

## **Guidance from National Police Chiefs Council**

### **Drugs, alcohol and festival planning in 2025**

We have pulled together this short guide to planning to support local authorities, police forces and their partners.

We have sought to focus here only on the drug and alcohol-specific issues, but event planning and licensing will cover many other issues that have some impact on drugs and alcohol.

#### **1. Local consultation and planning**

UK event promoters must already follow existing legislative procedures and event safety standards. They need to work with the local licensing authority and submit operating schedule and event management plans. A comprehensive risk assessment and risk management plan will consider all aspects and implications related to the health and wellbeing of attendees, including managing, and limiting the exposure to risk of alcohol and other drug use. Event planning and risk assessment should be done in close cooperation with the local authority, police force, health services and others (often through a Safety Advisory Group).

#### **2. Welfare provision and chill out spaces**

Welfare services operate best as part of a co-ordinated team, including event control, medical services, stewards, and security. Representation and input from local drug services are useful to provide local knowledge and context but welfare provision should usually be overseen and coordinated by a specialist and experienced welfare provider.

Welfare provision offers a designated onsite space at festivals and events for attendees to access support about a range of issues, including alcohol, drugs, mental wellbeing, and sexual health. It provides a safe and quiet space where event attendees can seek supervised relief or recuperation.

Welfare services can train security staff in how to respond to drug/alcohol related emergencies.

#### **3. Harm reduction**

Controlled drugs are illegal because they are harmful. Tragically, deaths have occurred because of drug use at festivals; police, festival organisers and partners

should do all that we can to prevent drug use at these events.

Organisers' first objective should be to avoid or eliminate risk as much as is practicable. But where elimination is not possible, efforts should be made to reduce the exposure to potential risk.

Harm reduction strategies seek to create safer settings and encourage safer behaviours. Welfare services and organisers can work together to implement some of the below measures:

- promoting safer attendee behaviour through education, support, and
- messaging
- promoting safer event environments
- reducing the impact of drug-related incidents and harms through appropriate onsite medical and harm reduction services

Event organisers should work with partners to include harm reduction messaging before and during the event.

### **Before the event**

Harm reduction messaging should begin before the event takes place and should provide information about onsite support and safer behaviour and encourage attendees to seek help.

Messaging should be tailored to the event and its audience and updated to reflect changing patterns of drug use.

Event managers should work with their media teams and stakeholders to develop evidence-based pre-event messaging that uses available communication channels, including:

- the main event website
- social media
- email communications
- messaging in welcome packs, printed on the ticket or on other promotional material

### **During the event**

Harm reduction information and real time warnings of potential onsite substances of concern should be delivered throughout the duration of the event. Some attendees may already be under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs when they arrive. Safety

messages should be concise and repeated often. Information about onsite services, and how to find and access them, should be clear, visible, and readily available.

Clear signage and service branding should be in place and organisers should also ensure that the location of services is clearly marked and identified on site maps or other event information.

Harm reduction messaging strategies during the event could include:

- harm reduction messages on festival merchandising, tickets, posters and digital boards/screens
- welfare staff roaming to engage with attendees at chill out areas, campsites, outside the welfare area, during roaming water distribution and at designated chill out zones
- notifications via any festival app or mobile broadcast system
- putting notices up at entrances and exits, campsites, water points and in and around toilet facilities
- real time alerts displayed on digital screens if substances of concern are identified by police, onsite testing or welfare services.

#### **4. Access to drinking water**

High temperatures can lead to dehydration, heat exhaustion and harm, all made worse using alcohol or other drugs.

Plentiful free water needs to be made available without long queuing in direct sunlight. Shade and shelter from the sun or heat should also be available alongside cooling measures such as misting tents and industrial fans.

Event organisers could also provide additional shaded, quieter, or cooler ‘chill out’ areas across the site and away from busy areas and alcohol sales points. Such spaces should be overseen by event security and be visited regularly by roaming welfare outreach workers.

#### **5. Management of those under the influence of drugs or alcohol**

All staff should have been trained to recognise and respond to drug and alcohol related harm or distress. The safety of anyone under the influence of drink or drugs must be at the forefront of any consideration about whether to remove them from the event. It may be more appropriate and less risky to move them to the welfare or onsite medical area. Anyone who presents with signs of a serious drug-related

illness, including those with severe agitation or behavioural issues, should be transferred as quickly and safely as possible to the onsite medical area for assessment.

If the health of anyone under the care of the welfare service deteriorates there should be an agreed, clear, and effective handover protocol between welfare and medical teams.

Those attending events may need support for mental health issues, compounded at events taking place over several days or where individuals may be deprived of sleep or have used psychoactive drugs over a sustained period and may be experiencing an emotional episode or feeling disorientated.

## **6. Emerging drug threats**

Police forces, public health and their partners should be alive to new and emerging drug threats, which include the presence of synthetic opioids within the UK drugs market. Synthetic opioids currently largely comprise a group of drugs called nitazenes, which are more potent than heroin.

Naloxone remains an effective, life-saving tool in the face of a synthetic opioid overdose. Police and health partners should work closely with event organisers to ensure that naloxone is readily available as part of their harm reduction and first aid measures.

