

Evidence submitted by Welsh Government (DRU0081)

Welsh Government response to the Home Affairs Committee call for evidence

1.UK Drug Policy

What are the trends and patterns in drug use across the four UK nations?

Drug use in Wales

1.1 Estimates of problematic use of opioids, cocaine and crack, amphetamine and new psychoactive substances indicate that there are estimated to be around 44,620 individuals in Wales, aged 15-64 years who are using these types of drugs, including those in contact with health and criminal justice services. Further work is being undertaken to validate these estimates in Wales.

1.2 Hospital admissions – drugs

- Hospital admissions related to use of illicit drugs decreased by 11.8% in 2020/21 compared with 2019-20. Admissions data suggests that use of multiple drugs remains relatively stable.
- Amongst young people (up to 25 years), hospital admission related to opioids have fallen by 28% in the last five years.
- Cannabinoid related admissions have decreased by 23% (all age groups) compared to the previous year.
- Opioids continue to account for more admissions in working aged adults than any other substance, with 44.3% admissions in 2020-21. However, admissions for opioids in this age group declined by 15.8% compared to 2019-20.
- Hospital admissions involving illicit drugs in older people decreased by 7.5% in 2019-20 compared to the previous year.

N.B it is important to note the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on 2020-21 data related to hospital admissions and trends in drug use

**The above data has been provided by Public Health Wales*

1.3 Drug Treatment

Referrals

There were 22,684 referrals into substance misuse services during 2020-21 and 1,337 further referrals who did not attend prior to assessment.

Assessments

The total number of clients assessed by specialist substance misuse providers in 2020-21 was 17,259, down 6.6% from 2019-20.

In 2020-21, the number of clients assessed for problematic drug use was 8,095, of which:

- **Heroin** assessments accounted for 3,108
- **Cannabis** assessments accounted for 1,868
- **Cocaine** accounted for 983 of all assessments

921 were under 20 years old

3,320 were between 20-59 years old

977 were 60 years old or over

Males accounted for 5,591 drugs assessments

1.4 Waiting Times

Target of 80% of people to access Treatment within **20 working days** of referral.

During **2020-21** overall 92.7% of people accessed services within **20 working days** of referral. 93.1% (7,014) Alcohol – in treatment within 20 Days

- 90.9% Heroin – in treatment within 20 Days
- 91.9% Cannabis – in treatment with 20 Days
- 92.1% Amphetamines – in treatment within 20 Days
- 95.5% Cocaine – in treatment within 20 Days

1.5 Treatment Outcomes

86.2% of people reported a reduction, abstinent or no change in their substance misuse in 2020-21 compared to 85.9% in 2016-17.

83.1% of people reported improved quality of life in 2020-21 compared to 82.1% in 2016-17.

82.3% of people have completed treatment either problematic substance free or have reached their treatment goals in 2020-21 compared to 74.8% in 2016-17

2. What is your view on the UK Government's 10-Year Drug Strategy for England and Wales, which was published in December 2021?

2.1 The Welsh Government will work with the UK Government on actions in the UK Government's Strategy that impact on Wales. Whilst the UK Government's Strategy is led by the Home Office from a criminal justice perspective (in conjunction with the Health Department on areas), our focus in Wales is very much Health led with the responsibility for Substance Misuse lying with the Deputy Minister for Mental Health and Wellbeing.

2.2 In relation to Drugs (and alcohol) our approach is focused on harm reduction. The Welsh Government's aim is to ensure that people in Wales are aware of the dangers and the impact of substance misuse to enable them to make informed choices and to know where they can seek out help and support.

2.3 Our current Substance Misuse Delivery Plan (2019-22) focuses on the themes of:

- preventing harm;
- support for individuals – to improve their health and aid and maintain recovery;
- supporting and protecting families; and
- tackling availability and protecting individuals and communities via enforcement activity.

Underpinning all of these is an emphasis on partnership working. In relation to the last theme "tackling availability", we recognise that there are elements of this work that are non-devolved so action by the UK Government is key here.

3 Are there particular policies at national or local level across the four UK nations that have been effective in reducing:

- **drug use,**
- **drug related deaths, and/or**
- **drug related offending?**

3. 1 Drug Policy in Wales

3.1.1 'Taking Wales Forward' outlines the commitments we will deliver to help drive improvement and make the biggest difference to the lives of everyone in Wales. 'Prosperity for All: the national strategy' takes those commitments, places them in a long-term context, and sets out how they will be delivered by bringing together the efforts of the whole Welsh public sector. One of the key themes of 'Prosperity for All:

the national strategy' is to improve health and well-being in Wales, for individuals, families and communities, helping us to achieve our ambition of prosperity for all, taking significant steps to shift our approach from treatment to prevention.

3.1.2 Following the end of our 10 year 'Working Together to Reduce Harm 2008-18' Substance Misuse Strategy, we carried out an extensive engagement and consultation in order to develop a new Substance Misuse Delivery Plan (2019-22) ("the Plan"). This Plan outlines our priorities for the three years and builds on the good progress made in the lifetime of the previous 2008-18 strategy.

