



INTEGRATION JOINT BOARD

Date of Meeting	6 February 2024
Report Title	HSCP.23.100 Update regarding the introduction of a drug checking pilot in Aberdeen
Report Number	HSCP.24.005
Lead Officer	Kevin Dawson Lead for Community Mental Health, Learning Disabilities, Drug & Alcohol Services
Report Author Details	Simon Rayner Alcohol & Drugs Partnership Lead Simon.Rayner@nhs.scot
Consultation Checklist Completed	Yes
Directions Required	No
Exempt	No
Appendices	None
Terms of Reference	1, 7

1. Purpose of the Report

- 1.1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update regarding the introduction of a drug checking pilot in Aberdeen.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1. It is recommended that the Integration Joint Board note the information contained in the report.

3. Strategic Plan Context

- 3.1. This report supports the work of the Health and Social Care Partnership Delivery Plan and specifically "Preventing Ill Health: Tackle the top



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preventable risk factors for poor mental and physical health including: - obesity, smoking, and use of alcohol and drugs". It supports the work of the Alcohol and Drug Partnership aim of "Reducing Harm, Morbidity and Mortality". It supports the work within Community Planning Local Outcome Improvement Plan to reduce drug related deaths by 10% by 2026. It supports the work of the Scottish Government National Mission to deliver recommendations from the National Drug Death Taskforce. Drug checking, as a component of a wider harm reduction, treatment and support system for people using drugs may help the aspirations set out in these strategic plans.

4. Summary of Key Information

4.1. Aberdeen along with other areas of Scotland has seen an increasing and sustained rate of drug related deaths. In the past 5 years between 2018 and 2023 there have been 332 suspected drug deaths in Aberdeen.

4.2. Aberdeen City Council, following consideration of a Notice of Motion from Councillor Cooke at a meeting of its Full Council on 3 November 2023 agreed:

(ii) to agree that safer drug consumption and drug checking facilities could be an important public health measure that could save lives, and support all options within the existing legal framework being explored to enable the delivery of these facilities to prevent overdoses and reduce harm;

(v) to recognise that tackling drug harm is part of a public health approach to the challenge of drug use and therefore agree to work with partners to support and assist applications for drug checking facilities in Aberdeen;

(vii) to instruct the Chief Officer - Health and Social Care Partnership to report to the Aberdeen City Integration Joint Board by March 2024 on the progress of discussions [with respect to delivering a drug-checking pilot in Aberdeen] with partner agencies, the Scottish Government and the Home Office.

4.3. The Scottish Government, along with the CORRA Foundation² and Drug Death Taskforce³, funded a research programme to determine how best to establish drug checking in Scotland and the potential benefits of doing so by systematically reviewing international practice and available evidence base. The two-year project ended in March 2023 and established an



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evidence base for, and support for the development of, drug checking services in Scotland across three early adopter cities: Glasgow, Dundee and Aberdeen.

- 4.4. Since March 2023 the Scottish Government have worked with the three City areas to establish pilot sites and requirements needed to progress the operational delivery of drug checking services.
- 4.5. The basic model being developed is that each of the three sites will have small “near-person” testing machines that will allow testing of a small sample of a substance with a rapid result being provided to the person along with tailored harm reduction messaging. The sample of the substances from all three sites will be transported to Dundee University for further in-depth testing that will contribute to a national level of surveillance.
- 4.6. Drug checking services allow people to anonymously submit samples of drugs for testing. Once the sample of drugs has been tested, individuals receive information about the content and potency of the submitted drugs so that they can make more informed decisions about their use or not. If the person still chooses to use the substance, provision of tailored harm reduction advice will aim to reduce associated risks.
- 4.7. These services also provide an opportunity to engage in harm reduction counselling and can support access into other services. The primary aim of drug checking is to reduce the risk of harms, including drug-related deaths, to people who use drugs, with an associated reduction of harm to families, communities and wider society.
- 4.8. There are currently no drug checking services in Scotland. Drug related deaths rates³ in Scotland have been increasing in recent years and are currently the highest per-capita in Europe.
- 4.9. Poly-drug use⁴ (taking more than one drug at the same time) is a key contributor to the high death rate, with many people using a number of drugs concurrently. The potency of these drugs is often unknown and can vary significantly, increasing the risk of fatal consequences. Additionally, drugs can contain potentially dangerous adulterants (unexpected or unwanted contents) or a completely different substance to the one it is sold as.
- 4.10. Drug checking services allow individuals to have the potency and content of their drugs tested before use, and to receive information regarding what these drugs contain. Drug checking also contributes to public health



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surveillance of drug markets in local areas: when particularly dangerous samples are identified the service can issue tailored public health alerts.

