

Preventing addiction, fighting homelessness, tackling stigma

A Pre-Budget Submission from Merchants Quay Ireland

August 2025



Merchants Quay Ireland
Homeless & Drugs Services

About Merchants Quay

Merchants Quay Ireland is a leading Irish charity working with people who are homeless and in addiction. The organisation provides services ranging from open access, crisis intervention and health promotion services to day-support programmes, educational programmes, vocational training, residential treatment, detox and prison counselling.

Merchants Quay Ireland's work in 2024

In 2024, MQI helped 14,086 people with needs spanning homelessness, addiction, and health.

We are a nationwide service. In 2024, 420 people were supported by our MQI CRIS team in the east of the country, whilst there were 2,890 interventions by our Cavan and Monaghan Drug and Alcohol Service. There were 1,224 interventions by MQI Northeast and 4,477 such interventions by MQI Drug and Alcohol Treatment Support in the midlands. We also supported 327 families nationwide.

Our new women's service, Jane's Place saw 1,132 interventions, 155 people were admitted to detox and rehab services.

There were 15,364 in-prison counselling interventions,

In our Riverbank drop-in centre in Dublin, 887 clients over the age of 55 were supported and 726 clients aged 18-25 were supported.

14,122 primary healthcare interventions and 22,896 interventions by our harm reduction team.

And we provided 81,878 meals and 4,027 showers to people who had nowhere else to turn.

We are proud of another year of achievement. We need help to continue to deliver.

Merchant Quay Ireland's four-point plan for Budget 2026 to protect Ireland's most vulnerable

Action 1: Support gender-specific services and in particular Jane's Place

To operate Jane's Place – a safe, warm and welcoming environment that provides holistic, trauma informed, gender specific services for women with complex needs of addiction, homelessness and mental health.

COST - €283k per annum.

Action 2: Support recovery services for those in the most need

To develop recovery services including residential, medical residential detox services, and residential Aftercare Day services to support people to reintegrate into the community.

COST - €800k per annum

Action 3: Support the Medically Supervised Injection Facility for the long term

To support a clean, supervised space where individuals can inject pre-obtained drugs, under the care of trained medical professionals for the future.

COST- €1.4m per annum

Action 4: Support an end to stigma

To support and implement a nationwide public awareness campaign to reduce stigma against people who are drug dependent, thus helping end the cycle of addiction.

COST- €100k next year

Introduction

Merchants Quay Ireland (MQI) is a leading Irish charity working with people experiencing homelessness, people who are in active addiction and people in recovery. Our organisation provides services ranging from crisis and case management, healthcare services, harm reduction and family support to residential and community detox and rehabilitation, aftercare, and prison-based addiction counselling.

Our clients are those who experience or are vulnerable to homelessness and/or who experience problematic drug use, mental health issues or mental illness.

Our pre-Budget submission outlines four key areas of an economic nature, which we are calling on Government to prioritise in Budget 2026, namely:

- To operate on a sustainable basis Jane's Place – a safe, warm and welcoming environment that provides holistic, trauma informed services for women with complex needs of addiction, homelessness and mental health.
- To develop recovery services including rehab and detox services, and after care services like the Dublin Drug-Free Programme
- To support the continued operation of the Medically Supervised Injection Facility (MSIF) beyond the pilot period which elapses in mid-2026
- To support an end to stigma faced by those who are drug-dependant via the execution of a national anti-stigma campaign.

A pathway to progress on drug policy has been provided by the Citizens' Assembly on Drugs. This submission builds on that pathway by outlining the key issues underlying these areas of funding, makes specific proposals to Government and a strong rationale to prioritise investment to support those who access our services.

It also provides an estimated cost of the necessary budget required for the respective areas and the government department responsible.

Our priorities for Budget 2026

Action 1: To support gender-specific services and in particular Jane's Place– a safe, warm and welcoming environment that provides holistic, trauma informed services for women.

In considering services for women, it is worth noting the following:

- Women now account for 42% of the adult homeless population, and this rises to 44% in the Dublin area.
- The average age of death for women who are homeless in Ireland is 36.5 years, while for men it is 42.
- In 2020* there were 155 female drug related deaths – a 35% increase on 2019.
- Women who experience extensive physical or sexual violence are eight times more likely to be drug dependent.
- One third of the 271 million people who use drugs globally are female.

One of the objectives within *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery-A health led response to Drug and Alcohol Use in Ireland 2017-2025* is improving access to services for women.

The Programme for Government also recognises that women can face barriers to accessing and sustaining addiction treatment, arising from an absence of childcare or the presence of gender-based violence, and the need to develop targeted interventions aimed at responding to their needs.

For our part, all MQI's services welcome women. But we know that trust is a key issue for women with complex needs as they have often been on the receiving end of so much hurt. Further, immediacy is key for the successful pathway through addiction, homelessness, residential and support services. Overall, the pathway through services needs to be flexible, with speedy access and with integration of services that are fully inclusive and accessible to women with complex needs, women with or without children, migrant women, LGBTQI women etc.

So, last year, Jane's Place opened in its new permanent home beside Holles Street. Since opening, demand for the service has grown significantly, with 173 women in crisis supported by the end of Q1 compared with 70 for the same period last year.

Jane's Place is a safe, warm and welcoming environment that provides:

- One to One Key working
- GP and Nursing Service
- Counselling Service
- Mental Health Support

- Health and Wellbeing Groups
- Addiction Education/Stabilisation Groups
- Social Activities

This service also offers a program focusing on recovery and healing from trauma and offers art therapy, mindfulness, maintaining physical and mental wellbeing and understanding trauma.

