dublin 8 area. Many such stakeholders believe that this facility would be of more benefit, less serviced part of the city.

Ms. Meagher also called into question the policing plans that are to be implemented with the opening of the MSIF’s door; “there is little mention of regulation and/or legislation regarding the sale and distribution of illegal drugs in the immediate vicinity of a childcare setting. The Gardaí are unable to address the issues arising; the policing challenges and the ‘area of tolerance’ within a certain radius of Merchant’s Quay.” She questions the protocol when it comes to prosecuting those found with drugs while travelling to the MSIF. The principal even went as far as to claim that this facility would jeopardize the “children’s chances of a happy and safe childhood.”

Another complaint raised by Fáilte Ireland was that the tourism industry of inner-city Dublin would take a hit due to the proximity of the proposed site to many revenue producing attractions such as the Dublinia and Christchurch, which leads to a huge amount of tourist spending in the area. MQI makes the argument that with the medical waste bins and the safe setting of the injection booths, less drug abuse on the streets will lead to less discarded needles and less visible signs of substance abuse in the city, therefore benefiting the area.

There is no set date as of yet for the opening of the MSIF. Time will tell if Merchant’s Quay will address the concerns of local stakeholders and how the eighteen-month pilot facility will impact its direct vicinity and the city as a whole.