

Essential reading for the London drug and alcohol sector

“Statistics-Driven” DIP Expansion Questioned

Tough Choices, the Home Office’s latest initiative to cut drug-related crime, has got off to a good start, according to Drugs Intervention Programme (DIP) providers in London. But many question whether its current focus on testing and assessing huge numbers of Class A drugs users in custody, will result in significantly more people in treatment, and if it does, whether the treatment system can cope with the influx.

One DIP manager told *LDAN News*: “Things have got off to a good start. There’s been a lot more positive test results, and we’ve done a lot more assessments, but before we start clapping ourselves on the back, we need to remember just because someone has an assessment doesn’t mean they are going to stop using drugs.” Another said: “The question is, is this all about assessments and ticking boxes rather than the quality of care people are getting? What’s the point in assessing 1000 people if only 20 end up in treatment?”

Tough Choices, the name given to the latest DIP expansion, covers a range of initiatives. Since the start of April, all those arrested for trigger offences in high crime boroughs, including 22 in London, face a mandatory drugs test and those who test positive have to undergo an assessment with a drugs worker. People who refuse can be imprisoned, whether or not they are charged with the original offence. Restrictions on bail - implemented across all London boroughs from the same date - allows magistrates refuse someone who tests positive for Class A drugs bail, unless they agree to attend an assessment and any follow up treatment recommended.

The Home Office believes that Tough Choices will direct significant numbers of

drug users caught up in the criminal justice system into treatment. When piloted, it says drug testing on arrest resulted in a 50 per cent increase in the numbers of drug misusers entering treatment, and it has set a target of “driving around 1000 drug misusing offenders into treatment every week by 2008” - a doubling of the current numbers.

Feedback from the first few weeks of its operation, suggests that testing on arrest is capturing many more Class A drug users, many new to the treatment system. While pointing out that is very early days, one DIP provider said, a significant number were “treatment naive”. There were also more primary crack and cocaine users, recreational users and younger users than previously.

But despite the fact that the measures do seem to be reaching new clients, providers still raised significant concerns:

- Too much attention and effort is being put into assessing drug users on entry to the criminal justice system and not enough to what happens them after that. Critics point out that the same thing happened in prisons several years ago when CARAT workers were given a target to assess large numbers of new inmates. They did, but the support given to drug users often stopped there.

The target was subsequently changed.

- The process is too statistics-driven. Drugs workers have a raft of tough targets to meet and cannot afford to let anyone with a positive drugs test to leave custody before being assessed. According to one worker this can result in “near panic” when the team is told of a

Tough Talk but can Tough Choices deliver?



Drugs Minister Paul Goggins says drug testing on arrest and restrictions on bail, which have been “switched on” across most London boroughs, including the City of London, will get more drug users into treatment

positive drugs test. The danger here as another observer said “ is that what gets measured gets done” but there is a reduction in the quality of the work. Another worker said the statistics-driven approach meant that drug users arrested for non-trigger offences, or those who tested negative but insist they use drugs, could be left without help.

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