Scottish Parliament Health and Sport Committee Session on Substance Misuse

I refer to your email request on 27th November 2017, in which you invited Police Scotland to give evidence on drugs misuse to the Scottish Parliament Health and Sport Committee on Tuesday 30th January 2018.

In my capacity as Head of Police Scotland’s Safer Communities business area, I am pleased to confirm that I will attend this event and be in a position to outline the key aspects of the preventative work which the force is currently undertaking and developing in this arena.

In respect of your request for a written submission in response to the four key questions that will be posed by the Committee, I can put forward the following commentary at this juncture:

**Question 1 - To what extent do you believe the Scottish Government’s National Drugs Strategy, The Road to Recovery, and the approach by Integration Authorities and NHS Boards are preventative?**

The National Drugs Strategy is focussed on the recovery and wellbeing of the individual and prevention is recognised as one of a number of key priorities within Chapter 1: Making a Fresh Start.

This chapter highlights ‘better prevention of drug problems, with improved life choices for children and young people, especially those at particular risk of developing a drug problem, allowing them to realise their full potential in all areas of life’ as being a priority.
Chapter 2: Preventing Drug Use; posits that preventing drug use is more effective than treating established drug problems. This section highlights that people will always consider using drugs but it is crucial that no-one in Scotland today takes drugs out of ignorance of the consequences. The prevention approach therefore appears built around the provision of accurate and credible information to the public and effective communication with young people both within, and outwith, the school environment.

Recognising that children and young people are crucial to the success of any preventative approach, the Strategy outlines that substance misuse education in schools is often the first line of prevention. Through the curriculum for excellence all those in the school community share responsibility to contribute to the Health and Wellbeing framework and teachers are not expected to deliver substance misuse education alone. It is also recognised that no single approach is effective without collaboration/coordination and that one off interventions have limited value.

Chapter 2 also outlines the need to address underlying factors associated with drug use which may impact on an individual’s decision to use substances. This includes early years’ experience, family relationships and circumstances together with parental attitudes and behaviours. It is here that socio-economic disadvantage is also recognised as a clear contributory factor.

In summary, the need for a collaborative, cohesive and sustained prevention based approach is recognised throughout the National Drugs Strategy, as is the value of partnership working and peer mentoring to ensure that preventative messaging is delivered to the public and to our young people. Police Scotland is not in a position to comment on the approach of NHS Boards.

**Question 2 - Is the approach adequate or is more action needed?**

It is suggested that more could be done to identify the drivers to problem drug use and tackle these under-lying factors collectively, rather than in isolation. This could be achieved with the assistance of Partnership for Action on Drugs in Scotland (PADS) which was recently established and includes an Executive Strategy Group and three subgroups; namely, Communities, Harm Reduction and Quality & Consistency.

Each of the subgroups has been tasked to lead on areas of work designed to address drug related harms. Police Scotland has representation on the PADS Executive Strategy Group and all three subgroups. Furthermore, Police Scotland has developed a similar governance structure; the multi-agency Drug Strategy Group (or DSG) is chaired by an Assistant Chief Constable and a Tactical Subgroup – the Drug Action Group (or DAG) - which is co-chaired by me and the Detective Chief Superintendent who holds the National Drug Coordinator portfolio.

This governance structure ensures that Police Scotland tackles the issues around drugs in a manner which aligns itself to the PADS programme and promotes the collaborative partnership working and information sharing needed to effectively tackle Scotland’s drug problems.

More action is needed to aid understanding of social inequalities; by taking steps to address factors such as adverse childhood experiences (ACES), mental health, housing, employment and poverty, which impact on an individual’s drug use and recovery.
Through this, we can begin to prevent problematic drug use and associated harms which contribute to the continued rise in drug related deaths.

Within Police Scotland, a Harm Prevention Portfolio has been developed within Safer Communities to ensure coordination across key business areas and activities. Harm Prevention leads are already looking at the links between ACES, substance use and mental health. Police Scotland recognises the need to address these issues as one. In this regard, there is a clear requirement for existing, and any future Scottish Government strategies or frameworks, to be cross portfolio and encourage a multi-disciplinary approach to tackle these issues together - not in isolation.

Work is also needed to address stigma and change the perceptions and attitudes of professionals and public around drug use, drug dependency, people in recovery or those undergoing treatment. Stigma can impact on an individual’s willingness to seek treatment and engage with support services. It can also influence the way in which we, as a society, address drug related harms. By raising awareness of stigma and the negative impacts of stigmatising attitudes we can influence behaviour and create an inclusive environment that recognises drug use as primarily a health issue. In doing so we can support individuals to address the harms they experience from their substance use and promote their engagement with services.

**Question 3 - What evaluation has been done of interventions?**

The National Drugs Strategy (Page 17) highlights that 'substance misuse education in schools is often the first line of prevention against drugs use, providing opportunities to pass on accurate, up to date facts, explore attitudes and crucially foster the skills needed to make positive decisions'.

‘Choices for Life’ is a diversionary and educational initiative, funded by Scottish Government, delivered by Police Scotland and supported by YoungScot and other external partners. Its main objective is raising awareness amongst 11-18 year olds regarding the risks and dangers of substance misuse including smoking, alcohol and drugs.

Police Scotland receives a grant from Scottish Government to deliver the ‘Choices for Life’ programme and the funds are utilised to ensure that key messaging is delivered effectively to the target audience. Prior to the allocation of funds, analysis is undertaken to identify / consider the underlying need and link to local / national priorities; any previous or similar programme is also reviewed in terms of cost / benefit / outcome before being presented to a Review Board which is chaired by the Head of Harm Prevention. Subsequently, proposals for the year ahead are discussed and agreed with Scottish Government.

The allocated funds are divided into various events and programmes both nationally and locally. Part of the funding is specifically used to support community based events delivered in communities by Divisional personnel following an approved application process.

The whole programme is continually reviewed by Police Scotland throughout the year to ensure that the on-going delivery is in line with Scottish Government expectations.

This process includes a robust review of all applications for community based events to ensure that those that receive funding are those that can best deliver positive outcomes.
for young people with the focus being on programmes that are continuing or produce a legacy as opposed to one off events.

The ‘Choices for Life’ programme is currently being reviewed at the request of Scottish Government to ensure it remains fit for purpose and continues to address the issues identified in Road to Recovery. Mentor UK have been funded to conduct this review and report its findings direct to Scottish Government. Police Scotland will work with Scottish Government colleagues to take forward any learning gained from the current review of ‘Choices for Life’ and utilise the findings to appropriately support the delivery of substance misuse education in schools to support informed choices and positive decision making.

Question 4 - Are the services and national drugs strategy being measured and evaluated in terms of cost and benefit?

As outlined above, a review of ‘Choices for Life’ is currently being undertaken and will include analysis of cost and benefit.

With the focus being on tackling Scotland’s drug problem as a health issue, and the increased likelihood of individuals being referred to drug / physical / mental health services through the ‘seek, keep and treat’ process, there will, it would appear, be a need to examine and evaluate the delivery of such services.

Conclusion

The National Drugs Strategy recognises the value of prevention based approaches and highlights those factors that impact on an individual’s use of substances. The Strategy posits that preventing drug use is more effective than treating established drug problems and a partnership approach to informing and educating our young people and to providing preventative messaging for the wider public is crucial. Police Scotland continues to support this partnership approach nationally through PADS and locally through the Harm Prevention Portfolio and engagement at Divisional level.

I trust that this response will suffice and I look forward to meeting you on 30th January 2018.

Yours sincerely,

John McKenzie
Chief Superintendent