While nitazenes have been most commonly found in heroin, they have also been detected in other drugs perhaps more likely to be taken at festivals, including benzodiazepine and opioid tablets, and ketamine.

The Government has recently published recommendations to local partners to help strengthen their preparedness for an incident involving an evolving drug threat such as synthetic opioids. This report can be found here:

Local preparedness for synthetic opioids in England - GOV.UK

Other relevant guidance provided by OHID that local partners should consider:

- Guidance for local areas on planning to deal with potent synthetic opioids - GOV.UK

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fentanyl-preparing-for-a-future-threat/guidance-for-local-areas-on-planning-to-deal-with-fentanyl-or-another-potent-opioid>

- Issuing public health alerts about drugs - GOV.UK

## **7. Drug testing on site**

It is important to point out the NPCC position on front of house (FOH) and back of house drug testing (BOH).

Community based/front-of-house testing, is whereby individuals submit a sample of their drugs for testing after which they are told the contents of the drug usually alongside health advice which aims to reduce harm, change behaviour and signpost to further support or treatment.

Back-of-house drug testing involves testing seized, found or surrendered drugs, but do not return the drugs to the individual or give individualised information on the content of the drugs back to the user. Instead, test results are generally shared among relevant stakeholders such as policing for intelligence purposes and on-site or local medical teams. Test results can also be used to enable localised public alerts if toxic or extremely dangerous drugs are detected and believed to be in circulation.

First and foremost, decisions around the use of FOH and BOH testing are not policing decisions; drug checking and drug testing processes should not be commissioned or led by police and a decision on their use at any event should be made by the event organisers following consultation with a safety advisory group.

Any drug testing requires a Home Office licence, without which staff carrying out testing may be committing an offence.

### **Back of House Testing**

NPCC recognises the importance of harm reduction measures and the value that back of house testing has. An effective back of house testing regime can support and increase public safety, potentially reduce safeguarding concerns, and provide valuable intelligence that would not ordinarily come to our notice. Whilst it is not the responsibility of the police to deliver this, planners should feel able to discuss this tactic with event organisers and planners.

While BOH testing is an effective harm reduction tool it is important to ensure that any messages communicated to users do not condone drug use or give any perception that illicit drugs can be taken safely.

Organisations wishing to deliver BOH drug testing services can apply for a licence and

timely applications to the Home Office are encouraged to enable the timely processing of licences.

### **Front of House Testing**

The Home Office does not license ‘front of house’ drug testing for recreational users. Any such service would therefore be unlawful and not supported by NPCC.

Police should not support a “tolerance zone” and any identified criminality should be dealt with fairly, consistently, and transparently in line with local policy.

### **Test strips**

The supply to festival attendees of drug testing strips does not require a licence but needs to be approached with caution. Test strips may indicate the presence of one or more specified drugs and enable someone to decide not to use or to start with a very low dose. They can trigger useful conversations and thinking about risks and how to mitigate them.

However, information from some of the manufacturers and suppliers makes clear the limitations of test strips:

- They will not detect drug concentrations below specified limits or may fail to detect a drug that is present (so-called false negative).
- They may not detect all variations of a drug type.
- They may not be used correctly or may fail if the drug doesn’t dissolve properly, or other substances interfere with the test.
- They do not indicate the presence of potentially harmful drugs other than those being tested for.
- They do not indicate the quantity or purity of a detected drug.

Test strips therefore cannot indicate whether the sample tested would or would not cause harm or possible overdose.

The efficacy of test strips may be improved by ensuring the drug solution being tested is sufficiently diluted: use the micro-scoop provided with the strips to add one level scoop of drug powder to 5ml water – that’s about the size of half a matchstick head of powder in one full teaspoon of water.

## **8. Spiking**

Although numbers remain low, over recent seasons we have seen reports of spiking incidents at festivals. Drink spiking has been the most common method, but we have also

seen incidents of both needle and vape spiking. All festival staff should be vigilant to this threat. The festivals and events sector have been proactive in this space and a range of preventative measures (e.g. drink covers, bottle stops, safe spaces etc) and messaging has been introduced. We encourage festival organisers to continue this proactive approach and encourage early reporting and testing when incidents become known. Based on an evidence review, the forensic testing window for spiking incidents has been reduced to 4 days which reinforces the need for testing at the earliest opportunity.

The NPPC is conducting research on urine testing kits for spiking. The first phase of that research is complete, and findings confirm that commercially available urine testing kits should **not** be relied upon due to the limited range of drugs that they can detect and the efficacy of them. Please encourage anybody who has been spiked to report to the police so approved testing can be conducted.

Advice and information pages on spiking, along with an online reporting tool can be found online at [www.police.uk/spiking](http://www.police.uk/spiking).

## **9. Resources**

For organisers:

- Festival Safe website, supported by RSPH, [www.festivalsafe.com/information/drugs-alcohol](http://www.festivalsafe.com/information/drugs-alcohol)
- Purple Guide to health, safety and welfare at music and other events, [www.thepurpleguide.co.uk](http://www.thepurpleguide.co.uk) (subscription-only)

For festival goers:

- FRANK, [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)
- Festival Survival Guide, [www.eventwelfare.co.uk/festival-survival-guide](http://www.eventwelfare.co.uk/festival-survival-guide)