

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee

14th Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Wednesday
4 October 2023

PE1986: Provide testing kits for drugs in public spaces

Petitioner	Andy Paterson on behalf of the Help Not Harm Campaign
Petition summary	Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide free testing kits for drugs in public spaces such as local pharmacies, libraries, and university buildings.
Webpage	https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE1986

Introduction

1. The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on [22 February 2023](#). At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Scottish Government.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received a new response from the Scottish Government which is set out in **Annexe C**.
4. Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
5. Further background information about this petition can be found in the [SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.
6. The Scottish Government's initial position on this petition can be found on the [petition's webpage](#).
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 164 signatures have been received on this petition.

Action

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

Clerk to the Committee

Annexe A

PE1986: Provide testing kits for drugs in public spaces

Petitioner

Andy Paterson on behalf of the Help Not Harm Campaign

Date Lodged

08/11/22

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide free testing kits for drugs in public spaces such as local pharmacies, libraries, and university buildings.

Previous action

I have contacted Jamie Hepburn MSP and Angela Constance MSP about what could be done in educational institutions towards testing kits being available in universities.

I have also campaigned on the issue locally and successfully committed the Students Union at the University of Stirling to begin to provide testing kits.

Background information

In 2020, during the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, more under 60s died of drug overdoses than COVID-19. Among those under 75s, accidental drug and alcohol deaths were the fourth biggest killer, just behind COVID, lung cancer, and heart disease.

In 2021, Scotland had 1330 drugs related deaths according to the National Records of Scotland. Although, this number has decreased from the previous year - this is nowhere near good enough.

The Scottish Drug Deaths Taskforce reported in 2022 that:

"Change is needed, but it will only be possible when we accept that this is everyone's responsibility. Any person can save a life.

They can do so through direct action like carrying and using naloxone and challenging stigma whenever it is seen."

This is not to approve drug use but to stop deaths from drugs, by checking drugs and making sure there are no substances that could cause harm. This is a harm reduction measure that is needed to stem the drug deaths in Scotland.

Annexe B

Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE1986 on 22nd February 2023

The Deputy Convener: PE1986, on the provision of testing kits for drugs in public spaces, has been lodged by Andy Paterson on behalf of the help not harm campaign. The petition calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to provide free testing kits for drugs in public spaces such as local pharmacies, libraries and university buildings.

The SPICe briefing for the petition highlights recommendations of the Scottish Drug Deaths Taskforce, which states that drug testing should be supported and that current drug-checking facilities should be reviewed to ensure that they are open, transparent and accessible. The briefing points to a research project on licensed drug-checking facilities, which was due to report in January 2023, and another related project, which is due to conclude in March 2023.

The Scottish Government's submission shares its reservations about the simplicity of the testing kits proposed in the petition. It highlights the planned establishment of drug-checking services in Dundee, Aberdeen and Glasgow through upcoming pilots. That approach includes laboratory testing and links to other drugs services and provides wider public health information about the drugs in circulation.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action?

Fergus Ewing: I suggest that we write to the Scottish Government to ask for a summary of the evaluation report, for the programme of implementation of licensed drug-checking facilities, and an update on the status of its licence application to the Home Office for the establishment of drug-checking facilities. We should also ask who the target service users of the facilities pilot will be and request information on how health boards will engage with those groups. Finally, we can ask what considerations have been given to ensure that drug-checking facilities will be made accessible to people who are not already in touch with other health services, especially young adults, as highlighted by the Scottish Drug Death Taskforce.

The Deputy Convener: Do members agree with that suggestion?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C

Scottish Government submission of 27 March 2023

PE1986/B: Provide testing kits for drugs in public spaces

The Drug Checking research project, funded by the Drug Deaths Taskforce, had originally been due to complete in March 2023 but has now been extended until May 2023, following which we expect to receive their final 3 reports which will be published if accepted by peer review. The reports will focus on the use of self-testing kits.

However, detailed plans for each city's Point of Care testing facilities have been submitted to the Scottish Government along with information about how they might operate. This identifies each city's plans of work to the point of submission of licence applications.

In advance of the research work concluding, an Implementation Group has now been established and the process and timings for implementing drug checking in Scotland will be a priority for that group. This group will draw upon the expertise and experience of members in order to progress this work as quickly as possible. It is important to note, however, that there is no specific timeframe from the period of application submission to the licence being issued as this is a matter for the Home Office.

The Drug Checking Research project has already published two papers, linked below:

- [Challenges for Drug Checking Services in Scotland: a qualitative exploration of police perceptions](#)
- [A Realist Review of How Community-Based Drug Checking Services Could be Designed and Implemented to Promote Engagement of People who Use Drugs.](#)

It is important to note that the licence applications for drug checking facilities are not being submitted by the Scottish Government, rather these are being taken forward by leads from each of the three pilot cities involved.

Each city is in the process of developing their licence application but in order to proceed with the submission to the Home Office there are particular requirements relating to their chosen sites which each area must fulfil. These include carrying out building renovations alongside security and equipment upgrades. These modifications are required to be completed prior to the submission of an application to the Home Office. It is anticipated that applications for two of the services will be completed and submitted by the end of April with the final application expected to be submitted before the summer.

Ideally, in order to make these facilities as available as possible to people using substances we would be able to provide mobile testing sites, festival and front of house testing at nightlife venues as well as testing facilities within existing services and stand alone drug checking. However, due to licensing requirements from the Home Office we are limited as to what we are able to proceed with. In discussions with the UK Government they have been clear as to the kind of facility they would consider appropriate for providing this type of service and as a result licence applications will be submitted for facilities which will be fixed sites and which will be predominately focussed on people with problem substance use.

This is not what the research has indicated as being the optimum type of service but, due to the need to apply for Home Office licences, we are hampered to an extent in what we can provide.

Initial testing will be conducted at the city sites with information being issued to the client alongside harm reduction advice, but the sample will also then be sent to the National Hub situated within Dundee University. Here the sample will be further analysed and will have potential to provide real-time information about drug trends and possible dangerous substances which are in circulation. This vital information will be linked and shared with RADAR, the Public Health Scotland early warning system. This will enable vital information to be disseminated to the correct services, issuing alerts to warn those people who use drugs with essential information.

Each of the Point of Care sites will be housed within an already established facility. The facilities have links to other health services. Dundee and Aberdeen will be situated within already established Drug and Alcohol services that have existing links in assessment and preparation for detox/rehabilitation, supporting the maintenance of abstinence, dried blood spot testing and overdose prevention and

Naloxone training, as well as further links to one to one support and recovery agencies. Integration into existing services has been identified as important for engagement with other services and allows relationships to be built upon with staff which are vitally important for people who use drugs.