

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. The risk of drug harm is especially true as we face an increasing threat from synthetic opioids, which have been increasingly reported in other drugs that might be more likely to be used festivals.

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 that can be adopted in festivals to reduce drug-related harm. Event organisers are encouraged to put measures in place for both festival attendees and Festival Staff.

Local consultation, planning and 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 a Safety Advisory Group (SAG). The North Devon SAG is co-ordinated by the District Council and made up of representatives from emergency services, Highways and District Authorities.
- 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 and overheating

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

Harm reduction and 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 for drugs should include;
 - Try to **avoid using substances alone**.
If you cannot avoid using alone tell a friend when, what and where that you will be using so they can respond in an emergency; make sure they can reach you quickly.
Get the Buddy Up App from your App store and use it when you are about to use drugs; especially if you intend to use alone.
 - **Start low go slow**.
Use small amounts and spread out the time between doses so you can feel the full effects before taking more.
 - **Avoid Mixing Substances**
avoid mixing with other drugs, alcohol or prescription medication as this increases the risk of overdose.
 - **Tolerance can change over time**
Use less when you have been sick or haven't used – even a few days of abstinence can lower your tolerance (meaning a lower amount can put you at increased risk of overdose).
 - **Carry Naloxone and ask others to also**.
Together can provide it and train you and others on how to use it. Drop in or call 0800 233 5444 (Monday to Friday 9am – 5pm)
 - **Seek support**
For support or advice about accessing treatment please contact Together drug & alcohol service 0800 233 5444 (Monday to Friday 9m – 5pm)
Samaritans are there to listen; add their number to your mobile phone 116 123
 - **Do not share equipment**
Sharing equipment increases risk of blood borne viruses such as Hep C, infections such as cellulitis or abscesses and vein damage.

If you are worried about yourself or anyone after taking drugs it is important to get help FAST; **call 999 or go straight to A&E**. Remember Naloxone only temporarily reverses

the effects of overdose so you will still need to seek medical care when it has been administered.

- **Harm reduction advice for alcohol should include.**
 - information about the effects & risks of mixing alcohol with drugs,
 - the importance of drinking water,
 - alternating alcohol drinks with soft drinks or low alcohol alternatives,
 - risks of spiking and advice of not leaving drinks unattended or accepting drinks from a stranger and,
 - amount of time it takes alcohol to leave the body if driving.
- Harm reduction messaging strategies during the event could include harm reduction messages on festival merchandising; welfare staff roaming to engage and check in 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; posters and digital boards/screens. Examples of harm reduction messages are available at [Alcohol & Other Drugs | Festival Safe](#)
- All staff should have been trained to recognise and respond to drug and alcohol related harm or distress. Welfare services can train security staff in how to respond to drug/alcohol related emergencies

Drug testing

- Testing provides opportunities to deliver harm reduction messaging and to issue warnings when adulterated or high strength drugs are identified.
- 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 require a Home Office license.
- Whilst fast, reliable testing at festivals is challenging and can never provide complete assurance, 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.

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 provision should usually be overseen and coordinated by a specialist and experienced welfare provider.
- Welfare services operate best as part of a co-ordinated team, including event control, medical services, stewards and security.
- 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 treatment services should be available. The local community drug and alcohol treatment service for Devon is [Find support near me - Waythrough](#)

Management of those under the influence of drugs or alcohol

- 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

Emerging drug threats

- Organisations 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 nitazene, which are more potent than heroin. Although primarily mixed into heroin, there have been reports in other drugs that might be more likely to be used at festivals.

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

Resources

For organisers

[Alcohol & Other Drugs | Festival Safe](#)

[The Purple Guide](#) - safety and welfare at music and other events (subscription-only)

For festival goers

[Honest information about drugs | FRANK](#)

[Festival Safe, Alcohol & Other Drugs | Harm Reduction](#)