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England



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To:
POLICE AND CRIME COMMISSIONERS / CHIEF CONSTABLES
DIRECTORS OF PUBLIC HEALTH

30 June 2021

Dear Colleague,

Drugs, alcohol and festival planning in 2021

As we see an easing of the COVID-19 restrictions, our attention is naturally drawn to the likely increase in the night-time economy, public events and especially the festivals season.

The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) and Public Health England (PHE) have worked together to look at minimising the risk of harm to individuals around these events. Appended to this letter is some joint advice that your respective forces and local authorities might find helpful when planning for such events over the coming months.

Yours sincerely,

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NPCC Drugs Lead
Deputy Chief Constable
Lincolnshire Police

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Public Health England

Drugs, alcohol and festival planning in 2021

2021 could be a challenging time in relation to drug and alcohol use at festivals (and in the night-time economy) as:

- some approved festivals may be finalised at short notice without the usual planning time, expertise and resources, including welfare services
- some unapproved festivals may go ahead to fill gaps in the usual schedule of approved festivals, and have little or none of the expected resources, like welfare services
- there is a risk that people might take fewer precautions with drugs and alcohol or that tolerance is reduced

We have pulled together this short guide to planning to support local authorities, police forces and their partners.

We have tried to focus here only on the drug and alcohol-specific issues but event planning and licensing will cover many other issues that have some impact on drugs and alcohol.

1. Local consultation and planning

UK event promoters must already follow existing legislative procedures and event safety standards. They need to work with the local licensing authority and submit operating schedule and event management plans. A comprehensive risk assessment and risk management plan will consider all aspects and implications related to the health and wellbeing of attendees, including managing and limiting the exposure to risk of alcohol and other drug use. Event planning and risk assessment should be done in close cooperation with the local authority, police force, health services and others (often through a Safety Advisory Group).

2. Welfare provision and chill out spaces

Welfare services operate best as part of a co-ordinated team, including event control, medical services, stewards and security. Representation and input from local drug services are useful to provide local knowledge and context but welfare provision should usually be overseen and coordinated by a specialist and experienced welfare provider.

Welfare provision offers a designated onsite space at festivals and events for attendees to access support about a range of issues, including alcohol, drugs, mental wellbeing and sexual health. It provides a safe and quiet space where event attendees can seek supervised relief or recuperation.

Welfare services can train security staff in how to respond to drug/alcohol related emergencies.

3. Harm reduction

Organisers' first objective should be to avoid or eliminate risk as much as is practicable. But where elimination is not possible, efforts should be made to reduce the exposure to potential risk.

Harm reduction strategies seek to create safer settings and encourage safer behaviours. Welfare services and organisers can work together to implement some of the below measures:

- promoting safer attendee behaviour through education, support and messaging
- promoting safer event environments
- reducing the impact of drug-related incidents and harms through appropriate onsite medical and harm reduction services

Event organisers should work with partners to include harm reduction messaging before and during the event.

Before the event

Harm reduction messaging should begin before the event takes place and should provide information about onsite support and safer behaviour, and encourage attendees to seek help.

Messaging should be tailored to the event and its audience and updated to reflect changing patterns of drug use.

Event managers should work with their media teams and stakeholders to develop evidence-based pre-event messaging that uses available communication channels, including:

- the main event website
- social media
- email communications
- messaging in welcome packs, printed on the ticket or on other promotional material

During the event

Harm reduction information and real time warnings of potential onsite substances of concern should be delivered throughout the duration of the event. Some attendees may already be under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs when they arrive. Safety messages should be concise and repeated often. Information about onsite services, and how to find and access them, should be clear, visible and readily available.

Clear signage and service branding should be in place and organisers should also ensure that the location of services is clearly marked and identified on site maps or other event information.

Harm reduction messaging strategies during the event could include:

- harm reduction messages on festival merchandising
- welfare staff roaming to engage with attendees at chill out areas, campsites, outside the welfare area, during roaming water distribution and at designated chill out zones
- notifications via any festival app
- posters and digital boards/screens
- locations for signage that include entrances and exits, campsites, water points and in and around toilet facilities
- real time alerts displayed on digital screens if substances of concern are identified by police, onsite testing or welfare services

4. Access to drinking water

High temperatures can lead to dehydration, heat exhaustion and harm, all made worse by the use of alcohol or other drugs.

Plentiful free water needs to be made available without long queuing in direct sunlight. Shade and shelter from the sun or heat should also be available alongside cooling measures such as misting tents and industrial fans.

Event organisers could also provide additional shaded, quieter or cooler 'chill out' areas across the site and away from busy areas and alcohol sales points. Such spaces should be overseen by event security and be visited regularly by roaming welfare outreach workers.

5. Management of those under the influence of drugs or alcohol

All staff should have been trained to recognise and respond to drug and alcohol related harm or distress. The safety of anyone under the influence of drink or drugs must be at the forefront of any consideration about whether to remove them from the event. It may be more appropriate and less risky to move them to the welfare or onsite medical area. Anyone who presents with signs of a serious drug-related illness, including those with severe agitation or behavioural issues, should be transferred as quickly and safely as possible to the onsite medical area for assessment.

If the health of anyone under the care of the welfare service deteriorates there should be an agreed, clear and effective handover protocol between welfare and medical teams.

Those attending events may need support for mental health issues, compounded at events taking place over several days or where individuals may be deprived of sleep or have used psychoactive drugs over a sustained period and may be experiencing an emotional episode or feeling disorientated. These feelings may be made worse for some people following a year of lockdown and relative isolation.

6. Drug testing on site

Evaluated drug testing or checking initiatives can be useful in some circumstances. Drug taking will always be risky but testing may reduce these risks. However, fast, reliable testing at festivals or clubs is challenging, so testing can never give complete reassurance. It's important that all local partners work together, especially with the police, to support programmes that reduce drug use and harm at clubs and festivals.

Testing can be either back-of-house (seized or amnesty bin drugs are tested) or front-of-house (individual festival goers submit their drugs for testing and receive direct information and advice). In both cases, the findings can be relayed to all festival goers to encourage them to reduce risks. Both forms of testing also require Home Office licensing.

7. Resources

For organisers:

- Festival Safe website, supported by RSPH, www.festivalsafe.com/information/drugs-alcohol
- Purple Guide to health, safety and welfare at music and other events, www.thepurpleguide.co.uk (subscription-only)

For festival goers:

- FRANK, www.talktofrank.com
- Festival Survival Guide, www.festivalwelfareservices.co.uk/festival-survival-guide

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