

SDF view on drug checking services

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As Scotland's national resource of expertise on substance use, SDF has a responsibility to contribute evidence, experience and expertise to public debate. Each month, we'll share our perspective on a key issue, explaining what the evidence tells us, why it matters, and what we believe needs to change.

Our position

At its heart, drug checking is about respect. It recognises each person's right to know what is in the drugs they are taking and gives people information they can use to make safer, informed choices about their own health.

Respect and autonomy should be at the heart of any credible public health approach to tackling drug-related harms.

It is hugely positive that a drug checking service will open imminently in Glasgow, and we are pleased that further services are planned for Aberdeen, Dundee and Edinburgh. These point-of-care services will be supported by a national testing and research laboratory in Dundee. It will run detailed tests on the samples collected at drug checking services and feed data directly into Scotland's national drug early warning systems to alert public health teams, communities, and services about toxic batches or new drugs in circulation.

While this may be considered progressive in a Scottish context, drug checking is a vital part of a compassionate drug policy strategy and is already common practice in multiple countries around the world, including the Netherlands, Austria, Spain, Portugal, Switzerland and New Zealand.

As stated in our [SDF manifesto](#), we want to see drug checking scaled up at pace so that services are available in communities across the country. This must include provision for people living in remote and rural areas.

About drug checking

Drug checking supports people to submit a small sample of a drug for testing. Testing can identify the substances present and provide information about their contents and potency.

The results provide an opportunity for a conversation about risk, harm reduction and any support the person may want.

Drug checking does not make drug use completely safe, and it does not tell someone that a drug is safe to take. Instead, it provides information that people would otherwise not have – information that can help them make decisions about their own health.

Why drug checking services are needed now

Scotland's drug supply has become increasingly unpredictable in recent years, with the emergence of potent synthetic substances such as nitazenes and xylazine.

This means people cannot reliably know what is in a substance they have bought, whether it contains the drug they expected, how potent it is or whether it has been contaminated.

Drug checking provides an opportunity to identify unexpected or particularly potent substances before they are used. This can help people make more informed decisions and reduce the risk of serious harm.

Drug checking services also provide valuable intelligence about the changing drug supply. They can identify emerging threats and help services and public health agencies respond more quickly to changes in the substances circulating in Scotland.

Scotland's plans for drug checking services

Scotland's first 'point of care' drug checking service will open imminently in Glasgow, on the same site as the [safer drug consumption facility](#).

After submitting a small amount of their drugs for testing, people can choose to stay on site to hear the results or leave and receive a text message. The process should take around 20 minutes.

As well as being told what is in their drugs, people receive tailored harm reduction advice and can be connected to other health, treatment and support services if they want them. Licences have been approved for similar drug checking services in Aberdeen and Dundee, and Edinburgh is in the process of applying for a licence.

The national laboratory in Dundee will not accept samples submitted directly by individuals by post. We believe this is a missed opportunity. At present, people in Scotland can send drug samples to WEDINOS, a harm reduction project in Wales. Results are published online and can be accessed using a reference number.

WEDINOS provides an important service. However, results can take weeks to appear online. In most cases, this means people may already have used the substance before they receive information about what it contains.

A national postal testing service for Scotland could provide an additional route to timely information, particularly for people who cannot easily access a point-of-care service.

Barriers to provision

The Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) makes it a criminal offense to possess or supply controlled substances. This means that any service that handles, tests, or temporarily holds an illegal drug is technically in breach of the law unless they meet specific legal requirements.

The Home Office has provided Controlled Drugs Licences for drug checking services in Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee, as well as the national confirmatory lab in Dundee. It is expected to provide a license for a service in Edinburgh.

However, these licenses come with some conditions that we believe are unnecessary and will create barriers to engagement.

The first is that the person having their drug checked must be over the age of 18. And the second is that the person must be “dependent” on substances – although the framework does not define what “dependent” means in practice.

In our view, this puts drug checking staff in a difficult position. They will need to ask people about their drug use and make a judgement about whether they meet a definition that is not clearly set out. It also raises a question around why someone who is “dependent” on substances can have their drugs checked, but others cannot. Services will ask people their age but will not require proof of age. This effectively creates a gap in provision for those under the age of 18, who will not be able to access drug checking services.

