

English Harm Reduction Group Response to the 2017 Drug Strategy

The Government has now published the 2017 Drug Strategyⁱ. We express great concern at the lack of focus on harm reduction - an evidence-based response that protects people and ultimately saves lives - at a time when drug-related deaths are the highest on record.

- Heroin and morphine deaths rose by 109 percent in the England and Wales between 2012 and 2016ⁱⁱ, when the evidence is overwhelming that harm reduction initiatives can reduce them. Initiatives such as opioid substitution treatment (OST) and needle and syringe programmes are only mentioned fleetingly within the Strategy, and others such as drug consumption rooms and heroin assisted therapy (HAT) are completely absent.
- It is appalling that the Government acknowledges in the strategy that the rise in drug-related deaths is 'dramatic and tragic', but proposes no concrete action plan to reduce them. For example, the strategy comments on the importance of naloxone to prevent overdose deaths but proposes no national systematic approach to naloxone provision, nor any new funding for this vital intervention. It is shocking that whilst drug-related deaths have outstripped both road traffic fatalitiesⁱⁱⁱ and deaths from blood borne viruses^{iv}, there is no coordinated response from central government.
- This erosion of services continues against a backdrop of funding for all drug services being continuously reduced. Public health spending has reduced by more than 5% since 2013^{vi}, and according to analysis a further £22 million in cuts are to be made for drug treatment by the end of 2017/18^{vii}. Without funding drug services will not be able to function effectively.
- The Government has dismissed decriminalisation of drug possession offences as being simplistic. Yet the World Health Organisation and a multitude of United Nations agencies have called for the end of criminal sanctions for possession and use of drugs in recognition that criminalisation creates barriers to those needing treatment and increases health harms.

People who use drugs are often vulnerable and marginalised. This new Drug Strategy simply does not begin to support them and reduce drug-related deaths. We call on the Government to implement the recommendations of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs to tackle opiate related deaths, these include: optimal OST prescribing; easier access to naloxone; a national HAT programme; and that drug consumption rooms are implemented where there is need^{viii}. The Government must also ensure a minimum level of care by requiring local authorities to provide drug treatment and harm reduction services by law.

Signatories

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Department for Transport, 'Annual Road Fatalities'. Accessed 10th August 2017. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/annual-road-fatalities>
- ^{iv} Public Health England 'HIV in the UK', 2017. Accessed 10th August 2017. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/602942/HIV_in_the_UK_report.pdf
- ^v Public Health England 'HIV in the UK', 2017. Accessed 10th August 2017. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/632465/HCV_in_the_uk_report_2017.pdf
- ^{vi} The King's Fund, 'Big cuts planned to public health budgets'. Accessed 10th August 2017. Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/press/press-releases/big-cuts-planned-public-health-budgets>
- ^{vii} The King's Fund, 'Chickens coming home to roost: local government public health budgets for 2017/18'. Accessed 10th August 2017. Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2017/07/local-government-public-health-budgets-2017-18>
- ^{viii} Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), 'Reducing Opioid-Related Deaths in the UK' (December 2016). Accessed 10th August 2017. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/576560/ACMD-Drug-Related-Deaths-Report-161212.pdf