



# Tackling Drug Related Litter

Keep Wales Tidy, April 2023

# Contents

Caru Cymru Approach .....	3
Summary .....	3
Drug Related Litter in Wales.....	5
Data Collection .....	7
Interventions and Approach .....	8
Infrastructure and Messaging .....	10
Enforcement.....	11
Innovation .....	12
Appendices.....	14
Current Practice in Wales .....	14
North Wales Police .....	14
Cardiff Council Community Safety Team .....	14
Focus on: Butetown Community Action .....	14
Focus on: Newport Drugs Partnership .....	14
Focus on: Cardiff Rivers Group .....	15
References.....	16

\*Key audiences for this document include local authorities, town and community councils, national park authorities, Natural Resources Wales and other landowners as well as agencies interested in developing policies to prevent drug related litter.



# Caru Cymru Approach

Caru Cymru is a collaboration between Cardiff University and all 22 local authorities in Wales to reach our shared vision of a beautiful Wales, cared for and enjoyed by everybody. Building on our many years of experience working in communities and schools and our expertise in behaviour change, Keep Wales Tidy has developed a unique approach to tackling environmental quality issues at local, regional and national level. Locally, we are working with partners to develop solutions in their areas, engaging with volunteer groups, schools and businesses to foster pride and ownership of the spaces on their doorstep. Nationally, we are hoping to address some of the barriers to collaboration on the most persistent issues through the development of standardised messaging and interventions, based on positive and informative information, from litter to fly-tipping to plastic reduction. We aim to support our partners in creating an enabling environment across Wales to encourage people nationwide to 'do the right thing'.

## Summary

Drug related litter is complex in nature and is unique to other littering behaviours due to the nature and behaviour of the user. Many of the traditional approaches to littering are ineffective but there is an even greater need for better data and more integrated partnerships to address littering, public health, and substance misuse strategies.

For local authorities, there are several recommendations for approaching this issue whilst recognising that some of the policy levers that will affect real change lie with the Welsh Government. However, the case studies in the appendices demonstrate that effective partnership and data collection can have an impact.

One of the key recommendations of this paper is in regard to more effective partnerships and data collection. In order to assess the scale and location of drugs litter instances, more accurate information should be collected. Ultimately if you can't measure it, you can't manage it. We need to better understand and monitor the scale and location of instances with general litter database.



The Health and Safety Executive recommend that all bodies with any cleansing responsibility, or anyone likely to come in to contact with discarded needles should have an effective reporting system in place for all needles found<sup>1</sup>. This supports employers in preventing risk from discarded needles and can help authorities on a wider level identify needs for needle exchanges or fixed bins. Having data agreements with other agencies will facilitate this

process and can help the police to focus their efforts without causing unintentional dispersal of drug related litter which can increase the risks and make the problem harder to contain and control.

Another key point in addressing drug related litter is that local authorities need to understand the nature of the user and target interventions accordingly. Noting, for example, that many discarded syringes may be purposefully hidden for the user to pick up later rather than intentionally discarded or that syringes may not all come from class A drug users but in and around areas where performance enhancing drugs may be commonplace. By understanding how and where drugs are being used, safer disposal facilities and appropriate messaging can be discreetly targeted to minimise risk, promote safer behaviour and reduce incidences of public alarm or concern.

This paper sets out a recommended approach by local authorities but also draws attention to some of the levers available to the Welsh Government that represents a necessary evolution of substance misuse policies in the future. The primary barrier to implementing some of the effective policies required to prevent drug related litter and associated harm stem from public perceptions and a lack of understanding.

- While not widespread, drug related litter has been found in parks, urban centres and green spaces in most local authorities in Wales.
- Drug related litter is evolving with recent trends seeing 'noxx canisters' being increasingly littered.
- Presently there are variations between authorities in the ways in which the public can report drug related litter in Wales.
- Keep Wales Tidy encourages continued data gathering, and reporting strategies to be agreed with community groups and community operatives to work with substance misuse agencies to improve understanding of the issue.
- There are examples of successful needle exchanges within Wales and safe injecting facilities and smart syringes used worldwide that require further research.

# Drug Related Litter in Wales

The term 'drug related litter' is most associated with discarded needles, syringes and sharps, but may also be used to encompass other litter discarded as a result of transporting substances (pouches or methadone bottles), or materials discarded as a result of drugs consumption such as spoons, 'baggies' foils, injecting equipment and increasingly commonly nitrogen oxide canisters. Clothes, mattresses and other belongings discarded by those consuming drugs are also recognised as drugs litter<sup>ii</sup>. Of most concern to the general population and authorities with responsibility for cleansing and removal of drugs litter are syringes and other sharps. These items pose a risk to members of the public from needle stick injuries with the potential to spread blood-borne viral diseases.

It is important to note that drug litter in all forms can be borne of both illegal and legal drug use. For example, not all used needles have been used by opioid users but could also have possibly been used by those injecting steroids<sup>1</sup> or even insulin. The drug scene is constantly evolving, with new drug types and trends emerging each year. In recent years there has been a marked increase<sup>iii</sup> in the use of new psychoactive substances<sup>2</sup> often incorrectly referred to as 'legal highs'<sup>3</sup> and as such this litter is now found more commonly on the streets of Wales. This is the observation of Keep Wales Tidy policy and research officers who undertake Local Environmental Audit and Management System (LEAMS)<sup>4</sup> street cleanliness surveys across Wales each year as well as community officers who undertake litter picks with community and school groups on a regular basis. 'Legal highs' were made illegal under the psychoactive substance Act 2016. Since then, it has been illegal to sell substances that create a psychoactive effect.

Another recent trend has seen young people use nitrous oxide (commonly known as 'NOx' or laughing gas). In the United Kingdom, as of 2014, nitrous oxide was estimated to be used by almost half a million young people at nightspots, festivals, and parties<sup>iv</sup>. Litter from this type of drug use has been particularly noticeable in Wales in streets and parks in the form of small canisters and much larger 'smart whips'.

There is no national recording system for drugs related litter in Wales and it is therefore very difficult to estimate the scale of the drugs litter problem along with any changes that are happening on the ground. Most local authorities across Wales collect information on the number of calls received about drugs litter but this information is not widely reported and is often not centrally stored or shared between departments.

The figures collected by local authorities would not be wholly representative of the situation as it would exclude data on the number of drugs needles collected during normal street cleaning exercises or by other community groups or organisations including Keep Wales Tidy, charities, and the police. It is believed that on the whole, drug litter in recent years has been on the increase since 2001 and that local authorities have become more aware of the pressing issues.<sup>v</sup> It should also be noted that drug related litter of any type is not a problem isolated to urban areas and is reported as an issue to varying extents by all councils in Wales. One of the potential causes of this is the correlation with the increased numbers of rough sleepers living on the streets in the UK, highlighting that this issue is symptomatic of a much greater need which intersects with a number of inter-governmental responsibilities such as public health, housing, substance misuse and crime and policing.

The majority of drugs litter in the form of discarded syringes is not widely encountered by the majority of people in Wales. A study on littering and litterers commissioned by Keep Wales Tidy in 2010 to understand the public's perception of litter asked members of the Welsh public to name environmental issues which had the most negative impact on the look and feel of an area. Visible in figure 2 on the next page - 73% of the population of Wales felt drugs litter would have the most negative affect on local areas but only 11% of the population of Wales mentioned seeing drug litter items regularly.<sup>vi</sup>

While not widespread, drug litter including needles and syringes has been found in parks, urban centres, and green spaces in most local authorities in Wales. No one area can be defined as having a greater problem although socially deprived communities may encounter more due to a greater propensity for drug use. In 2021, drug misuse deaths were over 5 times higher amongst those living in the 20 % most deprived areas compared with the 20 % least deprived areas in Wales.<sup>vii</sup>

Secluded areas such as underneath canal bridges or near waterside buildings are particularly likely to attract individuals taking drugs, and therefore be susceptible to higher levels of drug litter.<sup>viii</sup>



While there are limits to the extent of information available specifically for drugs litter across Wales, more information is known about the scale of drug use. This information is often used to best target provision and to meet the needs for regular drug users. By understanding more about the scale and changes to drug use on the whole in Wales we can better inform strategies for dealing with the subsequent littering issues.