Many of those who have suffered years of violence and abuse – going back to when they were girls, with women who’ve been abused eight times more likely to fall into addiction. These women have had their lives stolen from them. They can begin to rebuild their lives at Jane’s Place. A hot shower, clean clothes, a home cooked meal. Healing starts small, developing trust and rebuilding dignity.

Through groupwork and counselling, casework and holistic treatments like yoga, the foundations can be laid for a life beyond trauma.

The cost of running the service this year is €383k. We received state funding of just under €100k. To make this service sustainable, that gap should be bridged in Budget 2026.

COST - €283,000 per annum.

Action 2: To support recovery services for those most in need

Recommendation 12 from the report of the Citizens’ Assembly on Drug Use states that “the Government should allocate additional resources to fund community-based and residential treatment and recovery services as an alternative to custodial sentences for people with problematic drugs use.

Today, these services remain underfunded.

MQI offers residential medical detox programmes in St Francis Farm in Carlow and High Park, Drumcondra, Dublin.

Residential Rehabilitation – High Park:

This residential programme operates from High Park, Dublin and runs for 14 weeks. It offers clients a period of rehabilitation treatment in a drug and alcohol-free environment. The facility has capacity for 13 clients at any given time.

The programme operates on an ethos of being open to all, regardless of circumstance. The emphasis is on assisting service users to gain insight into the issues that underpin their drug use, developing realistic measures to prevent relapse and remain drug-free. The programme offers individual care plans, one-to-one work, group work,

psychoeducational groups, fitness-gym activities, outdoor pursuits, and recreational activities.

The facility also offers weekly Narcotics Anonymous meetings online. In 2024, the service received 288 referrals, 264 people completed assessments, 53 were admitted, and 36 completed treatment.

St. Francis Farm Detox:

With the changing demographic in drug use among clients, a key issue for MQI is to ensure clients are safe for admission to the unit. This is due to the complex nature of a medical detox programme, and the distance from St Francis Farm to the nearest acute hospital services.

However, these same challenges led to an agile response to client needs, resulting in broadening the criteria for admission under the guidance of the Clinical Governance Committee.

There were 318 referrals to the detox unit, which was similar to 2023. Overall, there were 54 admissions to the detox unit, which represents a 10% increase from 49 in 2023.

These admissions were a combination of clients detoxing from the following substances: methadone and benzodiazepine, methadone only, benzodiazepines only, and suboxone.

Completion rates from the detox unit were extremely strong in 2024, at 100%. This was a very positive outcome for the unit. Out of this group, 27 participants progressed to the St Francis Farm rehabilitation facility.

St Francis Farm Rehab:

There were 164 referrals to this rehab unit, aligned to the programme criteria during the year. Overall, there were 48 admissions to the rehab unit. The unit achieved an overall bed occupancy rate of 81% during the year up from 77% in 2023.

Within the MQI residential detox and rehabilitation programmes, the teams supported 183 individuals into recovery across the services.

This was done through a trauma informed and holistic approach which allowed clients to progress at their own pace and according to their individual needs.

The importance of recovery services for those experiencing addiction cannot be overstated.

This year, running these vital services will cost around €2.4m, yet the State funding we receive for them will come to €1.6m. Extra state funding is vital to keep these services

operating sustainably. That extra funding we are seeking will go some way towards meeting the complex needs of those who wish to avail of our services, transforming their lives.

COST - €800k per annum.

Action 3: To support the Medically Supervised Injection Facility for the long term

Ireland's first medically supervised injecting facility (MSIF) opened its doors in December of last year. The facility, which is supported by the HSE and Department of Health is located at Merchant Quay Ireland's, Riverbank centre in Dublin city centre.

The MSIF offers a clean, supervised space where individuals can inject pre-obtained drugs, under the care of trained medical professionals. This facility is designed to reduce the health risks associated with intravenous drug use, including overdose and the transmission of infectious diseases such as HIV and Hepatitis C.

It also serves as an important point of contact for those seeking help, by offering referrals to addiction treatment, mental health support, primary healthcare and social services.

The MSIF saves the lives of those who use the service. It also improves the lives of Dubliners by reducing public drug taking and the prevalence of drug paraphernalia on their streets.

The MSIF was not just our idea- it is Government policy that we are charged with implementing. And we are happy to do so because it is clear that the MSIF is working. The pilot period for the facility is 18 months.

We should now prepare the ground for the establishment of the MSIF on a permanent basis. It should also be put on a sustainable funding footing, so that services are secured, staff contract put in place and planning can happen.

COST - €1.4m per annum.

Action 4: To support an end to stigma

Our research shows that the levels of stigma in Irish society toward people who use drugs and are in addiction is falling. The Government's health-led approach to dealing with addiction is working.

People have a better understanding of the causes of addiction – and the solutions.

However, the research shows that stigma remains a potent and negative force in our clients' lives and much more needs to be done to tackle stigma.

Stigma has a serious impact on the health and wellbeing of those in addiction, and leads to social exclusion, thus exacerbating the problems caused by addiction.

While the trend of public opinion is going in the right direction, more needs to be done and we can never give up on combatting the stigma that those in addiction face every day.

To that end the Government should fund and implement a nationwide public awareness campaign to reduce stigma around drug use and addiction.

COST - €100k in 2026

Conclusion

The total cost of the three proposals in this document comes to €2.6m.

This is not a small sum, though it pales into insignificance when compared to other Budget lines. What is incomparable, however, is the impact this funding will have on those who rely so desperately on MQI's vital services.

Homelessness, addiction and stigma blight the lives of individuals and families throughout Ireland. A comprehensive approach to treatment, prevention and support means the right level of funding to provide the services that are needed most.

We remain in the midst of an addiction and homelessness crisis, and we need to protect those who need our care most.

Budget 2026 can do just that.