

## The Black Review – briefing note

August 2021

### Background

In February 2019, then Home Secretary Sajid Javid appointed Dame Carol Black to conduct an Independent Review of Drugs. One year later, the [first part of the Review](#) was published, focussing on drugs markets and the toxic combination of violence, poverty and exploitation that underpins supply and demand.

The [second part of the Review](#) was published in July 2021, making radical recommendations for drug treatment, recovery and prevention and putting forward powerfully the case for political leadership and a significant uplift in protected investment.

The importance of the Review's timing cannot be overstated. Deaths related to drug poisonings are at their [highest levels since records began in 1993](#), having increased by 60 per cent in the last decade. There have been concerning [increases in drug use among young people](#) in recent years, and it's been estimated that at least [1.5 million adults are affected by a relative's drug use](#).

Meanwhile, the long-term effects of Covid-19 and national lockdowns on the population's mental and physical health, and their social determinants, are still not fully understood. There are already worrying signs of increased substance misuse with [alcohol-specific deaths increasing by 20 per cent](#) from 2019 to 2020.

The Black Review makes clear that only a whole-system approach will succeed in effecting long-term change to our treatment and recovery system and the lives of the people who depend on it. In its [initial response to the Review](#), the government acknowledged this and set out some important preliminary steps.

At the [launch event for the Review](#), Public Health Minister Jo Churchill stated "we can do better, and we should do better" and that the Review "presents us all with an opportunity and a time for action". Attention is now firmly fixed on the outcome of the Spending Review in the Autumn, which will ultimately be the decisive factor.

### The Review's findings

There is little doubt that Dame Carol has found the current approach in England and Wales to reducing the harms caused by drugs woefully ineffective. The total annual cost of harms related to illicit drug use in England is cited as a staggering £19.3 billion.

Drug-related crime amounts for almost half, while investment in drug treatment and prevention services represents less than four per cent of the total cost, despite the fact that [every £1 spent on treatment saves £4](#) from reduced demands on health, prison, law enforcement and emergency services.

Drug harms continue to fuel or exacerbate other social problems like homelessness, demands on child social care, unemployment, mental ill health, and contact with the criminal justice system. The Review also found drug dependency and drug deaths are concentrated in the most deprived areas, particularly in the north of England.

### **The Review's recommendations**

These harms have led Dame Carol to suggest the government is left with “an unavoidable choice” to “invest in tackling the problem or keep paying for the consequences”. The investment in treatment called for is substantial - [£1.78 billion over five years](#), representing an 80% increase to the current annual treatment budget by year five.

The treatment field recently received an [£80 million boost](#), primarily to improve pathways into treatment from the criminal justice system. A government Minister recently stated this investment signalled “[a turning point, a moment for change, but also the start of something](#)”; the much larger amount Dame Carol has called for will depend on the Spending Review this Autumn.

But Dame Carol also made clear that additional investment is “necessary, but not sufficient” and will need to be supported by a radical overhaul of leadership, co-ordination and accountability for treatment, prevention and recovery.

On this point, the government has already begun to [set in motion](#) some of the structural changes and policy commitments that will help drive through the Review's recommendations:

- A new [Joint Combating Drugs Unit](#) housed in the Home Office will bring together six key departments, recognising the cross-cutting nature of addiction and its harms.
- A new long-term drugs strategy will be published by the end of 2021. The government is committed “to engage widely on the approach and interventions within the strategy across a wide range of sectors and the whole system of combating drug misuse”.
- A national outcomes framework will be developed.
- Dame Carol Black will continue to act as an independent advisor, sitting on a “combating drugs delivery board” to oversee the work of the Drugs Unit, including representation from the six key departments, the Treasury, and No. 10, and Dr Ed Day, National Recovery Champion.
- The new drugs programme will produce an annual report for Parliament, starting in 2022, which will report on progress against the outcomes framework.
- A local outcomes framework and a commissioning quality standard (both recommended by the Black Review) will also be drafted “in consultation with the local system”.

The majority of the Review's 32 recommendations still require a full government response, which we expect later in the year once the outcome of the Spending Review is determined. It will need to respond to the Review's important recommendations to develop a workforce strategy, occupational standards and training for drugs workers; incentivise new research; support recovery communities; improve services for young people; and review the current approach to commissioning residential rehabilitation and detoxification services.

The Review also makes a number of recommendations that speak to the cross-cutting nature of drug dependency and its social environment. The government's full response must acknowledge the need to better join up treatment with housing, health, employment and criminal justice services. There

will need to be particular attention given to the need to improve the situation for people experiencing co-occurring mental ill health and drug dependency.

### **Next steps**

The Black Review has correctly identified and thoroughly explained the challenges facing the substance misuse field. It has brought together a powerful case for investment and reform that few can deny would bring about lasting, positive change. The Review suggests that the policy programme would – if implemented – save the lives of over 3,000 opiate users, bring 95,000 new people into recovery and prevent 2.8 million crimes.

But Dame Carol has made clear that the recommendations must not be “cherry picked” and that the government should commit to itself the full, long-term project. In her own words, “This is about a whole system. And when you start to pull that system apart, bits of it will fall off.” Dame Carol has committed to continue in her role as an advocate for treatment and recovery and, in her words, “hold the government’s feet to the fire”.

Collective Voice, alongside other system leadership bodies, will continue to monitor developments around the Black Review and advocate for its recommendations to be implemented.

You can stay abreast by [signing up to our bulletin](#), [following us on Twitter](#) and checking our [website](#) where we regularly [blog](#) on substance misuse treatment policy.

We will continue to update this briefing as more details come to light. If you have any suggestions for how we could make it more useful for you or your colleagues, please email [peter@collectivevoice.org.uk](mailto:peter@collectivevoice.org.uk)

### **Resources and comment:**

- The Black Review [Part 1](#) and [Part 2](#)
- The Black Review [launch event](#)
- Government announces the [Joint Combating Drugs Unit](#)
- Collective Voice [joint response](#) to the Black Review with Adfam, the NHS Addictions Provider Alliance, and the English Substance Use Commissioners Group
- Collective Voice [member responses](#) to the Black Review
- Collective Voice [clarification note](#) on Black Review investment recommendation
- Collective Voice [webinar](#) with Dame Carol Black
- Government [initial response](#) to the Black Review
- Collective Voice [blog](#) on the government response