

News story: ACMD warns ministers of falling local funding for drug treatment services

The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), which advises the government on drugs of misuse and their harmful effects, found that maintaining funding of drug treatment services is essential to preventing drug-related death and drug-driven crime in communities. However, money available for both youth and adult substance misuse services has fallen in recent years.

The ACMD heard evidence of examples of funding reductions in local areas in England, brought about through variations to existing contracts and re-procurement of local services. For example, one local authority re-procured its substance misuse services to achieve 32% 'cost-efficiencies' over a five-year contract.

The report says the ACMD is concerned that such a loss of funding would result in the dismantling of a drug misuse treatment system that has brought huge improvement to the lives of people with drug and alcohol problems. If resources are spread too thinly, the report says, the effectiveness of drug treatment will suffer, which could lead to increased levels of blood-borne viruses, drug-related deaths and drug-driven crime in communities.

Annette Dale-Perera, chair of the ACMD's Recovery Committee, said:

A lack of spending on drug treatment is short-sighted and a catalyst for disaster. England had built a world class drug treatment system, with fast access to free, good quality drug treatment.

This system is now being dismantled due to reductions in resources. Unless government protect funding, the new drug strategy aspiration of 'effectively funded and commissioned [drug treatment] services' will be compromised.

The ACMD received evidence that further reductions in resources were likely because of future savings to the overall public health grant, as outlined by Public Health England. The report also found that disruptive and frequent re-procurement of resources was draining vital resources and resulting in poorer recovery outcomes.

It adds that in the complex and changing context it is difficult to see how current levels of drug, and also alcohol, misuse treatment coverage and outcomes can be maintained without significant extra efforts to protect investment and quality.

In its conclusions the ACMD makes a number of recommendations including:

- drug and alcohol misuse services should be mandated within local authority budgets and/or the commissioning of drug and alcohol treatment placed within NHS commissioning structures
- transparency and clearer financial reporting on local drug misuse treatment services should be increased in order to challenge local disinvestment or falls in treatment penetration
- the drug misuse treatment workforce should be reviewed to strike a balance of qualified and unqualified staff and volunteers required for effective drug misuse treatment services
- links between local healthcare services and local drug treatment systems should be strengthened
- commissioning contracts should be five to ten years in length
- research infrastructure and capacity within the drugs misuse field should be addressed

Notes to editors: