

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

12th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday
6 September 2023

PE2024: Create a national public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators, and other performance enhancing drugs

Petitioner	Cael Scott
Petition summary	<p>Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of using steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs), and other performance enhancing drugs (PEDs), which should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• a particular focus on the impact on young people aged 16-25;• working with Community Learning and Development practitioners, gyms, and community coaches to raise awareness; and• developing a public health campaign to highlight the negative impacts of PEDs, encourage regular health check-ups for users, and a screening programme allowing users to test the safety of their PEDs.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2024

Introduction

1. This is a new petition that was lodged on 25 April 2023
2. A full summary of this petition and its aims can be found at **Annexe A**.

3. A SPICe briefing has been prepared to inform the Committee's consideration of the petition and can be found at **Annexe B**.
4. Every petition can collect signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 14 signatures have been received on this petition.
5. The Committee seeks views from the Scottish Government on all new petitions before they are formally considered. A response has been received from the Scottish Government and is included at **Annexe C** of this paper.
6. A submission has been provided by the petitioner. This is included at **Annexe D**.

Action

The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take on this petition.

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE2024: Create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators, and other performance enhancing drugs

Petitioner

Cael Scott

Date lodged

25 April 2023

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of using steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs), and other performance enhancing drugs (PEDs), which should include:

- a particular focus on the impact on young people aged 16-25;
- working with Community Learning and Development practitioners, gyms, and community coaches to raise awareness; and
- developing a public health campaign to highlight the negative impacts of PEDs, encourage regular health check-ups for users, and a screening programme allowing users to test the safety of their PEDs.

Previous action

I have spoken to a local MSP, and on their advice, I wrote to the Scottish Government. The Drugs Policy Division responded to say it was focused on the delivery of the National Drugs Mission Plan 2022-2026, which does not address the use of PEDs.

Background information

A few months ago, one of my friends was admitted to hospital with a ruptured aorta. This life-threatening issue came about from steroid use. When I spoke to him, he was horrified at the severity of the issue, and was unaware of how bad the impacts could be having seen many people at his gym, and fitness influencers online, openly use PEDs without apparent impact.

This is not an isolated incident. Every time I attend my gym, PEDs are easily obtained, but information about them is not.

Social media influencers advocate for SARMs, claiming they have no negative impact. The fact that they are legal to buy suggests to users that they are safe, when the reality is they are simply untested. For young teens and adults feeling pressured to look a certain way, social media influencers are dominating the conversation.

From my time in youth work, I'm aware of this growing trend, and have worked with people as young as fourteen using PEDs. Something must change.

Annexe B

The logo for SPICe, featuring the text 'SPICe' in white on a purple-to-blue gradient background.

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2024](#): 'Create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators, and other performance enhancing drugs', lodged by Cael Scott

[PE2024](#) calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of using steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs), and other image and performance enhancing drugs (I PEDs). The information programme should be particularly focused on the impact on young people aged 16-25. The petitioner also suggests that the Scottish Government works with community learning development practitioners, gyms, and community coaches to raise awareness of this issue.

The petition further asks the Scottish Parliament to call on the Scottish Government to develop a public health campaign to highlight the negative impacts of I PEDs, encourage regular health check-ups for users, and introduce a screening programme allowing users to test the safety of their I PEDs.

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

Health impact of I PEDs

PE2024 refers to a range of image and performance-enhancing drugs commonly used to improve physical performance. [Anabolic steroids](#) are manufactured drugs that mimic the effects of testosterone. They are prescription-only medications; however, they are sometimes taken

without medical advice by people seeking to increase muscle mass and improve athletic performance. Anabolic steroids are [class C drugs](#), which can be issued by pharmacists with a prescription. [Possession of anabolic steroids](#) for personal use is legal; however, the manufacturing, import, export, and supply of anabolic steroids is illegal.

Anabolic steroids are addictive, and carry [a range of side effects](#), including liver and kidney failure, blood clots, high blood pressure, and infertility. Their use can also lead to heart problems and heart attacks. Anabolic steroids are commonly injected, and therefore carry the same risks associated with injecting recreational drugs, including damage to veins, and the transmission of blood-borne viruses such as HIV if needles are shared.

Selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs) is an umbrella term for a class of drugs, such as [ostarine](#) and [testolone](#), that have recently gained popularity as an alternative to anabolic steroids. [Both types of drug work](#) by binding to androgen receptors; however, SARMs are thought to carry fewer side effects than anabolic steroids. SARMs can currently be legally purchased in the UK without age restrictions, due to a loophole enabling them to be sold as “research chemicals”. The sale and production of SARMs is unregulated, and [a 2021 drug test analysis](#) of SARMs available to UK consumers found significant discrepancies in the ingredients of SARMs analysed.

The safety of SARMs is [under-researched and poorly understood](#). The availability and current legality of SARMs has contributed to the perception that they are safe. However, according to a warning issued by the [United States Food and Drug Administration](#) in April 2023, SARMs are associated with serious side-effects including increased risk of heart attack or stroke, liver failure, and infertility.

As the petitioner notes, SARMs are heavily promoted on social media. A 2022 [study exploring the impact of social media](#) on SARMs abuse reported that videos promoting SARMs on TikTok had over 115 million views as of 2 June 2021. In mid-June 2021, TikTok banned the hashtags ‘SARMs’ and ‘steroids’, along with associated terms. These hashtags can no longer be searched on TikTok; however, the content remains available.

Usage and prevalence of image and performance-enhancing drugs

Data on the usage of image and performance-enhancing drugs (IPEDs) in the UK is limited, and the data that does exist largely concerns anabolic steroid use. A [2019 report by UK Anti-Doping](#) (UKAD) suggested that up to one million people regularly use steroids in the UK, and that 34% of gym-goers surveyed by UKAD were aware of the use of IPEDs in their gym or club. The report identified exposure to “body image influencers” on social media, the “Love Island effect”, and a normalisation of injecting practices as drivers of increased IPED use, noting that the most common demographic for the onset of IPED use was among 20–24-year-old males.

Existing support and information

Information about the risks of IPEDs is available from sources including [FRANK](#) and [UK Anti-Doping](#). In April 2020, UK Anti-Doping [launched a digital campaign](#) to highlight the risks and side-effects of anabolic steroid use, directed towards social media users who may be influenced by online promotion of IPEDs.

Some local services, including [NHS Lothian's Edinburgh Steroid Clinic](#) and the [Glasgow Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs Clinic](#), have established specialist clinics for users of anabolic steroids and other IPEDs, to offer harm reduction advice, sterile injecting equipment, psychology support, and blood tests for hormone levels and blood-borne viruses.

Scottish Government actions

In its [written submission to the Committee in response to PE2024](#), dated 9 June 2023, the Scottish Government stated that it began working with young people in Spring 2023 to develop a series of standards for local areas to implement to support young people who use drugs. The Scottish Government has previously funded work through the Scottish Drugs Forum (SDF) to develop information and training programmes to meet the needs of “at-risk” groups, which included people who use IPEDs. SDF continues to deliver training on IPEDs as part of its sexual health and blood-borne viruses workstream.

The response also expressed the Scottish Government’s commitment to further enhancing its public health surveillance data to include IPED use. The letter added that the Scottish Government would be supportive of increasing the awareness of Injecting Provision Services for people who inject IPEDs.

Scottish Parliament actions

The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee is currently considering petition [PE1919](#), which calls for a ban on the sale of fast release caffeine gum to under 18s for performance enhancement due to risk of serious harm.

Sarah Swift

Researcher

21 June 2023

The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in petition briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

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Annexe C

Scottish Government submission of 6 June 2023

PE2024/A: Create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators, and other performance enhancing drugs

I refer to your email of 9 May asking for the Scottish Government's views on the action called for in the above petition.

The petition calls for the Scottish Government to create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs) and other performance enhancing drugs (IPEDs). The petition was lodged following the admittance to hospital of a friend of the petitioner with a ruptured aorta as a result of steroid use. The petitioner also highlights the ease with which IPEDs can be obtained and the concern related to the promotion of these substances, often described as 'safe, legal and desirable', by social media influencers.

While the focus of the Scottish Government's National Mission on drugs is to reduce drug related deaths, it is also concerned with improving the lives of those impacted by drugs. We have published a National Mission plan which sets out how we will achieve this but it includes a commitment to reduce harms from the consumption of drugs.

The main drivers of the majority of issues which we face in Scotland from problem substance use come from opioids and benzodiazepines. However, it is clear that in addition to those substances, there are a wide range of others which cause harms to individuals and communities including steroids, SARMS and IPEDs among many others.

In the past the Scottish Government has funded work through the Scottish Drugs Forum (SDF) to identify the specific risks and informational needs of certain 'at-risk' groups, and this included those who engage in the use of image and performance enhancing drugs. As a result of that work, SDF were able to develop information and training resources and programmes to ensure the workforce and service

providers working with these individuals are fully trained and equipped to support their specific needs.

Following receipt of this petition, we have also followed up with SDF to inquire about this work and they have reassured us that they continue to deliver training on IPEDs as part of their sexual health and BBV (blood borne viruses) workstream, which is included in their work with vulnerable young people.

We accept that the use of these substances is not without risk, particularly for young people, and that there is evidence of increasing use in communities of IPEDs beyond elite sport. As a harm reduction measure, the Scottish Government would be supportive of increasing the awareness of Injecting Provision Services for anyone involved in the injecting of substances. We know from the evidence, and our own experience, the dangers associated with sharing needles, such as the increased likelihood of blood-borne viruses, including HIV, but also the potential increase in injury.

We are committed to ensuring that we use, and further develop, our public health surveillance data to better understand drug trends, particularly amongst younger groups, and this could be further enhanced to cover these substances. It is vital that young people receive support and treatment that meets their specific needs and at this time there isn't much available for anyone looking for support with these substances.

