

# Understanding Substance Use and the Wider Support Needs of Scotland's Prison Population

## Research summary

The last prison health needs assessment in Scotland took place in 2007 and a great deal has changed in the policy and service delivery landscape since then. This needs assessment is one of four prison population-focused commissioned studies. It explores needs relating to alcohol, drugs, and tobacco use.

Substance use has long been a concern for the health and wellbeing of people living in Scotland's prisons, and the wider criminal justice system and remains a prominent challenge. Research indicates that individuals in prisons are more likely to have a substance use problem than to not have one. Treatment and support services for those who experience problems with substances whilst living in prison should be provided consistently across all prisons on an equivalent basis to community-based services. Further there should be continuity of care both from the community into prison, following liberation, as well as between transfer from one prison to another.

### What We Did

- We conducted a rapid literature review around substance use issues in prisons, with a focus on recent and Scotland-specific literature.
- We conducted a desktop review of available, relevant datasets, supplemented by a set of semi-structured interviews with key data specialists.
- We conducted a mapping exercise by reviewing the collated results of data gathered for the Scottish Government's Alcohol and Drug Partnership Annual Review 2019/20 to identify information relating to criminal/community justice pathways and partnerships.
- We set up a working group with 10 professionals from the Scottish Prison Service, NHS Scotland and the third sector to discuss the current nature of substance use in Scottish prisons.
- We then conducted interviews with 15 people currently living in prison and 6 people who had left prison within the last year. In these lived experience interviews we asked them about their experiences of substance use and their needs surrounding it.
- We then conducted 36 interviews with professionals where we asked about their experiences of working with those who used substances in prison.
- Finally we interviewed data specialists about the data available on this topic and mapped the Scottish Alcohol and Drug Partnerships and their involvement with prisons.

## **Key findings**

### **Policy and political landscape**

Substance use in prisons cannot and should not be divorced from wider political and community landscapes. The complexity of these wider landscapes has often led Scottish prisons to become an isolated or peripheral partner in the development and delivery of substance use responses. Involvement in partnerships needs to be more consistent and purposeful rather than piecemeal, as it often is currently.

### **Existing evidence and data**

There is a lack of existing, up-to-date literature on problem substance use in Scottish prisons. There are also significant deficiencies and variations in existing substance use and related health data collection, analysis, sharing, and storage leading to significant difficulties in mapping across Scotland's prisons. There is no universal or meaningful body of data to give an accurate quantitative overview. Only with a more accurate and consistent gathering of substance use and associated health data will the quantitative data produced by prisons and other partners be valid and of potential use.

### **Substance use**

Our report recognises tobacco use and support within Scottish prisons. However, there already exists extensive and recent evidence contained in the [Tobacco in Prisons Study \(2022\)](#). This maps out the successful management of tobacco-free prisons across the country.

Whilst it is clear that there are instances of alcohol use within prison, along with specific support needs for withdrawal (detoxification) upon entry into prison, the unaddressed primary alcohol need is psychological support in preparation for returning to the community, where alcohol is readily available.

Since the last needs assessment it is evident that the nature of drug use within Scottish prisons has changed dramatically. Where previously this would have been heroin orientated, it is currently dominated by a combination of Novel Psychoactive Substances, Cannabinoids and 'Street Benzos' (most commonly Etizolam). For most individuals illegal and illicit drugs continue to be readily available. Consumption choices are directed by what drugs are available rather than by previous preferences. Drug use and supply remain intrinsic to living in prison, both in terms of coping strategies and role status. Particularly, substance use is connected to psychological dependency and emotional regulation to cope with both pre-existing trauma(s) and the additional trauma of entering and adjusting to living in prison.

