

EMBARGO: 00.01 Monday 15th October 2012

PUBLIC MONEY WASTED ON INEFFECTIVE DRUG POLICIES, WARNS SIX-YEAR STUDY

- **COMMISSION CALLS FOR FAR-REACHING CHANGES TO IMPROVE VALUE FOR MONEY IN TACKLING DRUG PROBLEMS**

Much of the £3bn the UK spends annually on illicit drugs is not based on evidence and, until government pursues policies based on what works, it will continue to waste public money and damage lives, according to a six-year study released by the UK Drug Policy Commission today.

A Fresh Approach to Drugs reveals that some of the key policies used to tackle drug problems – including major drug seizures – are having little or no sustainable impact and that some education programmes in schools could actually be increasing use of illicit drugs.

The report concludes that the lack of evidence for current policy in limiting the damage drugs cause, combined with decreasing resources for tackling drug problems, the rapid creation of new drugs and increasing online supply routes, mean that the UK risks wasting money and failing to reduce drug problems unless there is a major change in policy.

It says that, while drug use and drug problems have declined in the UK in recent years, there are still around 2,000 drug-related deaths each year and 380,000 problem drug users. The annual cost to England and Wales of class A drug use is estimated at £15bn. Between 2009 and 2011, 114 new drugs were identified in the EU.

According to UKDPC, the cost of implementing current policy on illicit drugs is at least £3bn a year but **a lack of evidence for what works and provides value for money, and politicians' unwillingness to act on available evidence, means that much of this money may be wasted on policies that are not cost-effective**, for example:

- Even large seizures by the police and border agencies often have little or no sustained impact on the supply of drugs, because most drug markets are large, resilient and quick to adapt.
- Some drugs education in schools, like Just Say No campaigns, not only fail to reduce drug use but sometimes can actually make some young people more likely to use drugs.
- It is often claimed that drug classification 'sends a message'. But when cannabis was downgraded from class B to class C and then returned to class B, there was no change in the trend of falling numbers using the drug, so any 'message' was either not heard or ignored.
- For people addicted to drugs, complete abstinence is often regarded as the only true form of recovery. But in practice, pushing some drug users to become abstinent too quickly can lead to a greater chance of relapse or overdose and death.

According to ***A Fresh Approach to Drugs***, all drug policies should undergo rigorous and continual scrutiny to ensure that they provide value for money. The report recommends that **a new body should be established to coordinate research** and ensure that politicians and practitioners are aware of the evidence of what works to tackle drug problems.

UKDPC also identifies policy changes that it recommends the government should test in an effort to reduce drug problems and provide better value for public money.

These include changing the UK's drug laws so that **possession of small amounts of drugs, for personal use, would be a civil offence instead of a criminal offence**. According to the report, when this has been tried in other countries, such as the Czech Republic and Portugal, drug use has not increased and resources have been redirected to treating addiction and tackling organised crime.

However, UKDPC found little evidence to support further relaxing of the law and recommends that the **production and supply of most drugs should remain illegal**. The report warns that allowing legal sale of drugs such as heroin and cocaine could cause more damage than the current drug trade.

A Fresh Approach to Drugs also recommends that the government should review the Misuse of Drugs Act. The report proposes that **technical decisions about the classification of individual drugs should be taken by an independent body**, with parliamentary oversight.

However, the Commission concludes that substantial improvements in drug policy are unlikely without political commitment. The report recommends that the **main political parties should establish a cross-party forum** to agree on how drug problems can be addressed in a cost-effective and evidence-based way.

Dame Ruth Runciman, Chair of the UK Drug Policy Commission, said: "Over the last three decades, UK governments have done much to reduce the damage caused by drug problems. Needle exchanges have reduced HIV among injecting drug users to one of the lowest rates in the world. The investment in treatment for people addicted to drugs has also helped many to rebuild their lives.

"Those programmes are supported by evidence, but much of the rest of drug policy does not have an adequate evidence base. We spend billions of pounds every year without being sure of what difference much of it makes."

Professor Colin Blakemore, a UKDPC Commissioner and former Chief Executive of the Medical Research Council, said: "Medicine has moved past the age when we treated disease on the basis of hunches and received wisdom. The overwhelming consensus now is that it is unethical, inefficient and dangerous to use untested and unvalidated methods of treatment and prevention. It is time that policy on illicit drug use starts taking evidence seriously as well.

"Just as we have NICE to assess and disseminate the evidence for what works in medicine, so we need a body to collect and promote the evidence for drug policy. Given the benefits and cost savings this would bring, it's surely worth finding less than 1% of what we already spend on addressing drug problems to make sure that this money is spent well."

David Blakey, a UKDPC Commissioner and former President of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO), said: "Our current approach, of taking police action against people using drugs, is expensive and often does not appear to bring much benefit. When other countries have reduced sanctions for low-level drug users, they have found it possible to keep a lid on drug use while helping people with drug problems to get into treatment.

"But at the same time, we need to continue to bear down on those producing and supplying illicit drugs. This is particularly important for those spreading misery in local communities."

A poll of 150 MPs, conducted by ComRes for UKDPC in May-June 2012 found that 77% of MPs surveyed believed that the UK's policies are not effective in tackling the problems caused by drugs.

Notes

1. *A Fresh Approach to Drugs: the Final Report of the UK Drug Policy Commission*, will be published by UKDPC on Monday 15th October.
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. For the ComRes poll of MPs, and parallel polls of Members of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly Members, see: www.ukdpc.org.uk/publication/politicians-views-on-drug-policy/.
4. A working paper produced in July 2007 estimated total government anti-drugs expenditure to be £1.1bn in 2007/08, and that drug-related expenditure by the police add a further £2.1bn to this. See: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/about-us/freedom-of-information/released-information1/foi-archive-crime/8908_Drug_value_money_report_07
5. *A Fresh Approach to Drugs* is published at a time when international governments are reviewing their approach to drugs. The government of Uruguay has announced plans to introduce state-controlled sales of cannabis. New Zealand has introduced new testing procedures that could allow regulated sale of 'legal highs'. Alternative approaches to drug policy were also discussed at the 2012 Summit of the Americas.
6. For copies of the report and interviews, contact Leo Barasi: lbarasi@ukdpc.org.uk or 020 7812 3792 / 07988 054241.