### Key points

1. Drugs related litter evolves over time depending on trends but discarded syringes are the biggest concern for the public and the local authorities and staff who are responsible for their removal.
2. Serious drug related litter is rarely encountered by the public but have a significant impact on perceptions where found.
3. Drug related litter is currently lacking and needs to be addressed by all relevant agencies, including charities.

<sup>1</sup> Anabolic steroids are class C drugs, which can only be issued by pharmacists with a prescription. It's legal to have anabolic steroids for personal use.

<sup>2</sup> Substances that produce similar psychoactive effects to "traditional" illegal drugs like cocaine, cannabis and ecstasy.

<sup>3</sup> These include synthetic cannabinoid receptor agonists including 'spice'.

<sup>4</sup> Further information on Keep Wales Tidy LEAMS surveys can be found [here](#).

# Data Collection

The vast majority of local authorities have strict response times for dealing with this particular litter type but not all have specific reporting mechanisms.

There are at present variations between authorities in the ways in which the public can report drug related litter in Wales. Many local authorities have dedicated telephone hotlines, others also have web pages and an app which allows the reporter to pin the exact location, whilst reporting drug related litter in other local authorities is made through a general enquiries page.

Centralised reporting mechanisms could provide a key data source which can help to tackle the problem although it is worth noting that this is best done in partnership with other agencies and could be a Wales-wide scheme in the future which can inform substance misuse interventions.

A key point to note is that the data should be used for cleansing, targeting needle use and for supporting prevention and rehabilitation activities. It should not be used by the police to target arrests as this can disperse the issue and lead to drug related litter becoming less localised, hidden and fragmented which could mean a greater potential for public harm.

## Key points

1. Data collection is vital to the effective targeting of interventions and to understand the nature of the users – this may encompass both legal and illegal drug use.
2. Data is potentially collected by local authorities, needle exchange programmes, housing and parks and public health officials as well as health and environmental charities and individual volunteers.
3. Inter-agency data agreements between these bodies can facilitate our national approach and understanding.

# Interventions and Approach

In order to tackle the problem of drugs related litter a holistic approach needs to be taken from a variety of agencies. As with almost all litter types, the best way to eradicate this littering type is by putting prevention at the heart of our efforts. Ultimately if more users are supported to move away from drug use through good public policy, we will see a reduction in drug litter finds and complaints.

We recognise that it isn't feasible to completely tackle this litter at source or to expect these drugs to not be used but there are potential solutions that could be used and trialled. In order to consider interventions, it is necessary to look at the behaviour of litterers themselves.

This type of littering is unlike any other due to the nature of use and the user. Most drug users are aware of the risks to others from syringes and often will purposefully 'hide' a syringe to return and pick up later (or run the risk of being caught with it on their person). Many sharps are found in makeshift containers such as plastic bottles or tins which speaks to the littering being much more of a conscious placement than other types of littering.

In addition, those using syringes for heroin and other class A drugs may not be able to warrant walking to a needle exchange immediately after injection. That said, it is equally important to note that drug users do not want to be seen taking drugs and will seek out safe places away from the public to take them. By understanding where these areas are and how they are used, it allows for a more targeted and effective approach.

These observations explain the localised nature of where drug related litter is found and the fact that they are often found in accumulations.

'Business as usual' enforcement or targeted police action can lead to dispersal of the issue which increases the chances of syringes being found in isolation and can cause greater risk as they are less visible.

Traditional anti-littering campaigns in public are also not considered to be effective for this issue as they are not likely to capture the intended audience and can also negatively and disproportionately affect the general public's perceptions of an area.

Ultimately, it is critical that drug litter and the prevention of drug use (including the prevention of drug related deaths) be considered as an integrated and interconnected solution and interventions need to be applied (and reviewed) as required. Understanding user behaviour and locations of drug litter will support targeting behavioural change, safe drug use and rehabilitation.



Keep Wales Tidy would strongly encourage local authorities to consider some of the key lessons below to support drug related litter reduction and the prevention of substance misuse strategies.

- Cleansing operatives to work with health boards and other drug prevention and substance misuse agencies in order to understand the issue and target support and intervention accordingly.
- Data gathering as a key tool to understand how and where drugs are being used and where disposal and / or other interventions such as needle exchanges could be targeted which can also inform substance misuse strategies.
- Reporting and monitoring agreements to be established with organisations such as drug charities, community groups and organisations like Keep Wales Tidy who may come across this litter more frequently than operatives.
- Any data on accumulations should not be used to target any police-led interventions as this will disperse the problem which will lead to more isolated instances of discarded syringes and will make the issue much harder to tackle.

