Territorians urged to help tackle illicit drug use

"Tackling illicit drugs is an important way to cut the crime rate," Mrs Aagaard said, warning that the time for burying heads in the sand on this important issue was long over.

Mrs Aagaard’s call to action came as she opened the first meeting of the Government’s Taskforce on Illicit Drugs.

"One of our first tasks on coming to Government has been to set up strategies to try to stop the harmful spread of drugs, to break the cycle of crime and to help users and their families on the road to better health."

The 12-member taskforce will travel the Territory listening to Territorians’ views on drug abuse, in order to develop effective rehabilitation and prevention strategies. Hearings will be held in Darwin, Katherine, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs and Nhulunbuy over the next four months.

Mrs Aagaard urged community groups, families and individuals with experience on the illicit drug issue to make submissions to the taskforce.

"Every day we hear of families torn apart by drug use and young peoples’ lives blighted by drugs," Mrs Aagaard said.

"We know that drug usage goes beyond the problems experienced by individuals and their families. Drug usage affects the whole community, as many users suffer mental health problems and suicidal behaviour. Drugs are so often involved in juvenile offences and criminal activities."

The taskforce will report to the Minister by 31 May 2002. The scope of its inquiry will cover heroin, amphetamines, and prescription drugs used in an illicit manner, hallucinogens, cocaine, and designer drugs such as ecstasy.

[A separate report -- on cannabis, petrol sniffing, kava, alcohol and tobacco use – will be prepared by the Parliamentary Select Committee on Substance Abuse in the Community. Members of the Taskforce and the Select Committee will meet today to discuss the coordination of their activities.

The taskforce is headed by Darwin microbiologist and community figure, Dr Valerie Asche, and includes rehabilitation experts and researchers from Sydney and Melbourne, as well as Territorians involved in many aspects of health care, harm reduction, social service, community leadership and law enforcement.

Mrs Aagaard said she was particularly concerned about the increasingly younger age at which people were turning to illicit drugs.

"We need to look at why our young people -- those who will build this country’s future -- feel the need to experiment with drugs at an earlier and earlier age."

Support for families of drug users was another area of importance, Mrs Aagaard said.
The recommendations of the Taskforce will be a key component of the NT Government’s 3-Point Plan to Get Tough on Drugs.