

Q & As

PSNI

What is PSNI's strategy tackling Illicit and Prescription Drug Misuse?

Keeping People Safe by –

Prevent – Restricting, frustrating and disrupting the supply of illicit controlled drugs as defined under the Misuse of drugs (NI) Act & the illegal supply of prescription drugs to prevent misuse.

Protect - Support harm reduction and prevention initiatives.

Detect – Frustrate, disrupt and dismantle the Organised Crime Groups response for drug importation and distribution in Northern Ireland.

What is the extent of Organised Crime Groups involvement in Drugs in Northern Ireland?

There are currently around 90 Organised Crime Groups in Northern Ireland. Approximately 2/3 of these OCG's are involved in the supply of controlled drugs.

What has PSNI done to tackle the threat from organised crime over the last number of years?

Since April 2016 PSNI's Organised Crime Unit alone has -

- Arrested - 1,291 persons
- Searched - 650 premises
- Charged / reported - 561 persons
- Seized - £17.2 million pounds worth of drugs.

This resulted in 101 frustrations, 122 disruptions and 55 gangs being dismantled.

Figures provided by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) show that between January 2015 and December 2018 the PPS received 17,004 case files (relating to 19,413 suspects) involving a drug offence. During the same period 12,225 defendants were issued with a decision for prosecution in relation to a total of 21,620 drugs offences with 3,128 of these offences in respect of supply or importation

Can police / criminal justice system alone deal with the drugs problem?

The causes, complexity and pervasiveness of drug misuse and the harms it causes mean that no one agency can tackle it alone. Police at service and local levels, law enforcement partners, the voluntary and community sector and the public all have a role to play. It is vital that we do this together using a coordinated, partnership-based approach that recognises the common goals we all share – to keep people safe by reducing crime, improving life chances and protecting the most vulnerable.

How is activity co-ordinated at Regional level?

Efforts to tackle drug misuse and the availability of illicit controlled and prescription drugs in Northern Ireland is co-ordinated through the bi-monthly Organised Crime Task Force (OCTF) Drugs Group. Members of the PSNI-chaired group include the Northern Ireland Prison Service, National Crime Agency, Royal Mail, Forensic Science Northern Ireland, Department of Health Medicines Regulatory Group (MRG), the Departments of Health and Justice and Public Health Agency. Through this group stakeholders share information in relation to the misuse of drugs and related developments, issues and threats. The drugs communications sub-group also supports and helps co-ordinate awareness campaigns to highlight the harms associated with any drugs misuse and the impact of the drugs economy on local communities.

In addition, through its Medicines Regulatory Group, the Department of Health works in day-to-day co-operation with a wide range of local, national and international enforcement partner organisations including the Police Service, Border Force, Customs, the National Crime Agency and Interpol to address the illicit supply of prescription drugs. This collaborative work focuses on enhancing public safety through key aspects of medicines enforcement and control in Northern Ireland. This includes intelligence gathering, investigation and monitoring of the production, import/export, possession, supply and diversion of controlled drugs and other medicinal products and aims to tackle illicit markets in prescription drug misuse, and internet purchases.

This Department has developed international collaborative work on matters pertaining to the detection of international pharmaceutical crime including the supply of counterfeit and unlicensed medicines and is represented on national and international enforcement Agencies including the Permanent Forum on International Pharmaceutical Crime, European Medicines Enforcement Officers group and Cross-border controlled drug group.

How does PSNI activity link to the National Level?

PSNI are also engaged nationally with colleagues across the United Kingdom through our relationship with the NCA, UK Border Force and also through the regional Organised Crime Unit network. PSNI are also part of the National Police Chiefs Council Drugs working group. On an all-Ireland basis PSNI work daily, very successfully, with AGS's National Drugs and Organised Crime Unit to tackle drugs gangs operating on both sides of the border.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Is there a cross-cutting government strategy to address the issue?

Department of Health (DoH) leads on the cross-sectoral strategy to reduce the harm related to both alcohol and drug misuse, the New Strategic Direction for Alcohol and Drugs (NSD).

The NSD has 5 pillars provide the conceptual and practical base for the NSD. The five pillars are:

- Prevention and Early Intervention.
- Treatment and Support.
- Law and Criminal Justice.
- Harm Reduction.
- Monitoring, Evaluation and Research.

What is the scale of drug use here?

It's difficult to ascertain the number of people using illicit drugs, or misusing prescription drugs here, but worryingly, there seems to be an upward trend in risk-taking behaviour – particularly “poly-drug misuse” i.e. misusing more than one substance at the same time – among certain groups that is leading to greater substance misuse-related harms.

The Public Health Agency's leaflet 'Mixing: reduce your risk of harm' can be found at www.pha.site/mixing and has advice on the dangers of mixing more than one drug, which includes alcohol and prescription medication.

