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UKDPC: Survey warns of pressures on drugs policing

- Half of English police forces expect to spend less time tackling illicit drugs
- Drugs policing often expected to face greater reductions than other areas
- Concerns that reducing pro-active drugs enforcement risks escalating problems

Police forces across England are expecting to reduce the time and money spent tackling illicit drugs in the face of budget reductions, according to the UK Drug Policy Commission. New research presented today to the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) drugs conference found that many of those tackling drug crimes are concerned that drug-related policing activities face greater reductions than other police work.

A survey conducted by UKDPC in collaboration with ACPO found that many police forces are expecting to decrease a range of activities relating to the enforcement of drug laws. The activities affected include forensic testing, undercover operations, and covert surveillance.

In the report, police officers highlight the dilemma posed by pressures to reduce expenditure to tackle drug-related activities. One officer said: "It's just a time bomb in society. If we don't continue to fight it we will gradually lose the battle."

The research included a survey of officers representing 74% of police forces and 25% of Basic Command Units (BCUs) in England. The results showed:

- Most forces (58%) expect to reduce their expenditure on activities to tackle the problems associated with illicit drugs, and 51% expect to reduce the time spent on drug-related activities. This often represents a greater reduction than in other policing activities, with 34% of forces expecting drug-related activities to fare worse than other work.
- Nearly half of English forces expect to reduce their work to detect illicit drugs, including:
 - Test purchasing of drugs: 45% expect a reduction
 - Forensic testing relating to drugs: 44% expect a reduction
 - Drug-related covert surveillance: 38% expect a reduction
 - Use of drug dogs: 27% expect a reduction
- Many forces also expect reductions in local partnership work. Nearly two in five (38%) expect to carry out less drug-related work with community groups, and a third (34%) expect to work less with local councils. Officers expressed concern that the reductions in work with partner bodies will have knock-on consequences as gaps are created that some expect the police to fill.
- There is expected to be a greater focus on reclaiming assets from drugs offenders. Asset forfeiture and investigations related to the Proceeds of Crime Act (POCA) are expected to increase in 31% of forces; detection and prevention of drug money laundering is expected to increase in 28% of forces.

The research indicated that in response to funding reductions, the police are making choices about which activities to protect, and which to reduce. Officers suggested that, as drugs offences are typically less visible than other crimes, reducing drugs enforcement can be an attractive short-term option.

However, they warned that these decisions may not be based on information about which police activities can be most effective. The report argues that such decisions should be explicitly based on evidence of what works to most reduce harms to society and users.

Roger Howard, Chief Executive of the UK Drug Policy Commission, presented the results of the survey to the ACPO drugs conference. He said:

“It’s never been possible to police everything and we shouldn’t pretend otherwise. But what seems to be happening in response to the government’s reduction in police resources is that cutting down on policing drug markets offers a path of least resistance. Drugs production and supply offences are often invisible: if you don’t look for them, they don’t register.

“But officers are telling us that they’re worried about the long-term consequences. They’re saying that if you take your foot off the pedal on enforcement over drugs supply, you risk storing up much greater problems for the future.”

Notes to editors:

The results of the UKDPC research will be presented to the ACPO drugs conference on Tuesday 11th October 2011.

The report, based on the research and including the full results, will be available to download for free at www.ukdpc.org.uk.

The research was conducted in collaboration with ACPO. It included responses from 81 police officers (29 at Force level; 52 at BCU and other levels in England), and a workshop of officers from four Forces. The research was conducted between April – August 2011.

Basic Command Units are local policing areas which vary in size from over 1,000 officers to under 100. There are 172 BCUs in England recorded by the Home Office for 2011/12.

Interviews are available on request. Please contact: Leo Barasi, lbarasi@ukdpc.org.uk, 020 7812 3792, 07988 054241.

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