

Preventing harm from drugs at festivals

Introduction

Data on the prevalence of drug use at festivals is limited but suggest that it can be widespread and normalised. It will never be safe to use drugs but there are measures that can be taken to mitigate some of the risks involved. This briefing paper provides an overview of good practice (1) that can be adopted in festivals to reduce drug-related harm.

Local consultation, planning & responsibilities.

- UK event promoters must already follow existing legislative procedures and event safety standards.
- Large, planned events should approach their District lower tier authority to discuss their event and participate in an Event Safety Advisory Group (ESAG). An ESAG is usually co-ordinated by the District Local Authority and made up of representatives from emergency services, County Council Emergency Planning and Public Health, the event organiser and other relevant organisations.
- It is the responsibility of the festival organiser to ensure that festival goers are safe and the harm from alcohol and drugs is minimised.

Water provision & overheating

- Water provision plays a vital role in preventing drug related dehydration and overheating.
- 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.
- 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.

Harm Reduction & Staff Training

- Festival organisers should take steps to ensure harm reduction information is widely promoted before and during the festival.
- Harm reduction messages are more likely to be favourably received by existing drug users than abstinence-based health promotion messages
- Harm reduction advice should include the importance of drinking water, warnings about overheating, which drugs should never be mixed, the strength of pills in circulation and the risk of blood borne viruses from sharing snorting paraphernalia.
- All staff should have been trained to recognise and respond to drug and alcohol related harm or distress.

Drug Testing

- Testing can be either back-of-house (seized or amnesty bin drugs are tested) or front-of house (individual festival goers submit their drugs for testing and receive direct information and advice). In both cases, the findings can be relayed to all festival goers to encourage them to reduce risks. Both forms of testing also require Home Office licensing.
- It also provides opportunities to deliver harm reduction messaging and to issue warnings when adulterated or high strength drugs are identified (2).
- Fast, reliable testing at festivals is challenging and can never provide complete assurance however results from a drug testing pilot undertaken by the Loop in 2016, suggest almost one in five users opted to have their drugs destroyed, immediately and one in six said they would moderate their behaviour, reducing the prevalence of potentially more harmful substances circulating on site (3).

Welfare Provision

- Welfare provision offers a designated onsite safe 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 volunteers can help with information gathering and providing psychological support and are well placed to provide harm reduction advice and liaise with the onsite medical team.
- Provision of drugs outreach workers from local drug treatment services can fulfil various roles including the provision of harm reduction information. Signposting information to drug treatment services should be available. The local substance misuse treatment service for North East Lincolnshire is We Are With You <https://www.wearewithyou.org.uk/services/north-east-lincolnshire/>

References

1. Drugs, alcohol and festival planning in 2021, Joint letter from Public Health England and National Police Chiefs Council.
2. Royal Society for Public Health. Drug safety at festivals and night clubs. Available at <https://www.rsph.org.uk/our-work/policy/drugs/drug-safety-testing-at-festivals-and-night-clubs.html>
3. Measham, F. (2018) 'Drug safety testing, disposals and dealing in an English field: Exploring the operational and behavioural outcomes of the UK's first onsite 'drug checking' service', forthcoming in International Journal of Drug Policy Drugs, alcohol and festival planning