

Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee
Wednesday 23 April 2025
7th Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

PE2024: Create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators, and other performance enhancing drugs

Introduction

Petitioner Cael Scott

Petition summary Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of using steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs), and other performance enhancing drugs (PEDs), which should include:

- a particular focus on the impact on young people aged 16-25;
- working with Community Learning and Development practitioners, gyms, and community coaches to raise awareness; and
- developing a public health campaign to highlight the negative impacts of PEDs, encourage regular health check-ups for users, and a screening programme allowing users to test the safety of their PEDs.

Webpage <https://petitions.parliament.scot/petitions/PE2024>

1. [The Committee last considered this petition at its meeting on 29 May 2024.](#) At that meeting, the Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy.
2. The petition summary is included in **Annexe A** and the Official Report of the Committee's last consideration of this petition is at **Annexe B**.
3. The Committee has received new written submissions from the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy, and the Petitioner, which are set out in **Annexe C**.
4. [Written submissions received prior to the Committee's last consideration can be found on the petition's webpage.](#)
5. [Further background information about this petition can be found in the SPICe briefing](#) for this petition.

6. [The Scottish Government gave its initial position on this petition on 6 June 2023.](#)
7. Every petition collects signatures while it remains under consideration. At the time of writing, 16 signatures have been received on this petition.
8. Members may wish to note [that the Charter of Rights for People Affected by Substance Abuse was launched in December 2024.](#)
9. Members will also be aware that [the Criminal Justice Committee, Health, Social Care and Sport Committee and Social Justice and Social Security Committee are working together to consider the progress being made to reduce drug deaths and tackle problem drug use in Scotland.](#)

Action

10. The Committee is invited to consider what action it wishes to take.

Clerks to the Committee
April 2025

Annexe A: Summary of petition

PE2024: Create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators, and other performance enhancing drugs

Petitioner

Cael Scott

Date Lodged

25 April 2023

Petition summary

Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of using steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs), and other performance enhancing drugs (PEDs), which should include:

- a particular focus on the impact on young people aged 16-25;
- working with Community Learning and Development practitioners, gyms, and community coaches to raise awareness; and
- developing a public health campaign to highlight the negative impacts of PEDs, encourage regular health check-ups for users, and a screening programme allowing users to test the safety of their PEDs.

Previous action

I have spoken to a local MSP, and on their advice, I wrote to the Scottish Government. The Drugs Policy Division responded to say it was focused on the delivery of the National Drugs Mission Plan 2022-2026, which does not address the use of PEDs.

Background information

A few months ago, one of my friends was admitted to hospital with a ruptured aorta. This life-threatening issue came about from steroid use. When I spoke to him, he was horrified at the severity of the issue, and was unaware of how bad the impacts could be having seen many people at his gym, and fitness influencers online, openly use PEDs without apparent impact.

This is not an isolated incident. Every time I attend my gym, PEDs are easily obtained, but information about them is not.

Social media influencers advocate for SARMs, claiming they have no negative impact. The fact that they are legal to buy suggests to users that they are safe, when

the reality is they are simply untested. For young teens and adults feeling pressured to look a certain way, social media influencers are dominating the conversation.

From my time in youth work, I'm aware of this growing trend, and have worked with people as young as fourteen using PEDs. Something must change.

Annexe B: Extract from Official Report of last consideration of PE2024 on 29 May 2024

The Convener: PE2024, which has been lodged by Cael Scott, calls on the Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to create a national public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of the use of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators and other performance-enhancing drugs. It makes the case that that programme should have a particular focus on the impact of such products on young people aged 16 to 25, and that work should be done with community learning and development practitioners, gyms and community coaches to raise awareness of the issue. It also asks that a public health campaign be developed to highlight the negative impacts of PEDs and to encourage regular health check-ups for users, and that a screening programme be developed to allow users to test the safety of their PEDs.

