

Summary of the Scottish Affairs Committee Roundtable on problem drug use (24/09/2020)

The Scottish Affairs Committee held a digital roundtable event on Thursday 24 September 2020. Experts from the academic sector, police sector, judiciary, and public health sector took part in discussions, which took place following the publication of the Government response to the previous Scottish Affairs Committee's report on Problem Drug Use in Scotland.¹ Participants were divided into three groups, each considering a key issue relating to problem drug use in Scotland.

Discussion group 1: public health vs criminal justice approaches, and tackling stigma

- Participants emphasised strongly the needs and vulnerabilities of the people who are accessing addiction services, particularly mental health needs. There was a feeling that these needs are not always recognised within the current system and that there are many missed opportunities to provide people who use drugs with appropriate support.
- Some participants expressed deep disappointment in the Government's response to the previous Committee's report and its rejection of the recommendation to declare a public health emergency in relation to problem drug use.
- The Members were told that that the declaration of a public health emergency by government would send a powerful message about the health needs of people with addiction, which would help to break down stigma and promote a response that doesn't overlook people's vulnerabilities.
- The role of stigma was a recurrent theme in the discussion. Participants emphasised how ingrained stigma can be. Some were critical of the Government's response to the Committee's report, pointing to where the response argues that stigma can in some cases be helpful as a deterrent.
- The group discussed the impact of the pandemic on drug deaths and drug consumption trends, including the challenges that isolation poses for people in recovery. Members were told it was important that resources for treatment and support services were not diverted in the context of the pandemic.
- In relation to the UK Government's drugs summit held in February, some participants expressed disappointment that it had not been used as an opportunity for more substantial, proactive inter-governmental working. Although there had been a Ministerial follow-up, there since seems to have been little further action.

¹ Scottish Affairs Committee, First Special Report of Session 2019-2021, '[Problem drug use in Scotland: Government response to the Committee's First Report of Session 2019](#)' September 2020; and Scottish Affairs Committee, First Report of Session 2019, '[Problem drug use in Scotland](#)' November 2019, HC 44

Discussion group 2: drug consumption facilities

- Participants discussed the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on data collection relating to drug deaths and the transmission of blood-borne viruses. Members heard that the pandemic had created challenges for service providers, having limited opportunities to provide harm reduction services, such as access to clean injecting equipment.
- Members were told about the ongoing issue of HIV infection rates, particularly around Glasgow.
- On drug consumption facilities, there was some disappointment expressed within the group that the Government had not agreed to support a pilot drug consumption facility in Glasgow. Some participants argued that the case for a facility in Glasgow is as strong as ever. The Members were told about recent research which indicates that people who use drugs would use such facilities and that there is evidence of the wider public being supportive of the facilities.
- There was some discussion about the location of the proposed facility in Glasgow and that people who use drugs would be unlikely to travel in order to use services.
- The Members heard arguments about the need to invest in rehabilitation facilities, as well as harm reduction services.
- Beyond drug consumption facilities, participants highlighted the importance of looking at all services in Scotland and of considering whether these are adequately and sustainably resourced in order to meet needs.

Discussion group 3: decriminalisation and diversion schemes

- The group's initial discussion focused on the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, and whether it is fit for purpose.
- Members heard about some ways in which diversion schemes are being increasingly used, and the impact that this is having. Stigma, and the stigma brought by prosecution, was a recurrent theme in the discussion.
- The Members heard that within the existing legal frameworks, there are many points when discretion can be used, but little clarity on where the line for discretion should be drawn. Some participants advocated in favour of decriminalisation.
- The issue of prevention was raised with some discussion around what measures are most effective in preventing problem drug use.
- Some participants emphasised the importance of depoliticising the issue to better enable conversation around what works, based on evidence.
- There were mixed perceptions among the group of the UK Government's drug summit, held in February, with some seeing this as a positive step forward and others more sceptical about whether any substantial changes in approach will arise from it.
- In relation to the Covid-19 pandemic, some participants highlighted how the housing of homeless people who use drugs has had positive outcomes by increasing access to support services, whilst also recognising that other services are no longer able to operate. The Members were told that there is now a backlog of drug-related cases in

the courts but that this presents an opportunity to consider how things could be done differently, such as increasing diversion.