

Increase in alcohol-related deaths in Wales – new report shows

The 2017 annual report for the Welsh Government's 10 year substance misuse strategy, Working Together to Reduce Harm, shows that while there has been an increase in both alcohol-related and drug-related deaths, good progress has been made on providing quicker treatment.

An increasing number of people referred for treatment are receiving support within the 20 day waiting time target. Treatment outcomes are also improving, with 77% of people reported a reduction in their substance misuses following treatment in 2016/17, compared to 69.2% in 2012/13.

The report shows nearly half of people assessed with a substance misuse problem in Wales were suffering from problematic alcohol use. The report also highlights that in 2016, 20% of adults (or 1 in 5) reported drinking more than the UK Chief Medical Officers' recommended 14 units a week limit for alcohol consumption.

Health Secretary, Vaughan Gething said the new figures show there is an urgent need to address the affordability of alcohol, as part of wider efforts to tackle alcohol-related harm.

The Welsh Government recently unveiled a new Bill to introduce a minimum price for the sale of alcohol, as part of efforts to tackle the availability of strong, cheap alcohol.

There has also been an increase in drug use and drug-related deaths. Estimates of problematic use of opioids, cocaine and crack, amphetamine and new psychoactive substances indicate that there are around 49,370 individuals in Wales, aged 15-64 years who are using these types of drugs, including those in contact with health and criminal justice services.

In 2016, there were 271 drug poisoning deaths (involving both legal and illegal drugs) in Wales. Of these, 192 were drug misuse deaths (involving illegal drugs).

The Welsh Government is stepping up efforts to tackle avoidable drug-related deaths by initiating new awareness campaigns and by working closely with local harm reduction groups to shape further action to reduce drug deaths in Wales.

Alongside a range of other interventions, the Welsh Government is continuing to work with partners on developing the Take Home Naloxone programme – a drug which temporarily reverses the effects of opiate overdose. Since 2009, a total of over 15,000 kits have been distributed throughout Wales with 1,654 reported uses. Naloxone is available in every Community Drug Treatment Service and in all prisons in Wales.

Health Secretary, Vaughan Gething said:

“Substance misuse is a major health issue that affects the well-being of individuals, families and communities across the length and breadth of Wales.

“The Welsh Government invests almost £50m a year in tackling the harms associated within substance misuse. But while we invest and work hard in reducing harm, we need to take additional action to prevent that harm happening in the first place.

“Preventing future substance misuse is as important as treating the established problem. We know that the harm associated with alcohol misuse in particular is a pressing concern and that’s why there is now an urgent need to tackle the affordability of cheap, strong alcohol, through introducing a minimum unit price for the sale of alcohol.

“This report shows, however, that when people need help with their substance misuse problem they can access it. I’m pleased there has been a significant improvement in the number of people with a substance misuse problem being seen within the 20 day target time, while more people are telling us they’re successfully reducing their dependence on alcohol or drugs following treatment.

“But we’re not complacent. Our aim is to ensure that people in Wales are aware of the dangers and the impact of substance misuse to enable them to make informed choices and to know where they can seek out help and support – because each death caused by alcohol or drug misuse is one that can be and should be avoided.”