Information on a range of drugs is available at: <https://www.talktofrank.com/>

Prescription drugs

Prescription drugs can be equally lethal. All drugs are potential poisons - particularly if they haven't been prescribed for the individual by a qualified clinician, if the wrong dose is taken, if they are mixed with alcohol or other substances, or if they have come through an unregulated supply route and potentially could contain anything.

What help is available for people affected by drug addiction?

If you have or someone you know has taken drugs or have misused a medication and are feeling unwell, seek medical help urgently.

A range of support services are in place for individuals who misuse drugs. These services address drug and alcohol or mental health related issues or concerns. There are specific services in place and commissioned for children and young people, and for family members – even if the individual misusing drugs is not currently seeking help or in treatment. More information on all services, searchable by location, is available at www.drugsandalcoholni.info

We continue to work collectively across all stakeholders to prevent drugs deaths. In particular the Take Home Naloxone, a community-based programme funded by the Public Health Agency, which provides life-saving medicine (naloxone) to people at risk of opioid overdose. This medicine, which can reverse the effects of the overdose, is available to anyone who uses opioids, through their local Trust Addiction Services, Prison Service and Low Threshold Services. It is injected intramuscularly and can be administered by anyone in an emergency overdose situation.

In 2017-18, naloxone was supplied 807 times via the Take Home Naloxone programme. Through this programme it can be provided not only to individuals at risk, but also to anyone who comes in to contact with individuals at risk who work in the community and their friends and family members.

The Northern Ireland Ambulance Service also uses naloxone, separate from the PHA funded programme. Since 2016, Naloxone was administered almost 1845 times by the ambulance service.

Are waiting lists growing for those needing help?

In the past 2 years there has been growing pressure on a range of alcohol and drug related services, leading to the development of unacceptable waiting list for some key service across Northern Ireland but particularly in Belfast.

This has been the focus of significant action and investment by the Department of Health, the HSCB and the Belfast Trust. As a result mean waiting times for Substitution Therapy in the Belfast Trust have fallen from 41 weeks in July 2017 to 15 weeks in December 2018. The Trust will continue to prioritise this service and seek to address the waiting list. Belfast Trust has also seen significant improvement in waiting times to access the Community Addiction Team - in December 2018, 69% of individuals referred were seen in 0-3 weeks from initial contact and 28% individuals seen in 3-6 weeks from initial contact.

There is also an ongoing review of Health and Social Care (HSC) community addiction services to address the increasing complexity of problems being experienced by individuals misusing alcohol and drugs; an increased supply/availability of new substances ; changes in drug using trends; and increased levels of referrals to treatment services.

A key challenge in tackling waiting times is the ability to recruit suitably trained specialist staff.

To help address this, in addition to extra funding for community addiction teams the HSC is also providing additional funding and training for GP practices to treat more patients in primary care to help free up the Trust specialist services to work more with the new/clinically complex cases

What is the health service's message to all those affected by the issue of drug misuse?

Drug and alcohol misuse can affect anyone and can have a devastating impact on individuals, families, and communities, and there is help available whether you are a drug user, or are affected by someone else's alcohol and drug misuse.

Anyone affected by drug misuse should seek help. You can speak to your GP in the first instance or look at the range of services in your local area available at www.drugsandalcoholni.info

All drugs carry risks, so it is strongly recommended that you do not take anything unless it has been prescribed to you by a medical professional and in accordance with your prescription.

It is particularly important that people are aware of the risks associated with taking a combination of substances, including alcohol, as you have no way of knowing how they will combine and what affect they will have on your physical and mental health. Often, mixing can increase the toxicity of the substances and can be deadly.

The main risk factors when using drugs include taking too much of a substance, taking a substance over an extended period of time, "bingeing", mixing drugs with other drugs and/or alcohol, and using drugs on your own.

If you have or someone you know has taken drugs or have misused a medication and are feeling unwell, seek medical help urgently.

How do you keep track of new and emerging drugs posing a significant risk to the public?

The Department of Health oversees the Drug & Alcohol Monitoring & Information System (DAMIS) with support from lead partners in the Public Health Agency, PSNI, DoJ and the Forensic Service. Facilitated and co-ordinated by the PHA, DAMIS is an "early warning system" for emerging trends in substance misuse to secure anecdotal and early information from a range of sources that may be used to inform future policy directions, raise awareness of potential trends and, when appropriate, issue warnings to various stakeholders including service providers and service user groups. DAMIS can collate and disseminate information on: a sudden increase in a particular drug being misused; drugs being misused in new ways; new drugs becoming available; the emergence of substances with unexpected unpleasant or dangerous effects.

Press Office contacts

Victoria Sloss, PSNI Press Office – 028 90 700084/85
Chris Barnes, Public Health Agency Press Office – 0300 5550117
Public Prosecution Service Press Office – 028 90 897187
Department of Health Press Office – 028 90 520579
Department of Justice Press Office – 028 90 526444