To identify what the specific needs of children and young people are, we have brought together a range of experts from drug and alcohol, and young people's support services, to form a multi-agency working group whose work includes the development of a set of standards which we expect local areas to have in place to support young people with their drug use.

In Spring 2023, we began engaging with young people using a co-design approach, in order to develop those standards which will be specifically tailored to meet the needs of young people. The standards should also use language that resonates with young people so that they can clearly understand what they can expect when seeking help.

We are also already taking action to provide early access to treatment for all those who need it through the development of assertive outreach services and same-day treatment, as well as increasing the capacity of residential rehabilitation services. This is backed by an investment of £250 million over the length of this parliament.

I hope this response is helpful.

Drugs Policy Division

Annexe D

Petitioner submission of 16 June 2023

PE2024/B: Create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators, and other performance enhancing drugs

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS:

- The government response focuses on HIV/BBVs and not the negative effects of IPEDs (image and performance enhancing drugs).
- Data collection, though important, will not reduce the number of IPED users.
- Their multi-agency approach does not seem to include health and fitness industry professionals.
- Though the Government highlights a co-design approach with young people, this does not explicitly include young people with a lived experience of IPED use.
- The response does not highlight any specific strategy to tackle social media influencers, or the perception that new IPEDs like SARMs are safe to use.
- With an estimated 3.3% (or ~180,000) people in Scotland who will use steroids in their life, the government response does not go far enough.

MAIN RESPONSE

I read the [Scottish Government's response](#) with interest, but feel there are a number of issues in their response that I would like to address.

To begin with, I was deeply confused by the Scottish Government's focus on HIV and other Blood Borne Viruses (BBVs) in their response. This does not relate to the primary harm caused by steroid misuse.

A 2019 Literature review¹ of 109 papers found a number of attempts to treat harms resulting from PED misuse. These included:

¹ Bates, G., Van Hout, MC., Teck, J.T.W. *et al.* Treatments for people who use anabolic androgenic steroids: a scoping review. *Harm Reduct J* **16**, 75 (2019).

- 31 papers discussing hepatic and kidney disorders
- 26 papers discussing cardiovascular disorders
- 13 papers discussing musculoskeletal disorders
- 12 papers discussing psychiatric disorders

I would highlight that despite a comprehensive review of papers discussing the harms caused by androgenic anabolic steroids, HIV and BBVs are not mentioned. I would therefore suggest the Scottish Government's response is prioritising the wrong issues in their collaboration with the SDF. Delivering this programme as part of a sexual health programme, when existing research tells us the main harms are hepatic and kidney disorders or cardiovascular disorders, is wholly inappropriate. Additionally, whilst needle sharing is a mechanism for HIV/BBV transmission, not all IPEDs involve needle use. This intervention would therefore have, at best, a minimal impact on the health and wellbeing of IPED users.

I welcome the Scottish Government's commitment to improving data collection, and would highlight that the conclusion of the aforementioned literature review highlights that:

“Evidence is urgently required to support the development of effective services for users and of evidence-based guidance and interventions to respond to users in a range of healthcare settings.”

However, data collection alone does nothing to improve the wellbeing of the approximately 3.3% (or 180,000)² of people in Scotland who will use steroids in their lifetime. Nor will an improvement in data collection inherently reduce this figure.

The Scottish Government's aim to bring together a multi-agency group of practitioners is important, but I fear it will not be truly effective without involving health and fitness practitioners such as personal trainers, organisers of body-builder tournaments, and other similar professionals. I would also encourage this group to work in partnership with the co-design group they allude to later in their response, to ensure that their approach is appropriately geared towards young people. I'd also encourage the Committee to review this group's terms of reference to ensure that they have 'teeth' and will meaningfully enact change for the benefit of IPED users.

² Sagoe D, McVeigh J, Breindahl T, Kimergard A. Synthetic growth hormone releasers detected in seized drugs: New trends in the use of drugs for performance enhancement. *Addiction*;110(2):368-9.

Whilst I welcome the Scottish Government's engagement with young people through a co-design approach, I would highlight that they do not explicitly say if or how they are engaging with those with lived experience of IPED use. I would further argue, given that some estimates of high school IPED use can reach as high as 12% of school-age boys³, this approach does not do enough to ameliorate the potentially devastating impact IPEDs could have on these young people's lives.

Lastly, I would highlight that the Government response fails to directly acknowledge the new issues being raised by SARMs. Given that these are legal (and for clarity, I am not suggesting the Scottish Government makes a section 30 order request or otherwise attempts to change this fact), many young people could be misled into believing that these are safe; or at least safe enough for them to use without serious side effects. I would encourage the Committee to question what the Scottish Government intends to do to tackle this new form of IPED, or to tackle the social media influencers touting it as a safe and effective way of improving someone's performance or image.

Ultimately, I believe the Scottish Government response shows a veneer of activity to disguise a policy of inaction, and they should be encouraged to take more significant action more urgently.

³ Boyce EG. Use and Effectiveness of Performance-Enhancing Substances. *Journal of Pharmacy Practice*. 2003; 16(1): 22-36.