Unlike other types of litter, widespread public campaigns are ineffective, are likely to miss the target audience and can harm general public perceptions of an area but targeted information in user areas can have an impact.

Key points
<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Partnerships are vital to tackling the problem of drug related litter and associated harm.</li><li>2. Inter-agency data collection, reporting and monitoring agreements are key to understanding more about the issue.</li><li>3. Police-led interventions could fragment the issue, leading to more isolated instances and a greater potential for public harm.</li></ol>

## Infrastructure and Messaging

One of the main structural interventions that have often been applied to the issue of sharps are external drop boxes. These are secure and safe containers which are fastened in place on an outside wall. There are some public concerns with these as they may create concerns that placing these bins in communal locations could lead to increased drug use congregating within an area. However, there are advantages to keeping the problem concentrated and can also reduce drug related deaths if there are clean and safe areas nearby. They can, however, also serve to highlight the problem of drug use to other members of the public and draw negative attention to the problem which may be disproportionate to the actual risk.

It is important to note that drug users do not seek out public locations but rather, will endeavour to seek out areas away from view. This highlights the importance of data collection as, with sufficient knowledge of the nature and locations of 'hot spot' areas, drop boxes and relevant messaging can be targeted more discreetly toward users without drawing public attention to them.

A number of studies and reports have highlighted the effectiveness of drop boxes. In the UK, Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) published a good practice guide to tackling drug related litter in 2005<sup>ix</sup>. The report identifies that whilst there may at times be local resistance to public sharps bins, it is clear from research that a significant barrier to disposal of drug litter is the lack of facilities, particularly outside the hours during which exchange schemes and other services operate.

One study in a neighbourhood within Montreal, Canada compared levels of discarded needles before and after the installation of 12 drop boxes. The results found strong evidence of reduced discarded needles following the installation of drop boxes; with reductions of up to 98%, and overall significant reductions for areas up to 200m from a drop box<sup>x</sup>. This shows that drop boxes can have a positive impact on reducing drug related litter.



Needle drops need to be advertised within the drug use community. This needs to be done to ensure disposal zones are freely available and accessible to those who wish to use them. As with other litter types it is the minority of users who do not dispose of these correctly. Peer pressure could be a valuable tool in increasing returns.

As identified by Keep Wales Tidy project officers, and NHS Wales<sup>xi</sup> Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs are also a large source of needle usage. This suggests that more targeted needle exchanges could be used at places in which users may frequent, such as gyms.

Although not often still seen, blue lights in washrooms and public toilets are not advised as they can increase the risk of drug related harm and death. Rather, the provision of clean water and safe spaces will help to reduce the risk of drug related deaths. (See the section below on [Innovation](#).)

### Key points

1. Public perceptions can be a barrier to installing drop boxes however, drug use is rarely prevalent in the public eye so these can be installed discreetly if enough is understood about users.
2. Needle drops, exchanges and messaging need to be promoted within user communities.
3. Gyms and related spaces are also key locations for interventions for users of performance-enhancing drugs.

## Enforcement

All 'duty bodies' across Wales have a statutory responsibility under the Environmental Protection Act 1990 (EPA) to ensure that relevant land is kept free of litter and refuse. Relevant land refers to all land owned and controlled by principal litter authorities (including local authorities, statutory undertakers, Crown authorities and governing bodies of educational institutions) to which the public have access. A duty body's responsibilities apply to green spaces, pavements, parks and highways, essentially any land which is open to the air to which the public have access.

The Code of Practice on litter and refuse provides clear guidance that duty bodies should adopt in relation to the clearing of litter. Response times are set out to deal with significant litter issues.<sup>xii</sup> The code suggests that land managers should be effectively able to predict instances that could lead to higher rates of littering, and they should be able to respond quickly to specific dangerous items including glass and drugs needles. Section 9.6 recommends drug-related litter be made a priority and all duty bodies should aim to respond within three hours of a report.

