

Summary

The Northern Ireland Alcohol and Drug Alliance supports the establishment of ‘Overdose Prevention Spaces’ in Northern Ireland. The aim of such a facility is to reduce risk of disease transmission through unhygienic injecting, prevent overdoses and connect drug users with addiction treatment services, as well as to protect the wider public.

What is an ‘Overdose Prevention Space’?

An Overdose Prevention Space, more commonly known as a ‘safe drug consumption room’, or DCRs, are places where drugs can be consumed under the supervision of trained staff.

An Overdose Prevention Space is an expressly ‘harm reduction’ initiative and its objective is to provide a clean and safe place for drug users to inject. They also aim to:

- Reduce drug-related deaths (overdosing)
- Reduce disease transmission (HIV, hepatitis C, etc)
- Provide an opportunity for drug users to connect with health and social care and other professionals who can ultimately help them on a road to complete cessation
- Protect the wider community from drug-related litter and the visibility of drug using

Overdose Prevention Spaces have been operating in mainland European countries for several decades. The world’s first supervised ‘drug consumption room’ opened in Berne, Switzerland in 1986. Since then, a further 78 Overdose Prevention Spaces have opened across Europe, all supervised by trained professionals. Outside Europe, there are two Overdose Prevention Spaces in Vancouver, Canada and in Sydney, Australia.

In 2017, NHS Scotland and Glasgow City Council purchased a site in Glasgow city centre for use as the UK’s first Overdose Prevention Space.

Also, in February 2018, Merchant’s Quay Ireland was chosen to run the Republic of Ireland’s first Overdose Prevention Space in the South Quays area of Dublin. Subject to relevant planning approval, it is expected to become operational in 2019.

To access an Overdose Prevention Space, users typically register and must meet certain low threshold conditions, such as minimum age. Most Overdose Prevention Spaces target drug injectors but an increasing characteristic is the inclusion of users who smoke or inhale drugs. They also offer clean injecting materials, advice on safer drug use and what to do in an emergency.

As well as being a space where drug users can remain under supervision after drug consumption, many Overdose Prevention Spaces also provide users with the opportunity to shower, eat and distribute clean clothes to users, particularly to those who are homeless.

Why is NIADA calling for the introduction of Overdose Prevention Spaces in NI?

In the period 2006-2016, there were 633 opioid-related deaths in Northern Ireland, according to NISRA. In 2017 alone, there were 37 drug-related deaths within a nine-month period. Between 2013/14 and 2016/17, figures by drug policy think-tank Volteface showed Belfast saw a 1474% rise in call-outs for the removal of drug-related litter. These figures come with an increase in media reports of syringes, vials and other drug-related litter found in some of Northern Ireland's public spaces, as well as public drug consumption.

Only a small proportion of drug-related litter is reported, so the figure will be much higher.

Overdose Prevention Spaces or drug consumption rooms therefore provide safety for users and communities and provide an important opportunity for engagement with drug users to reduce harm.

NIADA is calling for the introduction of Overdose Prevention Spaces in Northern Ireland to:

- Allow health and social care professionals and drugs workers to reach and stay in contact with highly marginalised populations
- Improve injection hygiene as well as safer use for users
- Reduce risk behaviour such as syringe sharing
- Consider the safety of the general public

There is no evidence to suggest that Overdose Prevention Spaces increase drug use, frequency of injecting, drug dealing, drug trafficking or other drug-related crime.

About NIADA

The Northern Ireland Alcohol and Drug Alliance is a group of voluntary and community sector organisations that provide support to those affected by alcohol and drug use and their families. Membership of NIADA currently consists of those organisations who held regional Impact of Alcohol and Public Health Agency-awarded contracts for alcohol and drugs.

The current membership is: *Addiction NI, ASCERT, Carlisle House, Contact (Lifeline), De Paul Ireland, Dunlewey, Extern, Northlands, Simon Community, Start360*

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