

Drugs Deaths Taskforce

Summary and Recommendations

This paper seeks the views of the Health and Social Care Board on COSLA's involvement in the Scottish Government's 'Drug Deaths Taskforce' and wider policy work surrounding the recent increase in drug-related deaths. Members are asked to consider how COSLA can make the most meaningful and effective contribution to this high-profile and politically sensitive policy area and to agree the policy lines proposed below.

It is anticipated that papers will be taken to Leaders and the Board on this topic over the coming months and the work will be fast-moving. With this in mind, this paper presents elected members with an opportunity to shape COSLA's initial engagement with the Taskforce.

This paper invites Members to:

- i. Consider the drug deaths statistics in Scotland and discuss the contribution Local Government can make to preventing drug related deaths;
- ii. Consider the terms of reference of the Scottish Government's Drug Deaths Taskforce and the broader policy context; and;
- iii. Agree the proposed policy position and agree that COSLA officers make a constructive contribution to this work.

References

- No previous reports on this topic.

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Drugs Deaths Taskforce

Purpose

1. This paper seeks the views of the Health and Social Care Board on COSLA's involvement in the Scottish Government's 'Drug Deaths Taskforce' and wider policy work surrounding the recent increase in drug-related deaths. Members are asked to consider how COSLA can make the most meaningful and effective contribution to this high-profile and politically sensitive policy area and to agree the policy lines proposed below.
2. It is anticipated that papers will be taken to Leaders and the Board on this topic over the coming months and the work will be fast-moving. With this in mind, this paper presents elected members to shape COSLA's initial engagement with the Taskforce.

Current position

3. Figures [published](#) on 16 July 2019 showed that 1,187 drug-related deaths were registered in Scotland in 2018, an increase of 253 (27%) on the previous year and the largest number ever recorded in Scotland. These figures are based on a standard, recognised definition of a drug-related death.¹
4. Members will be aware of the significant media attention the release of these figures attracted and, in many cases, will be closely involved in local work to prevent harm from drugs and alcohol. Scottish Government were in touch with COSLA at an officer level in advance of the publication to make us aware that a Taskforce would be established and that COSLA would be invited to play a significant role.
5. The 'Drug Deaths Taskforce' has been established by Joe FitzPatrick MSP, Minister for Public Health and Sport, supported by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice with the central aim of "identifying measures to improve health by preventing and reducing drug use, harm and related deaths". It will examine the key drivers of drug deaths, and advise on further changes in practice, or in the law that could help to save lives and reduce harm. Its ambition is to work as an action and outcomes focused group to achieve this goal, consistent with the "[Rights, Respect, Recovery](#)" strategy. The Taskforce's [remit](#) includes the following:
 - Publish evidence of the triggers of drug deaths and what we know about prevention.
 - Collate, publish and spread good practice.
 - Identify specific barriers in the planning, commissioning and delivery of addiction services in Scotland.
 - "Review whether the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 affects the provision of a strengthened and consistent public health approach to drug use, recognising that this is reserved to the UK Parliament and any changes will require the agreement of the UK Parliament."
 - Identify the extent to which the availability of appropriate programmes and treatment options limit the use of diversion from the criminal justice system.

¹ A death is counted as 'drug related' if: a) the underlying cause of death was coded to one of a certain specified categories of mental and behavioural disorders due to psychoactive substance use; or, b) the underlying cause was coded to one of certain specified categories of poisoning (or self-poisoning) and a drug listed under the Misuse of Drugs Act was known to be present in the body at the time of death.

- Identify the full range of support services which help to reduce harm and identify deficiencies in the delivery framework, availability and provision of such services.
 - Make recommendations for changes in current health and social care practice.
6. The Taskforce will consider “the experience of people who use drugs and their interaction with all stages of the health and justice system”. It will be chaired by Prof Catriona Matheson (University of Stirling) who is Convenor of the Drugs Research Network Scotland (DRNS), based at the University of Stirling.

Wider Policy Context and COSLA Involvement

7. Scotland continues to face significant challenges relating to the use of illicit drugs including rising numbers of drugs deaths. Tackling this issue, including reducing the number of deaths is an important public health priority ([Scotland's Public Health Priorities](#), Priority 4: *A Scotland where we reduce the use of and harm from alcohol, tobacco and other drugs*).
8. Although “Rights, Respect and Recovery” is not a joint strategy, COSLA and Scottish Government are jointly signed up to the Public Health Priorities and have been undertaking joint work on a revised MOU for Alcohol and Drug Partnerships. COSLA is also a member of the Scottish Government’s Health and Justice Board and is involved with the Scottish Government on mental health policy (in particular the Children and Young People’s Mental Health Programme Board and the National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group).
9. These areas of collaboration can inform future work with Scottish Government and other partners to reduce drug-related deaths however there is not yet a shared understanding between Ministers and COSLA as to which practical steps should be prioritised.

Proposed COSLA position

10. The Health and Social Care Board are asked to consider the information above and provide a view on how COSLA should position itself in this policy area to make the most positive and effective contribution we can to the Taskforce. The proposed COSLA position is as follows:

- i. Officer engagement: COSLA will identify an officer(s) to attend the Taskforce and contribute to the work of the Taskforce constructively, reporting to Leaders and the Health and Social Care Board and Communities Board as appropriate. COSLA will work with officer groups to take advice on how the Taskforce can enhance local efforts to prevent drug-related deaths.
- ii. Political engagement: It is not yet clear how Ministers envisage COSLA’s political input. The COSLA Health and Social Care Spokesperson has a meeting with Mr FitzPatrick scheduled for September; the Ministerial Strategic Group is also a forum in which joint COSLA/SG decisions can be made.

It is proposed that COSLA maintains close links to the Taskforce and is a supportive member/partner and that COSLA’s position should be that any decisions or recommendations pertaining to Local Government are developed with and approved by COSLA. However, it is also proposed that COSLA allows for ‘space’ between Scottish Government and COSLA to develop their own clear policy lines and public messaging (i.e. *not* seek to share political ownership of the Taskforce). This would also allow COSLA to work autonomously to progress its own policy objectives where appropriate.

- iii. Proposed policy lines: In the first instance, the Board is invited to agree and make any additions to the following policy lines which COSLA will take in the Taskforce and any political engagements:
- Local Government and the network of support provided by local partners (including non-statutory services in particular) are fundamental to preventing drug-related deaths.
 - The Taskforce should focus on early support and prevention and on taking practical, evidence-based action that will have an impact on outcomes rather than seeking to overly 'medicalise' this issue. COSLA will focus on areas of policy and legislation which are in the gift of Scottish Government and Local Government.
 - To support the Scottish Government's underlying message that drug-related deaths should be treated as a public health issue. In particular, this should include tackling poverty and economic deprivation as an aggravating factor.
 - To be clear with Scottish Government that cuts to Local Government core budgets must be considered a contributing factor to the increase in drug-related deaths and make best use of the increasingly robust evidence to back this up.
 - Emphasise that the Scottish Government must demonstrate a meaningful investment in the Public Health Priorities and preventative services.

Next steps

11. COSLA will attend the first meeting of the Drug Deaths Taskforce on Tuesday 17th September and will reflect the position of the Health and Social Care Board. Further papers will be taken to the Board and to COSLA Leaders where appropriate and COSLA will also take soundings from an officer advisory group it is establishing with membership from across the Local Government family.

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