

Supervised Spaces Save Lives

We want to establish memorandums of understanding to enable the implementation of Enhanced Harm Reduction Centres in Wales.



What are Enhanced Harm Reduction Centres (EHRCs)?

Also known as Overdose Prevention Centres, Safer Drug Consumption Facilities and Drug Consumption Rooms, EHRCs have long been part of effective harm reduction responses to health-related matters due to substance use. They allow for the consumption of illegal drugs, within a sterile environment, under the supervision of trained professionals. Such facilities primarily aim to reduce the acute risks of disease transmission via the sharing of drug equipment, reduce early mortality via drug-related overdoses, reduce discarded paraphernalia within public spaces and engage with marginalised and isolated populations, while connecting them with treatment services. [1]

The first EHRC was established in Bern, Switzerland in 1986, to reduce drug-overdose related deaths. Since then, many European and global countries, such as Spain, France, Germany, Canada, USA, and Australia, have implemented such facilities to mitigate respective local public health harms. [2-5]






What does the evidence suggest?

Nobody has ever died of a drug-related death within an EHRC, while areas that have implemented EHRCs have noted a reduction in fatal overdoses within a 500m radius of the facility after it was opened. [6,7] Following the opening of an EHRC in Vancouver, there was a 35% decrease in fatal overdoses, within the first two years of opening, compared to the two years prior, within 500m of the facility. The sample catchment area was then compared to other areas of the city, which found only a 9% decrease elsewhere in the city. [7]

Many locations that have implemented EHRCs have reported significant environmental gains since the opening of such facilities. Reductions in discarded drug paraphernalia has been noted by multiple locations post-EHRCs implementation. Of the people who accessed an EHRC in Denmark, 96% self-reported a change in behaviour with regards to “not always disposing safely to always disposing safely” their drug paraphernalia, following the opening of the facility. [8] Other areas have also noted significant reductions in discarded paraphernalia in the location whereby an EHRC has since been established, as well as the number of public injecting episodes. [9]

EHRCs have also reported a significant decrease in the amount of ambulance call outs, in response to a drug-related overdose within the immediate vicinity, since the opening of the facility. [10] Research has found a decrease in behaviours among those who have accessed an EHRC, such as reuse of single use items and sharing of injecting paraphernalia, that can increase health risks and risks of disease transmission such as hepatitis and HIV. [11] For highly marginalised people, EHRCs can be the first step into the health and social care system. While EHRCs do not guarantee people access treatment, they can remove some of the traditional barriers and make treatment a more realistic perspective. [12] This is pertinent given that 40% of people who died from a drug-related overdose in 2021 in Wales, had ‘no known contact’ or no contact with services within 12 months prior to death. [13]

Key facts

-  Nobody has ever died from a drug-related overdose within an EHRC.
-  Many EHRCs report significant reduction in discarded drug paraphernalia post-EHRC.
-  Reduction in ambulance callouts in response to drug-related overdoses.
-  Decrease in behaviours, such as sharing injecting equipment, that increase the risk of various health related issues and diseases, including hepatitis and HIV.
-  Reduction in fatal drug overdoses within a certain radius of EHRCs.

Why now?

Barod have long argued for EHRCs to be explored and piloted in Wales, as part of the country's overall harm reduction plan. The Welsh illegal drugs market is frequently subject to new threats. At the time of writing, synthetic opioids represent a growing threat to public health [14] and could exacerbate a current drug-related crisis. [15] Wales recorded the third highest drug-related death figures in 2022 and we are already seeing the devastating effects of such substances. In 2022, England and Wales saw a 1,200% increase in fatalities associated to synthetic opioids compared to the year before. [16] The National Crime Agency reported that 101 deaths between 1 June 2023 and 22 February 2024 have been linked to nitazenes, a group of synthetic opioids, at a rate of three people a week. [17]

In September 2023, it was announced that the UK's first officially sanctioned EHRC has been given the go-ahead in Glasgow [18] in response to the public health crisis, while a needs assessment and feasibility study for a safer drug consumption facility in Edinburgh has recommended introducing an EHRC provision in the city. [19] The Advisory Council of the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), the UK Government's own advisors, recommended the implementation of EHRCs to reduce drug related deaths and other harms back in 2016 [20], and this has since been echoed by other bodies. [21]

EHRCs would prove an effective evidenced-based intervention to reduce the risks associated to synthetic opioids, as well as the use of other substances, and allow for a more unified and whole system approach to mitigating ongoing and future concerns. Implementing EHRCs would provide Wales the foundation to align with best practice on an international level.

Why a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)?

Establishing and operating EHRCs would be subject to the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA) 1971, which means that to legalise their establishment and operation, a working agreement must be drawn up with law enforcement, such as MOUs with each police force in Wales. This would guarantee that those operating the facility would not face legal challenge or be prosecuted. People in possession of illegal drugs at the facility or surrounding area would also not be arrested and / or punished.

“We're getting much better at providing services but we still can't save enough lives. If it was this amount of people dying because of anything else it would be a national emergency. We would be doing everything we could to stem this tragedy. Wales is being left behind and the facts speak for themselves, EHRCs save lives.”

Caroline Phipps, CEO, Barod

What do we want?

- We call on each police force in Wales to set up a memorandum of understanding on EHRCs to allow for the establishment of a pilot EHRC in each area of Wales.
- While we recognise that current criminal law is not devolved, we urge Welsh Government to follow Scotland's lead and pilot a EHRC in Wales, as recommended by the Home Affairs Committee in August 2023. [22]
- We also ask Welsh Government to urge the UK Government to amend the MDA 1971 to legally allow for the establishment of EHRCs, based on international evidence that EHRCs reduce substance-related deaths and in response to the frequent threats to public health including the rise of synthetic opioids.

References

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