

Time for safer injecting facilities?

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Drug consumption rooms provide a hygienic and supervised space for consumption of illicit drugs, reducing public injecting and its adverse effects on the environment, public order, and the health of drug users, particularly by intervening in overdoses. As with other forms of harm reduction, the premise of drug consumption rooms is that if people are going to use drugs, they should be informed about the risks, enabled to use as safely as possible, and know what to do if something goes wrong.

Based on a *Drug and Alcohol Findings* review¹, this poster outlines evidence in favour of piloting these facilities in the UK, set against the reluctance of policymakers to accept the need to try this approach.

What ‘real world’ evaluations show

Evidence on whether consumption rooms work tends to come from ‘real world’ evaluations, making it difficult to attribute observed changes (e.g. in behaviour or health) to the intervention. However, the more robust alternative – a randomised trial – would be *ethically* problematic, denying one group of people at risk from public injecting access to a facility that could save lives.

Nevertheless, on balance research has found drug consumption rooms make drug use safer, increase access to health and social services, identify and respond to emergencies, and reduce public drug use. Fears that they might encourage drug use, delay treatment entry, or aggravate problems arising from local drug markets, have proved unfounded.^{2, 3, 4} By ensuring that staff offer a welcoming and non-judgemental environment, drug consumption rooms help restore dignity and respect to the lives of people who use drugs.⁵

However, the facilities may not be accessible to all groups at risk from public injecting, especially people aged under of 18, pregnant women, and those who cannot self-inject.⁶

Mixed support among key stakeholders

Among key UK stakeholders embracing drug consumption rooms are the Police and Crime Commissioners for North Wales, the West Midlands and Durham. Plans to pilot rooms were considered by the UK government in 2002 and 2006, and by a committee set up in Brighton in 2012. All were ultimately withdrawn. In response to overdose deaths and an ‘epidemic’ of HIV, in 2018 the Scottish Parliament approved an initial facility in Glasgow, but were blocked by the UK Government, which according to the Home Office and Prime Minister, still has ‘no intention’ and ‘no plans’ of introducing drug consumption rooms.



Scenes of public injecting in Birmingham documented by harm reduction advocate Nigel Brunson⁷