We last considered the petition on 6 September 2023, when we agreed to write to UK Anti-Doping, Anabolic Steroids UK and the Scottish Drugs Forum, as well as the Scottish Government. The Scottish Government has responded by providing the terms of reference for the early interventions for children and young people working group, which, it notes,

“will be guided every step of the way by the experiences of young people whose lives have been affected by alcohol and drug use and the front line services who support them.”

The response also lists the organisations that are members of the working group.

In its response, UK Anti-Doping draws our attention to its 2019 report on image and performance-enhancing drugs, which showed that the use of IPEDs extends beyond cheating in sport and is a significant public health issue. It is UK Anti-Doping’s view that structural arrangements to establish cross-agency working are needed in order to tackle the wider public health concerns that exist in relation to IPED use.

The Scottish Drugs Forum would welcome and actively support any national initiative that was focused on reducing the risks and harms associated with IPEDs. The forum suggests that a national campaign should be accompanied by the provision of adequate services, such as blood testing and other health checks, to reduce harms.

We have also received a response from the petitioner, in which they share their analysis of a series of freedom of information requests to regional health boards across Scotland on the costs and prevalence of, and existing support for, IPED use.

Do members have any comments or suggestions for action, given the robust responses that we have received?

Maurice Golden: I think that we might be nearing the end of the road on this petition as well. However, we could write to the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy to highlight the written evidence that the committee has received, which you have articulated, and to seek an update on what specific action the early intervention working group is taking to address public health concerns about the use of image

and performance-enhancing drugs, including how it intends to include owners of leisure centres, gyms and fitness professionals in that work.

The Convener: I think that we might accompany that with a note to emphasise the strength of expression of the responses that we received from the Scottish Drugs Forum and UK Anti-Doping. Are colleagues content with that approach?

Members *indicated agreement.*

Annexe C: Written submissions

Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy written submission, 27 June 2024

PE2024/G: Create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators, and other performance enhancing drugs

I refer to your correspondence dated 31 May 2024 asking for an update on what specific action the Early Interventions for Children and Young People Working Group is taking to address public health concerns about the use of Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs (IPEDs).

The Working Group has provided an invaluable opportunity to listen to the views of young people about the services available to them. The focus of the work has been on treatment services in general rather than on specific treatment services for individual drug groups.

So, in answer to the Committee's question, this Working Group has not considered IPEDs specifically. The Working Group is developing a Framework which includes treatment standards for children and young people being supported for any drug or alcohol problem. The aim is to have the Framework published in late 2024 in time for the introduction of the Charter of Rights for people affected by substance use in December 2024. The Framework and the Charter will benefit young people impacted by IPEDs.

The Scottish Government's policy on IPEDs remains that we will continue to support Police Scotland in tackling any criminality and we will continue to support local treatment and recovery services to provide help for people who have been impacted by drugs of any kind, including IPEDs.

CHRISTINA MCKELVIE MSP

Petitioner written submission, 10 April 2025

PE2024/H: Create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators, and other performance enhancing drugs

Summary of Key Points:

- An estimated 560 people will die each year from IPED use
- That number is likely to increase
- The Scottish Government's current policy will result in no further action
- The Scottish Government's commitment to support police to tackle criminality does not apply to IPEDs as they are legal to use.

- Likewise, the commitment to support local services would be limited to the three health boards that currently provide services for IPED users.

I write largely in response to the Scottish Government submission PE2024/G, to highlight that this submission will ultimately lead to no action. Although on the face of it the Minister was committing to continue a policy that might help reduce the impact of IPEDs, the unique legality of IPEDs and patchwork support provision for users means the Scottish Government are in fact indicating that they will do nothing. I also wish to draw the Committee's attention to the publication of an observational study, released since the Committee last met, that gives us a clear idea of the number of people who will die annually from harms resulting from IPED use.

