

Testing helps people avoid taking lethal drugs

We want community drug checking services to be part and parcel of harm reduction interventions across Wales.



Photo credit: The Loop

What is drug checking?

Drug checking services allow people to get their substances tested, often by voluntarily dropping off their sample without fear of arrest, and subsequently provides individuals with information of the content of their substances, as well as tailored harm reduction advice and often, brief interventions. The service aims to reduce drug related harms by enabling people who use substances, to make more informed decisions and avoid consuming unwanted drugs and adulterants. [1] The need for community-based services is as significant as ever, given the threats posed by dangerous and toxic substances, most notably synthetic opioids, emerging within the illegal drugs market.

Various models of drug checking services exist. In Wales, WEDINOS [2], a harm reduction project facilitated by Public Health Wales, has provided an anonymous service allowing people to submit their samples for testing, since 2013. It forms a critical part of the harm reduction strategy in Wales. However, there is a delay in the turnaround between receiving the sample and publishing the results of its analysis, as well as a lack of tailored harm reduction advice being disseminated. Community-based services, by being situated within current treatment services, can give timely information regarding the contents of the samples tested, as well as provide a human touch by having face to face harm reduction discussions and opening the door for people to access treatment, if required.

What does the evidence suggest?

The Loop, a non-profit, dedicated drug checking NGO, started providing services at two festivals in 2016 before rolling out their services more widely across the UK. The benefits found from their services has been significant. When individuals have been informed that their substance, that they submitted to The Loop to test, contained something other than what they expected, nearly two-thirds disposed of their entire sample. [3] It has also been found that for those samples that matched purchase intent, nearly half reported that they intended to use less than originally planned. [4] Additionally, one in five reported alerting their friends to a substance of concern. [3] What has also been evident is that drug checking services have engaged with people, who are both, more likely to consume a wider range of drugs in the last month,

as well as not having previously accessed treatment services regarding their substance use before. [4] Therefore, drug checking services provide the foundation to engage with, and disseminate lifesaving harm reduction advice, to a wider section of society, and help build upon current provisions facilitated by treatment services.

Currently in the UK, drug checking services are able to operate within the law via a Home Office licence enabling services to operate without fear of criminal sanctions for the service itself and individuals intending to access the service. Additionally, research has shown that police officers have expressed a general support for drug checking services to supplement an ongoing shift towards public health-oriented policing. However, legislative change is deemed important to allow for the support of such facilities, as a means for providing 'cover' for the police. [5]

Key facts

In January 2024, The Loop launched the UK's first regular community-based drug checking service in the UK, in Bristol's city centre. Members of the public can access this anonymous service by submitting a substance for testing. Within an hour, an individual can receive the results of their sample and be given tailored harm reduction advice. It also opens the possibility for people to speak openly and receive non-judgmental information, as well as support people to access further support or treatment, if desired. [6]

Why now?

Wales recorded their third highest drug-related death figure in 2022. The three highest annual figures associated to drug-related fatalities in Wales have come in the last five years, [7] and there are fears within the sector that this is going to get worse in the foreseeable future, considering the emergence of synthetic opioids, most notably nitazenes within the illegal drugs market. WEDINOS received their first sample containing a nitazene back in April 2021, and since then, of the samples that have been found to contain such substances, none of them were submitted with a nitazene listed as the purchase intent. [8] Furthermore, The National Crime Agency reported that 101 deaths between 1 June 2023 and 22 February 2024 have been linked to nitazenes, at a rate of three people a week. [9] Additionally, between April 2022 and March 2023, WEDINOS received over 1,200 samples in the belief they were diazepam. However, only 45% of these samples were profiled to contain diazepam, meaning the majority contained other substances, often more dangerous benzodiazepines. [8] This all points to the increased risk of people who use substances, unintentionally consuming substances that are potentially more dangerous and toxic than what they believed their sample to be, and subsequently increasing the risk to health.

The evidence linked to drug checking services highlights that such provisions not only allow for engagement with populations who do not ordinarily engage with treatment services, but it can increase the likelihood of more informed decisions being taken by people who intend to use substances and therefore decrease significant harms, including early mortality. Drug checking services can also play a significant role within early warning systems by identifying trends within illegal drug markets and drug use. This can help formulate local, regional, and national drug alerts to raise awareness of harm reduction measures to mitigate risks of a public safety incident, due to substances that pose a potential threat to public health.

Community drug checking services are already facilitated in Switzerland, Canada, England, and The Netherlands. [10] By incorporating these services within the harm reduction strategy in Wales, and compliment the work already undertaken by WEDINOS, such measures could significantly reduce the harm associated to substance use and help work towards more cohesive and healthier Wales, as well as align Wales with best practice on an international level.

What have Barod done and our next steps?

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, our Swansea service was in the process of applying for a Home Office licence, following the successful application to secure funding, in order to facilitate a month-long community drug checking pilot from the Swansea base. With the funding still secured, we have revisited the Home Office licence application and hope to be successful soon.

Following on from this, as well as the start of the regular community drug checking service in Bristol, facilitated by The Loop, we believe that such services should be provided in other areas across Wales, to compliment other harm reduction initiatives including Needle and Syringe Programmes, as a response to growing threats within the illegal drugs market, and current and future harms posed by substance use.

What do we want?

- We call on Welsh Government to introduce community drug checking services within the harm reduction strategy in Wales, to help mitigate the harms associated to substance use and work towards a healthier Wales.
- We call on Welsh Government to fund pilot community drug checking services in various areas across Wales and for external academic evaluation of all pilots to be undertaken.

References

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