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UK “not serious” about improving drug policy – new research

- **Politicians and civil servants do not seriously discuss policy options**
- **System for measuring impact of policies “is broken”**
- **New body should be established to tackle knowledge gap**

Politicians will not improve the way the UK tackles drug problems until there is a fundamental change in the way drug policy is made, according to research published today. The 18-month study, based on interviews with former home secretaries, drugs ministers, senior civil servants and policy experts, warns that there is a lack of serious discussion about the aims of drug policy and that policy options are not adequately researched or tested.

How to make drug policy better by the UK Drug Policy Commission reveals the depth of frustration among senior policymakers, which earlier this month erupted into political arguments following a drug policy report by the Home Affairs Committee.

A former senior Home Office civil servant interviewed in the study said: **“I’ve never in my policymaking years in Whitehall had what I would call a proper policy discussion in this area”**.

The UK also lacks evaluation of existing and alternative policies, according to the research. Discussing the process for testing the effectiveness of policies, a senior political adviser said: **“our impact assessment system is broken and needs to be completely reformed”**.

The report warns that a lack of leadership, and the high turnover of ministers and civil servants in drug policy, are undermining attempts to make improvements. Since the 2010 election there have been four drugs ministers and three Home Office civil servants with lead responsibility for drugs.

The report concludes that politicians should establish a cross-party forum to decide where progress could be made on improving drug policy. This would be faster than further evidence reviews or commissions and focused on finding solutions that could win broader political support.

UKDPC also concludes that a new body is needed to improve drug policy knowledge and evaluation. This would test existing and alternative policies and share knowledge about results and value for money.

Tracey Brown, the lead UKDPC Commissioner for the research, said:

“The response to the Home Affairs Committee’s report suggests we have got as far as we can with our current structures for making drug policy. Reviews of the UK’s drug policies all come to similar conclusions, but we lack the political will to act on them.

“To make progress, we need the party leaders to work together to take the heat out of the debate. They may not agree on everything, but they should be able to agree to improve the way we use evidence – so we know our policies are working as best they can.”

Roger Howard, Chief Executive of the UK Drug Policy Commission, said:

"We have not been taking evidence seriously. As a result we are spending billions of pounds a year tackling drug problems, without always knowing what difference it makes.

"We need a body that takes responsibility for collecting and sharing evidence. Until we get serious about this, we will continue to be driving blind with our many of our drug policies. At the moment, no one can say that much of what we are doing in enforcement and prevention offers value for money."

Notes

1. ***How to make drug policy better*** will be published by UKDPC on Monday 31st December.
2. The UK Drug Policy Commission is an independent charity that provides objective analysis of the evidence concerning drug policy and practice. It is principally funded by the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation and will finish its work in December 2012. For details of UKDPC Commissioners and biographies, see: www.ukdpc.org.uk/who/commissioners-trustees/.
3. The research is based on interviews with politicians, civil servants and advisers responsible for making drug policy over the last 20 years, including five former home secretaries and drugs ministers, and five former permanent secretaries, the senior civil servants in charge of government departments.
4. The research also includes background research by the Institute for Government and RAND Europe, as well as four essays by drug policy experts. These will also be published on Monday 31st December.
5. A poll conducted earlier this year by ComRes for UKDPC found that 77% of MPs polled thought that current policies are not effective in tackling the problems caused by illegal drugs. The poll also found that 75% agreed that it can be difficult to have an objective debate about the best solution because drug policy is such a controversial issue (the poll was weighted to be representative of the House of Commons by party and region). For details see: <http://www.ukdpc.org.uk/publication/politicians-views-on-drug-policy/>.
6. In October, UKDPC published the results of their six-year study of drug policy. The report, "A Fresh Approach to Drugs", concluded that of the £3bn spent annually tackling drug problems in the UK, at least £2bn is not supported by clear evidence.
7. The report is published following the release of the findings of the Home Affairs Committee's year-long inquiry into drug policy. Its recommendations included creating a royal commission to look at alternative approaches to drug policy, and ring-fencing funding for drug policy research. After the launch of that report, David Cameron and Nick Clegg publicly disagreed on the effectiveness of current drug policies and whether a royal commission should be established.
8. For copies of the report and interviews, contact Leo Barasi: lbarasi@ukdpc.org.uk or 07830 819121.