Powers introduced under the Anti-Social Behaviour Crime and Policing Act 2014 allows authorities to deal with problematic areas more effectively. However, given the nature of encountering this litter type any enforcement practically around fixed penalty notices are likely to be ineffective – and active drug use in public is more likely to be dealt with by the police.

As with all enforcement, any approach needs to follow guidance set out by local authorities. However, enforcing for drug related littering offences is more complex than with other littering offences. The use of enforcement for offenders according to DEFRA's 'Tackling Drugs Litter' report have three key points of concern to address.

- At the point when drug litter is discarded, users may not be in a suitable state to engage with enforcement officers.
- Approaching a drug user in this state would place enforcement officers at additional risk.
- Some drug users are unlikely to have the means to pay a fixed penalty or, if prosecuted a court fine.

It is also important to note that a heavy-handed police approach to the problem will disperse the users and may make incidents of individual hidden needles coming into contact with a member of the public more likely.

### Key points

1. All duty bodies need to respond to drug related litter within three hours of a report.
2. Enforcement against drug related litter is significantly more complex than other littering behaviours.
3. Enforcement officers should use extra caution due to the increased risk and be aware that any fine would not be paid, creating additional an administrative burden.
4. A police-led approach to the issue of syringes (as opposed to the issue of drug crime) could exacerbate the problem by dispersing users and locations.

## Innovation

A number of innovative practices and policy ideas have been tested to reduce drug use, discarded syringes and drug related deaths. Whilst recognising that some of these issues are not currently wholly in local authority control, there are a number of areas which can support prevention and minimise risk both to users and members of the public.

One such example which is operating effectively in all parts of Wales are Needle Exchange programmes which offer a service where a user is able to return a used needle in return for a sterile needle. There is strong evidence to show that needle exchange schemes can play a part in reducing drug related litter.

International studies show return rates averaging 90%, with average rates for UK schemes slightly lower at around 80%<sup>xiii</sup>. This could mean less drug related litter as drug users return used needles in a safe manner. It also results in users of the scheme having sterile needles to inject with, rather than injecting with a potentially contaminated needle.

Scottish Community Safety Network launched one such project which proved extremely successful having a 57% reduction in discarded sharps across the Scottish Borders, with an average month seeing an exchange of 4500-5000 needles throughout the Scottish Borders<sup>xiv</sup>. These appear well used in Wales, which have a high percentage of regular users and there is no evidence of negative impacts. Local authorities are encouraged to advertise these in hotspot areas and work with public health officials to ensure that the schemes are targeted in the right areas at the right times for maximum impact.

Smart syringes (designed for single use) are one such innovation that will likely be more prevalent in the coming years. Whilst this may not necessarily address the litter problem directly, it would encourage needle exchange and minimise transmission risk when encountered. In 2015 the World Health Organisation stated that smart syringes should be used for all injections by 2020<sup>xv</sup>. They are more expensive which would explain the delay but it is likely that they will become more prevalent in time.

Safer injecting facilities are another policy option to consider and have been discussed for a number of years but proceeding with these rooms hasn't moved forward in Wales or England. In 2016 these rooms were introduced to Scotland and Ireland. The main objectives of consumption rooms are health objectives (to reduce the health risks associated with drug use, enable more hygienic drug consumption, reduce mortality and morbidity, stabilise and improve the health of service users along with reducing public drug use and avoid increase in crime in and around the facility).



The use of needle exchange programmes in safe injection sites has been proven to reduce the number of syringes thrown in public. Wood et al (2004<sup>xvi</sup>) monitored drug related litter in the vicinity of a safe injecting facility named Insite in Vancouver which opened in 2003 (North America's first safe injecting facility). In the ten blocks around the city, they found a drastic reduction in drug related litter in the weeks that followed the facility's opening. Much of the available global evidence points to safer injecting facilities resulting in better safety for drug users and a reduction in drug related litter and public nuisance.

Although not without controversy, safer injecting facilities have proved successful in tackling the problem of drug related litter and drug related harm with the main barrier to implementation being public perception.

#### Key points

1. Needle exchange programmes can be effective and a more joined up approach is required to target these accordingly where drug related litter is an issue and where there is the greatest need.
2. Smart syringes will likely become more prevalent in the future, this may reduce harm but exacerbate the littering issue.
3. Safer injecting facilities are controversial but have demonstrated drastic reductions in drug related litter in studies elsewhere in the world.