3.1.3 The Plan published in October 2019 is rooted in a harm reduction approach which recognises substance misuse as a health and care issue as opposed to one that is solely related to criminal justice. The overall aim of the Plan is to ensure that people in Wales are aware of the dangers and the impact of substance misuse and to know where they can seek information, help and support. The Plan has been revised in response to Covid-19 to reflect the work that has been, and will be, undertaken as a result of the pandemic. The revised Plan was published in January 2021: <https://gov.wales/substance-misuse-delivery-plan-2019-2022-0>

3.1.4 The impact of Covid-19 has been a challenge from a policy and operational perspective. Welsh Government, Substance Misuse Commissioners and Services have worked closely during this period to ensure that individuals are able to receive the support they need. We have worked with partners (particularly our Area Planning Boards (APBs) and substance misuse third sector), to ensure the needs of the most vulnerable substance misuse population are met and the appropriate guidance is in place.

3.2 Drug Related Deaths

3.2.1 In 2014 Welsh Government published guidance for undertaking fatal and non-fatal drug poisoning reviews in Wales. The guidance encompasses all stages of review including instigation, collaborative working with statutory bodies in data collection, establishment and implementation of recommendations/lessons learned and dissemination of information for action.

3.2.2 The case review framework and procedures were designed to ensure:

- Clear delineation of roles and responsibilities, and co-ordination between, National/Area Planning Board, and local provider level.
- Effective implementation across all Health Board areas in Wales of the existing lessons learned and recommendations relating to fatal and non-fatal drug poisoning prevention.
- Timely response to fatal and non-fatal drug poisonings at a local level, including information gathering and clarification of circumstances of death.

- Innovative and effective collaborative working between those with a statutory investigative role (Coroners, Police, Serious Untoward Incident (SUI) Accountable Officers) and those charged with undertaking case reviews, establishing lesson learned and recommendations for fatal and non-fatal drug poisoning prevention.
- Information and recommendations established at a local level (for both fatal and non-fatal poisonings) are disseminated to Health Board (APB) level and National Implementation Board for consideration and national implementation.
- Robust collation, data analysis, co-ordination and effective dissemination of data and recommendations to prevent fatal and non-fatal drug poisonings across Wales, the wider UK and beyond.

3.2.3 Reviewing fatal and non-fatal poisonings in real time along with the wide distribution of naloxone ensures key harm reduction messages are reaching those who are vulnerable and at risk of overdose.

3.3.4 In 2020, 224 deaths due to drug poisoning were registered in Wales, a decrease of 7 per cent from the previous calendar year. Of these, 149 were classified as drug misuse deaths, a decrease of 10 per cent.

3.4 Delivery and funding for Substance Misuse Services across Wales

3.4.1 The seven Area Planning Boards (APBs) are responsible, within their regions, for the assessment of need, commissioning and monitoring of delivery of substance misuse services using the funding allocated by the Welsh Government. To ensure the actions set out in the Plan are achievable, we continue our work in supporting substance misuse services through our APBs and Health Boards (HBs). APBs have been the key vehicle for supporting the delivery of substance misuse services and this will continue to be the case.

3.4.2 The Welsh Government currently invests almost £55m in our substance misuse agenda (2021-22), of which over £25m goes to our APBs through our Substance Misuse Action Fund. In 2022-23, these allocations will increase by £6m from £25m to £31m taking overall investment in substance misuse to almost £64m. This includes an increase of £1m to both the children and young people and residential rehabilitation ring fenced allocations to support the rise in demand for these services since the onset of the pandemic. The remaining £4m will help address waiting times, support service improvements including developing trauma informed services and implementation of recommendations from the recently published Alcohol-Related Brain Damage Framework.

3.4.3 In addition, the Local Health Boards ring fenced substance misuse allocation is increasing by £1m, from £20.774m to £21.774m. These allocations are designed to

complement SMAF Revenue by supporting predominantly NHS substance misuse provision and expenditure is agreed with our APBs

3.4.4 We therefore expect APBs to ensure they continue to provide services that meet the needs of the population and utilise the additional funding to achieve improvements against waiting times, services and develop trauma informed approaches and that the key performance indicators continue to be met and improved upon. To achieve this we will continue to ensure interventions are 'joined up' across government, recognising the needs of individuals go beyond their substance use, by developing a whole person approach to support them.

4. A cross Government approach

4.1 Over its duration, the Welsh Government's Substance Misuse Delivery Plan has focused on ensuring that substance misuse is embedded across other policy areas within the Welsh Government, particularly as we focus more on prevention. For example, close joint work will continue with Education, Children and Families, Employability, Housing, Social Services, Tackling Poverty and Crime and Justice to strengthen links with these areas, so that fewer people are drawn into substance misuse in the first place and for those that are we provide integrated and easily accessible treatment leading to recovery.