- 4.11.** To legally be able to deliver a drug checking service that complies with the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and the Misuse of Drugs Regulations 2001 a Licence is required from the UK Government Home Office. To be able to obtain a Licence there needs to be standardise operational procedures in place that are ratified by the Home Office.
- 4.12.** In addition to the standard licensing requirements the Home Office have provided guidance on what they would consider necessary when submitting license applications for drug checking facilities. These are:
- They take measures to ensure their service cannot be seen to condone drug misuse;
 - They are targeted at people who are dependent on one or more illicit drug, and they can demonstrate effective measures which prevent non-dependent people from accessing the services;
 - Located in a fixed community-based, drug treatment, harm reduction or other healthcare setting;
 - They are restricted to users over the age of 18 only;
 - They ensure that all users receive a follow up appointment with a trained treatment professional to support behaviour change, entry to treatment and becoming drug free, and ensure messaging does not condone drug use;
 - They feed information into, as a minimum, domestic early warning systems to support the Government's understanding of emerging drug threats;
 - They agree an impact assessment methodology with the Home Office in advance (a licence condition);
 - They agree to share data from the impact evaluation openly with the Home Office (a licence condition);
- 4.13.** In Aberdeen our current third sector provider, Alcohol & Drugs Action, are the provider that we are working with the Scottish Government to operationalise drug checking and support Home Office Licence application.



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Alcohol & Drugs Action currently deliver an established Harm Reduction Service on behalf of the Health and Social Care Partnership. Harm reduction involves support and counselling on substance use and provision of clean sterile injecting equipment and other consumables designed to reduce the potential harm of substance use, and including onward support to more structured treatment.

- 4.14.** Discussions have taken place with Police Scotland locally and nationally. They have indicated that their position will continue to follow the current arrangement where the police will not target sites where people access help and support for drug problems unless there is a specific incident. This established protocol stems from work in the 1980s during the setup of injecting equipment providers (needle exchanges) to ensure people were not dissuaded from accessing services that would help reduce the transmission of HIV in the community i.e. ensuring a public health priority to reduce harm first and foremost. More recently there is a national consensus about taking a public health approach to reducing substance harm and related deaths, rather than a judicial based approach.
- 4.15.** Aberdeen is in the process, with Scottish Government and Public Health Scotland support, of finalising its application to the Home Office for a Licence with the expectation of submission by the end of Quarter 4 2023/2034. Depending on the outcome of that submission there will be an assessment and refinement process. The date of a drug checking service going live is not known, but is likely to be late 2024/early 2025.
- 4.16.** In summary, for the purpose of this project, local drug checking services will not be targeted at the wider population or young people. Instead it will provide a safe environment where people experiencing problematic drug use will be able to engage in an informed conversation about what they are taking and potential risks, with the aim of potentially reducing these harms. Drug checking is delivered in the context of a wider range of evidence based harm reduction, community and residential based treatment and support, and is an enhancement of current service provision.

5. Implications for IJB

5.1. Equalities, Fairer Scotland and Health Inequality

There are no direct implications arising for Equalities, Fairer Scotland and Health Inequality from the recommendations of this report at this stage

5.2. Financial



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There are no direct financial implications arising from the recommendations of this report at this stage

5.3. Workforce

There are no direct workforce implications arising from the recommendations of this report at this stage

5.4. Legal

There are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendations of this report as all conditions of the licence will be met as set out in paragraph 4.11

5.5. Unpaid Carers

There are no direct implications for Unpaid Carers arising from the recommendations of this report at this stage

5.6. Information Governance

There are no direct implications for Information Governance arising from the recommendations of this report at this stage

5.7. Environmental Impacts

There are no direct Environmental (or Sustainability) Impacts arising from the recommendations of this report at this stage. However, this may be subject to change as the service becomes operational

5.8. Sustainability

There are no direct Sustainability impacts arising from the recommendations of this report at this stage

6. Management of Risk

6.1. Identified risks(s)

There are no identified risks arising from the recommendation at this stage

References

1. <https://committees.aberdeencity.gov.uk/documents/g9183/Decisions%2003rd-Nov-2023%2012.00%20Council.pdf?T=2>
2. <https://www.corra.scot/>



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3. <https://drugtaskforce.knowthescore.info/>
4. [Drug Related Deaths in Scotland 2020 \(crew.scot\)](#)
5. [Mixing drugs \(crew.scot\)](#)