

# New cross-government unit to tackle drug misuse following major independent review

A new drugs unit will be set up to help end illegal drug-related illness and deaths, the government has announced today.

The Joint Combating Drugs Unit will bring together multiple government departments, including the Department of Health and Social Care, Home Office, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Department for Work and Pensions, Department for Education and Ministry of Justice – to help tackle drugs misuse across society.

This joint approach recognises that treatment alone is not enough and wider support, including with housing and employment, is essential to aid recovery.

There are now an estimated 300,000 opiate or crack users in England, and around one million people using cocaine per year. Drug misuse poisoning deaths are at a record high, having increased by nearly 80% since 2012.

It comes as Professor Dame Carol Black today publishes the second part of her Independent Review of Drugs, which sets out more than 30 recommendations to government to help overcome the harm drugs have caused to individuals, families and communities across the country. The report calls for significant investment in the drug treatment and recovery system so that more people can get the support they need.

Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid said:

When I first commissioned Dame Carol to do this review as Home Secretary, we knew the sale and use of drugs drives serious violence and homelessness but this review shows that the health implications are just as devastating.

Tackling this issue requires strong collaboration across government and the new specialist Joint Combating Drugs Unit will help us to do just that.

I would like to thank Professor Dame Carol for her dedication to this critical work and for producing this accomplished review. We will look closely at these recommendations and publish an initial response shortly on the urgent action we can take to turn the tide on drug-related deaths and get more people access to higher quality services.

The review recommends the government must work together to improve treatment, employment, housing support and the way people with addictions are treated in the criminal justice system. It recommends addiction be recognised as a chronic health condition, requiring long-term follow-up.

The report says there's an urgent need to reinforce the treatment workforce to raise standards and restore morale, while national leadership needs to be strengthened to reduce supply and help people get off and stay off drugs.

Professor Dame Carol Black said:

Drug deaths are at an all-time high and drug addiction fuels many costly social problems, including homelessness and rising demands on children's social care.

The government faces an unavoidable choice: invest in tackling the problem or keep paying for the consequences. A whole-system approach is needed and this part of my review offers concrete proposals, deliverable within this Parliament, to achieve this.

The rise in drug misuse poisoning deaths has been driven by increases in heroin deaths which have doubled in this time and other substances such as cocaine have seen notable recent increases. The proportion of 11-15 year olds who use drugs has increased in recent years with one in three 15-year-olds saying they took drugs in the last year.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

Drugs devastate lives, ruin families, damage communities, and see ruthless criminal gangs cashing in on the most vulnerable in society.

We will not let this continue and are cracking down on criminals, preventing drug misuse in our communities, and supporting people through treatment and recovery.

I welcome this landmark review by Dame Carol and the Government remains absolutely committed to addressing this issue. We are taking action to deliver lasting change through the new Joint Combating Drugs Unit – which will bring together all parts of government to tackle the scourge of illegal drugs – as well as investing £148million this year to cut drugs crime and improve treatment and recovery services.

Rosanna O' Connor, Director of Drugs, Alcohol, Tobacco and Justice at Public Health England said:

Drug treatment services save lives and help many people recover from drug dependence, improving not only their lives but those of their families, their communities and wider society. We know treatment works and so it's essential that everyone can easily get the treatment they need.

We welcome Dame Carol Black's recommendation for increased funding that is protected and prioritised for treatment and recovery services to ensure that everyone can get the support they need to move forward with their lives.

There are 32 recommendations made in the report, including that the government invests more in treatment and recovery support, and appoints a single, responsible minister on drug policy to hold the government to account. Its recommendations include:

- Reforming central leadership to set clear targets for the government through a new government unit headed up by a minister
- Increasing funding for drug treatment in the community by over £550 million over five years.
- Requiring local authorities to use drug treatment funding for this purpose.
- Introducing a national Commissioning Quality Standard to ensure comprehensive treatment services are available, working with health, housing and employment support, and criminal justice partners when commissioning services.
- Taking urgent action to restore the morale of the workforce, including through employing more staff to work in this area so people can receive a higher quality service.
- Commissioning a new strategy to increase the number of professionally qualified drug treatment staff including psychiatrists, psychologists, therapists, nurses and social workers.
- Developing and implementing an action plan to improve mental health treatment of people with drug dependence.
- Taking action to divert drug users from the criminal justice system into treatment, and maximise the use of community sentence treatment requirements.
- Ensuring everyone leaving prison has ID and a bank account, ensuring that prisoners with drug dependence can access and receive drug treatment in the community as soon as possible after release.

The report highlights two welcome developments in the efforts to tackle drug-related issues, with the £80 million additional funding for drug treatment in 2021/22, as part of a broader package on crime, and the additional £126 million over three years invested into drug and alcohol treatment for people

who sleep rough.

Professor Dame Carol Black was appointed to lead the review following her initial report commissioned by the Home Office, which looked at the challenges around drug supply and demand. It found drug deaths are at an all-time high, the market has become much more violent and drugs are costing society billions of pounds every year. In response to this the former ministers commissioned a further review focusing on prevention, treatment and recovery services.

Systematically addressing the causes of preventable deaths and ill health is a priority for this government, and this year the government announced that the new Office for Health Promotion which will spearhead these efforts to level up society, while making the largest increase to drug treatment funding for fifteen years, with £80 million of new investment.

Throughout the last year providers have continued to support and treat people misusing drugs and alcohol and we are supporting local authorities, who know their communities best, with over £3.3 billion in 2021-2022 to spend on public health services, including drug and alcohol treatment.

Building on recent successes in tackling county lines gangs, the government is doubling the funding available to law enforcement to take down and bring to justice county lines gangs and drug kingpins. Since 2019, our investment has seen more than 780 lines closed, over 5,100 arrests, £2.9m in cash and significant quantities of drugs seized, and more than 1,200 vulnerable people safeguarded.

A further £28 million is being invested into piloting Project ADDER – a new intensive approach to tackling drug misuse, which combines targeted and tougher policing with enhanced treatment and recovery services. Project ADDER (which stands for Addiction, Diversion, Disruption, Enforcement and Recovery) will bring together partners including the police, local councils and health services and run for three financial years in five areas with some of the highest rates of drug misuse: Blackpool, Hastings, Middlesbrough, Norwich and Swansea Bay.