4.2 Specific actions are set out in the Plan which highlight the important contribution other government departments (including non-devolved areas), can make to improve substance misuse outcomes for individuals through their policies and programmes. Whilst health services are designed to respond to the needs of individuals who suffer from substance misuse, there are other levers outside of health which are critical in improving an individual's health and well-being. There are many initiatives in place - or planned - across the Welsh Government that will support the substance misuse agenda with significant investment being made in terms of resources. One of the areas where this is demonstrated, particularly on the preventative side, is through the investment being made to take forward a 'Whole School Approach' (WSA) to mental health and wellbeing for children and young people in Wales. As part of the WSA, all schools will support the broader mental health and wellbeing of learners, which in turn will help to prevent other issues from developing or escalating, including substance misuse issues.

5. Take Home Naloxone

5.1 The supply of take-home naloxone (THN), along with training on the identification and response to opioid poisonings remains a vital and cost-effective intervention in the prevention of fatal opioid poisonings. Since 2009, THN has been supplied to individuals identified 'at risk' of opioid poisoning by substance misuse services, Integrated Offender Services (IOS), prisons and approved homelessness services / hostels. Amendments made to the Human Medicines Act Regulations (2015) have since provided opportunities for increased distribution and a wider range of individuals to carry THN including family, friends and carers of people at risk, professionals, and volunteer programmes.

5.2 Currently in Wales, THN distribution is available from 58 registered sites. The number of sites supplying THN has increased year on year from 11 'pilot' sites participating in 2009 to 58 in 2020-21. Increases in availability and distribution have been influenced by the Human Medicines Act Regulations (2015) amendment, which facilitated all commissioned substance misuse services to distribute THN as opposed to only those providing clinical services. However, due to ongoing regulatory requirements, supply remains limited from a range of settings e.g. homelessness services / hostels without co-located substance misuse services. Wales therefore looks forward to seeing the outcome of the recent consultation on the relaxation of current legislations to allow wider distribution to those most at risk.

5.3 Throughout 2021 there were some key developments in the THN scheme which included:

- Click and deliver service to those who cannot attend treatment service;
- Peer to peer distribution; and
- Police officers carrying THN.

In Wales we continue to develop initiatives to ensure the wide spread availability in an attempt to further reduce drug related death.

6. Buprenorphine

6.1 The Welsh Government has provided an alternative Opioid Substitution Therapy (PST) and supported the national implementation of injectable buprenorphine (Buprenorphine) in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Buprenorphine is a slow-release (seven day and one month) injectable form of buprenorphine. This is a 0.5ml sub-cutaneous injection and can be delivered in much the same manner as many vaccines. It is provided in a one-use safely disposable syringe and can be stored at room temperature. These formulations have been reviewed by NICE in February 2019 and approved in Wales since September 2019.

6.2 This has significantly reduced the need for service users to attend community pharmacies and clinics, thereby protecting their health and that of key workers. Over 1,000 service users are now benefitting from this treatment and there is significant anecdotal evidence that many are experiencing significantly improved outcomes.

6.3 Since its implementation, research into the effects of Buprenorphine and early findings are positive. A study by Cardiff and Vale indicates that over 80% of patients are retained on Buprenorphine treatment and that it breaks the daily cycle of withdrawal and despair. Early findings have shown some patients need little additional input, some need low intensity trauma-informed support and a smaller number need more specialised psychological support. Many have successful journeys to recovery after decades of opioid misuse, with some successfully detoxifying. Positive outcomes include returning to families, work and wider health improvements.

As part of the Welsh Government's Budget for 2022-23, £3m has been allocated to continue this treatment alongside a longer term full evaluation.

7. Prisons

7.1 Evidence suggests that one of the groups at risk of poorer health outcomes are people in prison. In particular, they will often have a higher prevalence of substance misuse and poorer mental health, as well as a higher prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and trauma. A study in [2018 by Public Health Wales](#) (PHW) to understand the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences amongst the male offender population found that over eight in 10 prisoners in Wales reported at least one ACE, and nearly half had four or more.

7.2 With the view to improving health outcomes and reducing those health inequalities which currently exist, we have worked with PHW and the Royal College of Psychiatrists to develop a new Substance Misuse Treatment Framework (SMTF) and new standards for mental health services for our prisons in Wales. The development of these policies are priorities in the [Partnership Agreement for Prison Health](#) – which was developed collaboratively between the Welsh Government, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) in Wales, HBs and PHW – to support the fundamental principle of equivalence and ensure people in prison have access to the same levels of support and healthcare as those in the community. Other priorities in the Partnership Agreement are around Medicines Management and the Prison Environment.

7.3 Welsh Government commissioned PHW to develop the SMTF for the prisons, and the Royal College of Psychiatrists to develop the new standards for mental health services. We are now looking at undertaking a joint consultation of the two documents, the current intention is for 2022-23 to be an interim year for the implementation of the SMTF and the standards for mental health services. The plan is to work with the prisons and HBs in Wales on the next steps and timeframes – based on consultation feedback and the current situation in relation to the pandemic. We anticipate that following consultation, HBs and the prisons in Wales will need to undertake a gap analysis to identify key actions to support delivery. Further support for delivery will also be available for the prisons through other developments, such as the Traumatic Stress Wales initiative and its focus on supporting those in prison who have experienced trauma, to access the support and treatment they need.

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