A harm reduction service should start from a position of trust and respect. Conditions that require staff to make judgements about who is eligible to receive information can undermine that approach.

The biggest challenge with the current set up is that it requires health boards to make individual applications before opening a drug checking service. This can be a lengthy process. As is so often the case in Scotland, we know what interventions are needed – but we are slow to make them available, and we rarely make them available consistently and nationally.

What the evidence tells us

Drug checking cannot remove all the risks of taking illegal drugs. But it can help reduce the risk of taking something unexpected or particularly potent and gives people an opportunity to get information and advice that can help them stay safer.

Drug checking services can also connect people with other health, treatment and support services if they want them.

Importantly, drug checking generates intelligence about the substances circulating in local drug markets. This can help identify emerging threats and support faster public health responses.

[The Loop](#) is a charity that is committed to “developing a nationwide network of drug checking services that is non-judgemental, accessible and available to all”. Its research shows that, when drug checking was offered at festivals:

- More than half of people disposed of substances that were not what they had bought or expected.
- Nearly half reduced their dose or spread their consumption over a longer period.
- When people were told that their drugs were higher strength than expected, half either took less or chose not to consume them at all.
- Nearly half of people who received a Loop health consultation said they became more cautious about polydrug use immediately afterwards.
- Three months later, nearly one-third of people who received a Loop health consultation were still being more careful about combining drugs and taking smaller doses than they had previously.

Addressing common concerns

Drug checking doesn't stop people using drugs

Some people who use drugs will want to stop, and they should have access to effective treatment and recovery support when they are ready. But not everyone will be ready, able, or willing to stop using drugs immediately.

Drug checking recognises this reality. It does not encourage or endorse drug use. It provides people with information about the substances they are considering taking and an opportunity to make a more informed decision.

It can also create opportunities to connect people with wider health, treatment and support services.

Should money be spent on drug checking when people need treatment and recovery support?

Treatment, recovery and harm reduction are complementary, not competing, interventions.

People need access to effective treatment and recovery support when they want to stop using drugs. At the same time, people who are not ready, able or willing to stop should still be able to access interventions that reduce their risk of serious harm.

Access to drug checking should not depend on a person's intentions about their substance use. People should not have to demonstrate that they want to reduce or stop using drugs in order to access a service that can help keep them safe and alive.

The choice should never be between helping someone to stop using drugs and helping them stay alive while they continue to use them. Scotland needs both. Harm reduction must meet people where they are at, without conditions, judgement or an expectation that abstinence is the ultimate goal.

Why should public money be used to provide these services?

Public services already bear the costs of preventable drug-related harms. Investing in harm reduction means taking practical action to reduce those harms, rather than waiting until people need emergency healthcare or other crisis support.

What people with living and lived experience think

People with living and lived experience should be central to the design and development of drug checking services.

Their experience can help ensure services are accessible, trusted and responsive to the realities of people's lives – including where and when people are most likely to use drugs, what prevents them from accessing services and what information they need to make safer choices.

Nikki, a member of the Peer Editorial Board of Buzz Magazine, says: "Everything scares me about heroin now, with contamination and nitazenes. I'm glad I'm not taking it and I feel sorry for people that have to take it. It is so scary. I know how it feels to be desperate for a charge, even when you know it could be contaminated.

"I believe we should be able to walk into any chemist and get foil, needles, pipes, drug checking, anything that will help. If we can't stop drugs coming into Scotland, we should do what we can to give people a chance of being safe."

What needs to happen next

There are plans to open drug checking services in four Scottish cities. This is important progress – but it is not enough.

Drug checking should become a routine part of Scotland's harm reduction response – and that means ensuring that people can access life-saving information wherever they live, including in rural and remote communities. This should include considering models to reach more people, such as a mobile services that can perform outreach work.

We need an equitable national approach to providing drug checking services, supported by a robust national laboratory and effective systems for sharing intelligence about emerging threats.

Scotland has taken an important first step. Now we need to make sure drug checking is accessible to everyone who could benefit from it – wherever they live.