



The Honourable Dominic Perrottet MP

Premier of New South Wales
GPO Box 5341 SYDNEY NSW 2001

6 June 2022

Dear Premier,

It is now over two years since the NSW government received the recommendations of the **Special Commission of Inquiry into the Drug 'Ice'** – a Commission that was established by the Government at the cost of more than \$10million of public funds. Yet the NSW community is still waiting for the government to properly respond to the urgent public health matters at the heart of the Commissioner's report and its recommendations. Indeed, we now learn through the media, that the NSW Cabinet is still struggling to agree on a model for implementing even just a few of the recommendations from the Commission's Report.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made the past two years challenging for everyone, including governments. Among these challenges is the negative impact the pandemic has had for people who use illicit drugs (particularly those who are drug dependent) their families and communities. HRA believes, however, that the lack of unity and action from the NSW Government on the Inquiry recommendations has only compounded this situation.

We already know for example, that people actively seeking drug treatment continue to find it hard to access services – a situation that has only grown worse over the past two years as alcohol and other drug (AOD) services struggle with funding and workforce issues. Access to harm reduction approaches and their life saving benefits have also suffered from a chronic lack of funding and support. While the response to the Inquiry Report drags on, and the Cabinet appears to be turning its back on evidence-based approaches in the various proposed models under debate, preventable drug-related harms such as overdose, stigma and discrimination have continued to escalate.

Harm Reduction Australia (HRA) is a national organisation that advocates for evidence-informed harm reduction approaches and drug policy reform in Australia. As an organisation, we are committed to reducing the health, social and economic harms potentially associated with drug use. HRA does not condone drug use but we also know that the worst thing you can do is condemn those who do use drugs. In short, HRA promotes engagement and compassion over punitive and stigmatising approaches which have (and continue) to fail individuals, families and the community.

In handing down its final report, the Commission stated that methamphetamines and other illicit drugs require *"compassionate responses consistent with human rights approaches, rather than punitive responses that can compound the harms of use"*. HRA believes the continued inaction from the NSW Government to the Commission's recommendations (as stated in recent media reports), are far from compassionate or rights-based and moreover, are set to re-enforce and escalate, rather than diminish, punitive and harmful responses to illicit drug use in the community.

While the long-standing delays to the Government's response to the Commission report is concerning enough on its own given the issues involved, these concerns are likely to be compounded by the proposals under-discussion in Cabinet. Based on recent media reports and comments from the NSW Attorney General in the media, HRA is deeply concerned that the NSW Government is set to waste further money by establishing a new system of punitive fines that could risk greater, not less, contact with the criminal justice system. This will only serve to further marginalise an already highly stigmatised group in our community.

Instead, HRA believes that there is a need for specific investment in harm reduction and other evidence-informed approaches to reduce preventable drug-related harms and allow people who want and need AOD services to access them. To this end, HRA strongly urges the NSW government to provide a comprehensive response to Commissioner Howard's recommendations as part of the State Budget in the coming weeks. Further, HRA believes that the report in total (including all 109 recommendations put forward by the Commission) should be deliberated as a package of reforms. This should include decriminalising personal drug use, expanding treatment options and accessibility and introducing pill testing services, similar to those in the ACT. Anything less, not only risks an ineffective and piecemeal response to the urgent health matters the report seeks to address but is also disrespectful of the priorities identified by the NSW community during the Inquiry.

We wish to thank you for your time and we would be very happy to make ourselves available to meet with you and other members of the NSW Government to discuss the above matters in greater detail.

Yours sincerely,

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cc: The Hon. Paul Toole, MP, Deputy Premier
The Hon. Mark Speakman MP, NSW Attorney-General
The Hon. Matt Kean, MP, NSW Treasurer
The Hon. Brad Hazzard, MP, Minister for Health
The Hon. Bronnie Taylor, MLC, Minister for Mental Health