

7th May 2021
44/2021

STRENGTHENING WELL-BEING NOT SUBSTANCE USE

STATEMENT BY THE SECRETARIAT FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION AND THE CHURCH SCHOOLS' ASSOCIATION ON CANNABIS WHITE PAPER

The Secretariat for Catholic Education (SfCE) and the Church Schools' Association (CSA) have issued a position paper giving feedback to the White Paper "Towards the Strengthening of the Legal Framework on the Responsible Use of Cannabis". This feedback will now be presented to the Government as part of the consultation process currently underway.

As educators working on a daily basis with thousands of children and youths, the Secretariat for Catholic Education and the Church Schools' Association feel the responsibility to voice strong reservations about the dangerous path the proposals listed in the White Paper appear to be taking.

The position paper emphasises the importance of the need for a healthy national discussion about the direction the country should be taking in this area, instead of rushing to push a legislation which will clearly promote substance use. The Church schools sector also appeals for our country to learn from the experiences of other countries, where protective measures to reduce substance abuse, particularly among youths, have worked.

The position paper identifies seven problematic issues within the White Paper:

1. Science and statistics

Contrary to what is stated in the White Paper, cannabis use can lead to serious addiction issues. 25% of those who reached out for help to Caritas in 2020 were addicted to cannabis. 36% of youths aged 20 to 29 and 75% of adolescents aged 14 to 19 using the services offered by Caritas in 2019 started using drugs by smoking cannabis.

2. Placing cannabis plants within Maltese households has very serious implications

The White Paper allows for the cultivation of up to four cannabis plants per household. With the right environmental conditions, this number of plants may produce up to two kilograms of cannabis. This is of great concern, especially when one considers the fact that there are still no studies available as to the wide-ranging implications of such a proposal. The position paper lists a number of serious issues that this proposal may create, particularly with regards to children and families.

3. Strong criticism by professionals from different fields

All organisations working in the field of substance abuse and a number of professional bodies have expressed strong opposition to the White Paper. In light of such opposition made by professionals with no partisan agenda, but with solely a professional outlook to the issue, Government needs to reflect on the validity of the proposals which have been subject to such stinging criticism. At the very least, the repeated calls to undertake serious research on the issue prior to going ahead with any legislative changes need to be heeded.

4. Decriminalization needs to be handled with caution

While it is clear that there is broad consensus that the possession of small amounts of cannabis for personal use should not result in a criminal record, the present legislation which has depenalised the possession of up to 3.5gr of cannabis has only been implemented for a short number of years to date. Before rushing into extending this legislation, it would be wiser to carry out extensive research on the effects of this legislative change on our society.

5. Educational campaigns on cannabis use need clarity and not mixed messages

The reference to educational campaigns as mentioned in the White Paper is contradictory to educational campaigns carried out to date by all professionals working in the educational field.

6. The need for a new body to regulate cannabis use is not clear

The White Paper proposes the setting up of a dedicated cannabis authority. The purpose is not clear unless the long-term intention is to extend the use of cannabis beyond what is mentioned in the White Paper.

7. No strategic vision on how to reduce substance use in society

The White Paper includes no strategic vision on the manner in which substance dependency should be reduced in our society. There is no discussion whether our national strategy should be on promoting the culture of normalising and legalising the use of cannabis, as the White Paper is doing, or for pushing for a much stronger investment of the State in policies and facilities for healthy recreational options.

Conclusion

The debate surrounding the White Paper is important because it will shape the direction our society will take in the coming years. The position paper appeals to Government to take its time to engage in a healthy discussion on such an important issue, to commission extensive research on the impact of these proposals on society, and to avoid making the issue a cynical vote-catching exercise. Above all, the White Paper proposals should not be taken forward before the coming general election. The debate on such a sensitive issue should not be hijacked by the partisan battle for votes which comes with every general election.

The appeal of the Secretariat for Catholic Education and the Church Schools' Association is for this discussion to be placed within the context of a national debate on measures to reduce the risk of substance abuse in our society, particularly among youths, and to learn from the experiences of countries where protective measures to reduce substance abuse have worked.

The position paper is available at: csm.edu.mt/sfce-and-csa-position-on-cannabis-white-paper/