

# RELEASE

The Drug Strategy for the next ten years looks like much of the same, but there are some aspects of it which appear slightly sinister. The withdrawing of benefits for those failing to engage in treatment; the freezing of assets of those not yet even charged with an offence; the idea that enforcement tactics leading to an increase in drug prices acts as a form of harm reduction; a requirement that an additional 2000 conditional cautions and 1000 DRRs should be issued by 2009 are all worrying developments.

Some aspects of the strategy are positive the focus on families and the willingness to accept alternative forms of substitute prescribing. However, there is an overall feeling that this strategy is more about headline grabbing and looking 'tougher than the other guys'.

## **WELFARE BENEFITS**

Release is particularly concerned about the proposal to remove income benefits for those who fail to engage in treatment. Although the specifics are not contained within the strategy, Government announcements have clearly indicated a financially punitive approach. This development is of concern on a number of levels not least because it simplifies addiction.

The strategy paper recognises that many of those affected by drug addiction come from the most vulnerable and poverty stricken segments of society. Yet, the removal of benefits would compound this position. To leave people without income for a prolonged period, newspaper reports suggested up to 26 weeks in a 'three strike' rule, would result in many having no option but to resort to crime. This clearly is a counterproductive approach.

There appears to be little or no concern about the role of individual therapeutic providers, a role already muddled by the rapid expansion of criminal justice interventions. Will it be the job of a drugs worker to contact the Department of Work and Pensions [DWP] to advise that a client has failed to attend and that his/her benefits should be stopped? Will people feel comfortable in accessing treatment knowing that their confidentiality could be breached? There is no doubt that a trusting relationship between the drugs worker and client is paramount in determining successful treatment outcomes. The continued erosion of this relationship, through the increased disclosure of information for criminal justice, the NTA and potentially the DWP, must surely undermine the likelihood of positive treatment outcomes.

Many organisations have already stated they are concerned about the lack of funding available to facilitate treatment for those on benefits. Release believes that, instead the drugs field should be more concerned about the long term impact of service users seeing them as 'bed fellows' with the State.

## **ASSET SEIZING ON ARREST**

Seizing alleged drug-dealers' assets upon arrest—before they are even charged, let alone convicted by a court—may be a cartoonist's dream (visions of mountain bikes, plasma TVs and ipods heaped on the front desk, while the constable wonders 'What are we gonna do with this lot, Sarge?'). It also sounds a darker note, however, marking a further radical departure with the traditional principles of British justice, where one was innocent until proven guilty. Release wonders which cornerstone of British justice is planned for removal next?

## **TOUGHER ENFORCEMENT EQUALS HIGHER DRUG PRICES**

If the Government had enjoyed any significant success at all with its enforcement strategy the street prices of heroin and cocaine would indeed be higher. However, the exact opposite is the truth – the prices of the two drugs that the Government said were of the greatest concern have in fact fallen annually for the last ten years.

Further, the strategy states that higher prices will discourage use; reduce current consumption and encourage many to end their drug use. On closer inspection this theory, which the Government states is evidence based, is the result of a paper produced by RAND in 2002 titled 'School based drug prevention: what kind of drug use does it prevent'<sup>1</sup>. Is it appropriate that the UK's national enforcement strategy flows from a paper focusing on drug use by American school children?

## **TARGET DRIVEN APPROACH TO SUCCESS**

Whilst many targets driving the success of treatment have been dropped, criminal justice intervention targets now drive the strategy instead, with the Government wanting 2000 conditional cautions and 1000 additional DRRs meted out by 2009. The decision about issuing cautions or DRRs should surely be based on the circumstances of the case not targets.

## **EDUCATION**

Release welcomes further education on the harms that can be associated with drug use but would encourage the Government to ensure the messages delivered are honest and credible.

As stated in our response to the Consultation document published in July 2007, it is regretful that this process and the culminating strategy is, in our opinion, an opportunity missed. In the past ten years there has been extensive qualitative research<sup>2</sup> into the current drugs strategy and the failure of the ongoing 'war on drugs'. Dressing up tired old documents with a handful of new phrases and gimmicks, when so many lives are at stake, is a terrible indictment of the politicization of drug policy.

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<sup>1</sup> Caulkins JP, Pacula RL, Paddock SM and Chiesa J (2002) School based drug prevention: what kind of drug use does it prevent? Santa Monica: RAND

<sup>2</sup> Science and Technology Ctte, 'Drug Classification: Making a Hash of It?' 5<sup>th</sup> Report, HC1031/ RSA, 'Drugs – Facing the facts', March 2007/Reuter. P & Stevens A, 'An Analysis of UK Drug Policy', UKDPC, April 2007.