

*D. Health*



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*27th*

July 1995

I was interested to see your recent exchange of correspondence with my colleague Michael Ancram and last week's article in the Irish News, both on the subject of drug abuse.

I share your concern about the dangers of drugs, particularly as far as young people are concerned, and that is why I have established the Central Co-Ordinating Group for Action Against Drugs. You will see from the enclosed press statement announcing the first meeting of the Group on 28 June that its remit extends across the whole gamut of activity on this front, including the important issue of public awareness and education. I am determined that the new Group should be a forum to provoke action and not just discussion. To that end I have already asked Departments to let me have firm plans which demonstrate their commitment to tackle the drugs problem and we will be considering these at our next meeting.

I am, however, conscious that we do not have all the solutions and I am keen to enrich debate and inform our proposals through the experiences of others. I would be glad, therefore, to hear of any further views you might have on this matter; if you think a meeting would be helpful I would be happy to have one arranged.

THE RT HON SIR JOHN WHEELER DL MP  
Minister of State for Northern Ireland



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## NORTHERN IRELAND Information Service

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28 JUNE 1995

### GOVERNMENT TAKES IMPORTANT ANTI DRUG INITIATIVE

An initiative to co-ordinate Government's campaign against the abuse of drugs was launched today by the Rt Hon Sir John Wheeler, DL MP, Minister of State at the Northern Ireland Office.

Sir John announced that he is to chair a new top level group to co-ordinate Government action against the scourge of drugs after the first meeting of the body - the Central Co-ordinating Group for Action Against Drugs - at Stormont today.

The Group comprises top level representatives from Northern Ireland Departments, the medical profession and the RUC and will ensure that initiatives against drug abuse are taken forward in a co-ordinated manner.

Sir John said: "Northern Ireland is fortunate so far in suffering lower levels of drug abuse than many other areas of the UK and Ireland. Government however, does not see this as any cause for complacency. As Chairman of this new Group I am determined to ensure that each Government Department in Northern Ireland is playing its full part in building on the excellent work which is already in hand to tackle this insidious evil."

He added: "Drugs pose a threat to the very fabric of our society; they endanger the health of our young people and inhibit their

ability to achieve; and they are the source of other forms of crime committed by those who need money to pay for their craving.

"We will focus our attentions on reducing the demand for drugs by ensuring properly targeted health education and health promotion programmes; and on reducing the supply of drugs by stopping their entry into the country and bringing those responsible for trafficking swiftly to justice. Our actions will be informed by the policy statement of the Northern Ireland Committee on Drug Misuse, by research, and, every bit as important, by public opinion."

The first meeting of the Group considered presentations on the scale of the drugs problem and proposals to carry out further research. Future meetings will agree action plans for each Department, based on the policy statement agreed by the NICDM.

#### NOTE FOR EDITORS

The drugs problem is being tackled on a number of fronts. For example:

Health education, which includes education on drugs, is a compulsory element of the school curriculum for all pupils up to age 16. Health and Social Services Boards are responsible for assessing the health status and needs of their populations and for securing appropriate services to meet those needs. Such services cover both health promotion and education programmes and also the provision of treatment; care and rehabilitation services.

The RUC Drugs Squad, which has been in existence since 1968, presently comprises 44 officers headed by a Detective Superintendent. At sub-divisional level, there are some 70 officers operating within 30 Drug Liaison Units. The sole responsibility of these officers is to address the problems of drug offences at a local level.

The Northern Ireland Committee on Drug Misuse was established by the Department of Health and Social Services in 1984 and brings together key interests from the statutory and voluntary sectors - Government Departments, Health and Social Services Boards, clinicians, RUC Drugs Squad, Customs and Excise, the Probation Board and the Voluntary Sector.

The consultative document "Drug Misuse in Northern Ireland: A draft Policy Statement" was issued in March 1995 to a wide range of interested organisations inviting comments by 31 May. The draft statement sets out a framework within which all relevant organisations can work together in pursuit of a common set of strategic objectives.

The draft statement also outlines the roles and responsibilities of the various organisations involved together with arrangements for ensuring co-operation and co-ordination between the activities of those engaged in tackling drug misuse.

The statement will form the basis for action by individual Government Departments, which will be co-ordinated by the new top level Committee which has been established for this purpose under the chairmanship of Sir John Wheeler.

The new Group will provide an additional thrust to action by Government Departments by ensuring that each plays its full part in tackling the problem. As Chairman of the Group, Sir John Wheeler is determined that action plans based on the Policy Statement, will be drawn up quickly and vigorously pursued by each Department.