### **Support for substance use**

There are a number of consequences of this situation. This begins with issues of a lack of treatment and support continuity leading up to prison entry and is immediately followed by the need for improving comprehensive substance use related health assessments for all. It includes complex issues of prescribing (availability, choice, continuity, equitability, and timeous). We heard a primary focus

on treatment with substance use being considered to be the wrong starting place, meaning that critical support needs (such as housing, mental and physical health, harm reduction, and recovery) are all too often insufficiently addressed. As a result of these complexities approaches to substance use support, and the policies in place to manage substance use, often vary significantly across estates. Some prisons, for example, are faced with having to negotiate and establish relationships with multiple Health Boards and Local Authorities to enable the delivery of in-prison and throughcare support services. This can create a de facto postcode lottery, where services available to people in different prisons are inconsistent and shaped by local partnerships and services which vary across the country (and where a person resides ordinarily). This complexity was noted as being more significant for the bigger urban prisons.

Inconsistencies were also reported in terms of access that individuals have to external organisations and supports.

## Conclusions

The key message from this study is that prison is the wrong place to address the very complex needs experienced by those who experience problems with substance use. However there are currently a large number of people who experience problems with substance use who are already in prison. As such we can make changes now to improve individual's health and wellbeing, as well as prospects for recovery, during their time living in prison.

Overall the provisions available for supporting people with substance use needs in prison are inconsistent and inadequate. The care and treatments given to them are not continued well from when they enter prison or when they leave prison.

One of the main changes that needs to be made is to move away from seeing substance use as a 'problem' and instead to recognise that it is a coping strategy.

It is important to identify what substances are coming into prisons but this is challenging with the current, less identifiable, substances that are currently being used. Resources and time must be invested into this to develop a better understanding of the current picture of substance use in prisons.

## Recommendations

Firstly a small set of high-level, key recommendations have been made. These are explicit in terms of the actions required by specific organisations. There are four of these:

- **Key recommendation 1:** This calls for a better partnership agreement between all key national partners. This new agreement should detail core principles and have a core aim of working together.
- **Key recommendation 2:** A multi-agency working group should be convened by the Scottish Government to address the learning from this needs assessment.
- **Key recommendation 3:** A National Oversight and Assurance Group should

be instigated who must pay particular attention to the data deficiencies that we have identified.

- **Key recommendation 4:** The MAT standards must be fully implemented across all Scottish prisons.

Secondly, we have developed a set of 22 outcome-based recommendations, which describe a 'preferred future' and will only be achieved if all relevant stakeholders and partners work together.

These recommendations have been grouped under the following headings;

- **The wrong starting place** – these recommendations advise that prison is not the best place to be addressing substance use needs and that alternatives to imprisonment will be better.
- **Continuity of treatment and support** – These recommendations suggest that there must be better continuity of care between prisons and between prison and community.
- **Policy perspectives** – This recommendation urges the adoption of a prevention-first approach and for prisons to consider complex needs in their approach to substance use.
- **Systemic complexities** – This advises the incorporation of prison into relevant planning structures and the development of a more integrated approach to addressing substance use needs.
- **Non-substance use specific needs** – This recognises the structural challenges often associated with substance use needs and advises for the improvement of support in these areas.
- **Substances and substance use** – This section advises the use of drug screening to identify patterns of substance use and the use of appropriate interventions.
- **Substance use specific needs in-prison** – This recommends the provision of information and support for those entering prison to allow them to make informed decisions about their in-prison care.
- **Throughcare and liberation** – These recommendations emphasise the importance of continuity of care and the availability of the Prison2Rehab pathway.
- **Specific populations** – These recommendations focus on the needs of young people, women, remand prisoners and those with co-occurring needs. They emphasise the need for trauma-informed approaches.
- **Workforce** – This recommendation recognises the important for resources and training for the workforce alongside the recognition that the approach to substance use must recognise workforce responsibility.
- **Recovery** – This recommends the development of recovery and substance-free interventions across all Scottish prisons for those who request them.
- **Data** – Finally this report recommends that the collection of data should be reviewed so that it may become consistent and shared across estates.