# Appendices

## Current Practice in Wales

### North Wales Police

North Wales Police in conjunction with the six local authorities and Betsy Cadwallader health board have recently launched a drugs litter line <http://www.drugslitterline.org.uk/> and freephone number to enable residents and visitors to North Wales to report any instances of drugs related litter. This will enable authorities and police to deal with the problem more efficiently and enables the public to have one point of contact.

<https://www.north-wales.police.uk/news-and-appeals/drugs-litter-line>

### Cardiff Council Community Safety Team

In addition to taking reports of drug related litter from the public via telephone, since September 2019, Cardiff Council has used both an app and website on which the public can report drug related litter. Both the app and website enable the use of geotags to pinpoint exactly where the drug related litter is located. This accurate recording enables the street cleansing team to locate the litter and remove it more quickly.

This also enables the local authority to map locations in which drug related litter is commonly found. From this, the community safety team can engage with those responsible for the litter in the area, to reduce the issue.

<https://www.cardiff.gov.uk/ENG/resident/Rubbish-and-recycling/Report-a-problem/report-drugs-needles>

### Focus on: Butetown Community Action

Drug litter can be found anywhere but when hotspots are located action needs to be taken to address the issue. One approach alone will not help in irradiating the presence of drugs related litter but as has been seen in Butetown a holistic approach by a whole community can begin to make a difference. Butetown Community Safety partnership have recently launched a video which shows how sectors throughout the community have come together. A multifaceted approach from Cardiff Council, Police Cardiff and Vale Area Planning Board (APB) service user charity and amongst others.

### Focus on: Newport Drugs Partnership

In 2019 Newport Council set up a drugs partnership to work with a holistic approach with a variety of agencies. This meant working with different departments of the waste management team, charities, and emergency services. The sheer number of needles and sharps related incidents in binmen, and fire officers prompted collaborations. Charities such as Pride in Pill use special equipment to pick needles, grabbers and special gloves allows community to clean up in their areas themselves and not just rely on authority staff.

Experts working with the drug community, Kaleidoscope charity, are working with the council on joint databases to collate data on needles, drugs related litter. Operatives in the council will write drugs related litter down on a sheet and then transfer to a spreadsheet. This data has multiple uses such as site-specific risk assessments, ascertaining hot spots which is beneficial to the clean-up teams but also charities working with volunteer peers (who are also users) to do outreach in the community. One aspect which is key to the success of these databases is that hotspots are not shared with the police as enforcement intervention can scare users and disperse the problem to new and unknown locations. Without this interference the data shows the patterns and habits of users are predictable making it easier to work with the groups and clean up sharps efficiently. The data collated through hotspots shows where drugs litter bins would be best installed. The provisions have been set aside for these, but they have not yet been installed.

Working with drugs charities creates opportunities to engage with users and work in ways they respond well. An example of this is the needle exchange programmes. Work with users has been done to review practises and insights into messaging and incentives. Incentives and information are required for needles to be disposed of safely as those participating in heroin related drug use do not necessarily think about being 'responsible citizens' when doing so.

Another desired outcome to working with other organisations include the needle exchange program liaising with the health board. The main priority of the health board is to minimise infections and needle sharing which is a rather different priority to those focused on drugs related litter. Moving forward more collaboration on advertising disposal zones and making them accessible to use can minimise sharps related incidents.

### Focus on: Cardiff Rivers Group



Photo taken by Cardiff Rivers Group

Much of the litter left behind from consuming nitrous oxide has often either been incinerated or sent to landfill.

Cardiff Rivers Group on their litter picks are now collecting as many of the canisters as they can, (which can block drains and pose a threat to wildlife and the environment) and recycle them at a scrap metal company to produce funds to help fund their charity work. In 2022, Cardiff Rivers Group recycled 1,005 large NOx canisters and 48,000 small nitrous oxide canisters<sup>xvii</sup>. In one litter pick more than 700 small canisters were found in a park in Cardiff. Whilst it is important to reduce drug paraphernalia being littered in the first place, this is one innovative method that has been used to try to reduce drug related litter.

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