That study from 2024 has highlighted the mortality risks of IPEDs. In an observational study over 11 years¹, nearly 1200 young men identified as users of anabolic steroids were compared to age matched controls in the general population. It found that 2.8% of IPED users died, compared to a 1% mortality rate in the general population. That hazard rating of 2.8, when applied to the previous estimate of 4% of the population using IPEDs made by the Drug and Mental Health Charity *We Are With You* ([provided by the Scottish Government in FOISA Request 202300382567](#)), would indicate an estimated death rate of 560 people per year. For comparison, in one 2019 study², heroin use had an excess death rate of 9.3% over a similar 11 year period. With an estimated 47,100 users in Scotland³, that would be approximately 400 deaths per year from the indirect harms of heroin use (and 389 direct deaths in 2023)⁴.

In the very first response to this petition, the Scottish Government stated “the focus of the Scottish Government’s National Mission on drugs is to reduce drug related deaths”. With the data suggesting that so many people die from IPED use (even if from long term or indirect causes), a position to refuse to take action is becoming increasingly untenable. Despite this, [the response from the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy](#) ultimately means they will take no action.

The Minister stated that the Scottish Government’s policy is to continue to support the police in tackling any criminality. However, many IPEDs, such as selective androgen receptor modulators are entirely legal, and can be freely purchased online. Even where they are covered by the Misuse of Drugs Act, there is an exemption for anabolic steroids intended for personal use, meaning this commitment does not apply to this petition or this group of drugs. Either the Minister was aware of this and attempted to placate the Committee despite a policy of inaction, or she was genuinely unaware of the legal complexities and availability of IPEDs.

The Minister also committed to support local treatment and recovery services. However, as [I highlighted in submission PE2024/F](#), after a series of FOISA requests to every regional NHS Health Board in Scotland, there is a clear issue with a lack of service provision or support. If there were local services that could provide advice

¹ [Windfeld-Mathiasen J, Heerfordt IM, Dalhoff KP, Andersen JT, Horwitz H. Mortality Among Users of Anabolic Steroids. JAMA. 2024;331\(14\):1229–1230.](#)

² [Lewer, D., Tweed, E., Aldridge, R. & Moreley K. \(2019\). Causes of hospital admission and mortality among 6683 people who use heroin: A cohort study comparing relative and absolute risks](#)

³ [Scottish Public Health Observatory. \(2024\). Drug Use: Availability and Prevalence.](#)

⁴ [Scottish Public Health Observatory. \(2024\). Drug Use: Health Harm.](#)

and treatment that were readily available, this petition would be largely redundant. As highlighted in my previous submission, from available data, only ~1% of IPED users are engaging with healthcare services; perhaps because these services are only available in three health boards. There is clearly a need for more widespread support than small initiatives in only three areas, but this is not addressed by the Scottish Government.

I note that when the Committee last discussed this petition, Maurice Golden MSP said they felt “we might be nearing the end of the road on this petition”. So I have no doubt that members of the Committee will be considering closing the petition when faced with the obstinate response from the Minister for Drugs and Alcohol Policy. However, in the 12 months it would take for another petition to be brought asking for this matter to be reconsidered, an estimated £72 million will have been spent by the NHS tackling this issue with minimal support from the Scottish Government and, more importantly, more than 550 people will have needlessly died without any further attempt at an intervention.

When I started this petition, I did so on the basis of a single person I knew who had almost lost their life. In the nearly two years since, there has been additional research published, and this research increasingly builds on the pre-existing evidence that action must be taken. This petition is no longer about one person who nearly died, but the hundreds who will die over the remainder of this Parliament’s term.

So if the members of the Committee feel, as Mr Golden suggested they might, that they cannot do anything further, I would ask that they instead consider referring the petition to the Health and Sport Committee. Although I appreciate that there are many demands on the time of Members of the Scottish Parliament, and many vital issues need to be considered, I hope that ten people dying every week would be reason enough to continue to call on the Scottish Government to take action.