A Local Drug Early Warning System
[Salford pilot]

A simple, low cost, local drug early warning system (EWS).
Model with regional & national expansion plan

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UK DrugWatch

UK DrugWatch is an informal online Professional Information Network (PIN). UK DrugWatch was set up in November 2010 by a group of professionals working in the UK drugs sector. The group was established in light of the lack of useful information around the 2010 heroin drought, the rise of NPS and the subsequent plethora of random, often inaccurate drug alerts/warnings.

The aim of the group is to raise/establish standards for drug information, alerts and warnings. It is currently an unfunded, bottom-up initiative that works in the spirit of mutual co-operation.

UK DrugWatch members have produced a number of information briefings and other resources for professionals and have provided advice around numerous NPS and adulterated ‘traditional’ drug incidence. It also acts as an advisory body to a number of other professional information networks including Lifeline DrugWatch and the pilot of the Salford Drug EWS.

UK DrugWatch is currently looking to expand the scope of its activities. This document outlines an ongoing pilot project to establish a simple low cost network of local drug early warning systems.

UK DrugWatch members
- Michael Linnell - Lifeline (DrugWatch co-ordinator)
- Harry Shapiro - Drugscope
- John Ramsey - TicTac
- Annette Dale Perera - NHS / Club Drug Clinic London.
- Neil Hunt - University of Kent
- Danny Morris - UKHRA & Independent Consultant
- Kevin Flemen - KFX
- Katy McLeod - Crew 2000
- Austin Smith - Scottish Drugs Forum
- Michael Lawrence - CRI
- Mark Adley - North Tyneside YOS
- Nigel Brunston - Injection Advice/HIT
- Josie Smith - Public Health Wales
- Ifor Glyn - Swansea Drugs Project
- Iain Cameron - Belfast Drug Outreach
- Chris Rintoul - Council for Homeless N.I.
1. Background

Current UK drugs markets
An astonishing and growing variety of ‘legal highs’/’research chemicals’ or what are now more commonly known as Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS) are on sale in the UK. These are often cheaper, more potent and longer lasting than their illegal counterparts.

As one NPS is banned, a newer version can quickly replace it, with the newly banned drugs often reappearing on the illicit market. The European Monitoring Centre (EMCDDA) has described this worldwide phenomenon as a ‘convergence of the markets’.

The current situation in the UK varies region by region, with some areas already reporting significant NPS use among a variety of drug markets including among the existing population of injectors.

There have recently been well publicised cases of deaths from ‘adulterated ecstasy’ containing PMA (para-Methoxyamphetamine).

The injecting drugs market has also been in a state of flux since the heroin drought of 2010, although there are indications of a return of higher purity heroin in some areas with the subsequent concerns of overdose this may cause.

Early Warning Systems
Although a number of national and European wide drug early warning systems (EWS) exist, none of these national/international systems are designed to identify, risk assess or respond to localized outbreaks of NPS or adulterated drug use.

Some local areas have existing local EWS, although the scope and robustness of these varies considerably.

Keeping up to date with the rapidly changing drug market, even knowing which substances are legal, presents a growing challenge for (already busy) professionals.

The Salford Pilot Drug EWS
In the context of this background, Salford DAAT (Drug Alcohol Action Team) asked Lifeline Publications and Research to establish a low cost drug early warning system (EWS) on their behalf.

The pilot of the Salford scheme is already underway. This document is intended to describe (pictorially) the process of setting up an EWS, with the aim of encouraging those areas without an existing scheme to develop one.

This document also outlines plans to utilise DrugWatch and join both new and existing EWS into a regional and national network.

Mutual co-operation
The model and plans contained in this document are not designed to replace existing systems. This system has been conceived in the spirit of mutual co-operation. We aim to enhance scarce existing resources and network together to share knowledge and experience.

Where local EWS already exist it is hoped that either system can be adapted to enable them to be networked together.

The pilot of this system is being developed in Salford, so may need to be adapted or operate differently in other areas. However, the model has been designed to be as simple as possible.

Ownership
The ownership and management of each local EWS in the proposed network will usually lie with the local DAAT (or equivalent). It is envisaged that this overall model and way of working proposed in this document (when fully developed) will be made ‘Creative Commons’ or some similar non-commercial copyright that encourages its adoption.
2. Aim of the System

The overall aim of the system is to reduce drug related death and harm.

The objective is to establish an interactive multi-agency system for professionals likely to come across the use of NPS and/or adulterated traditional drugs.

The system will be designed to respond to the information needs/concerns of its members, facilitate the cascading of information or warnings to appropriate staff and when deemed necessary to send alerts to specific target audiences of service users and/or the media/public.

The system will also assist DrugWatch and/or the DAAT to formally report where necessary to Public Health England or other appropriate body.

The system is designed to be low cost and require the minimum of time commitments from its members. If no incidents arise, there will be no time commitment at all. The system has been designed to be used only when it is needed.

However, the system may also be used to pass on information of relevance such as changes to the drug law, information from other networks and issues seen in other areas etc. Exactly what level of general information is needed/wanted by members will be decided during the pilot phase of this project.
3. Forming a Professional Information Network (PIN)

**Aim:** The aim is to form a local online forum of professionals from relevant services. The purpose of this network is to share information, experience and knowledge and to inform any subsequent alerts, warnings or actions. The Professional Information Network (PIN) is the core of the EWS.

**Step 1**

**Appoint EWS Manager.**

Identify and contact those professionals in your area/town/city who are likely to come across or be in contact with people who use NPS and/or adulterated drugs.

**Step 2**

**Persuade the above professionals to sign up to an online forum and form a Professional Information Network.**

The **EWS Manager** will usually be the relevant DAAT (or equivalent) manager.

In reality DAATs (or equivalent) will already have contacts with many if not all of these professionals, organisations and individuals listed below:

The group may include:
- A & E
- Paramedics
- Police
- Drug services
- YOS
- Youth services
- Dual Diagnosis services
- Public Health
- School counsellors
- Trading Standards etc.

Arrange meetings and seminars where needed to explain, recruit and promote the proposed network.

Emphasize to professionals that this system requires minimum time commitment and is only used when needed.

Encourage those staff who do join to both circulate information to colleagues as appropriate and to recruit others into the network.

There are a number of simple, free ways to set up a PIN, for example a mailing list an online group such as Google Groups.

[https://groups.google.com](https://groups.google.com)

The network should only be accessible by members, should not store information on a database and should anonymise any client information.

Support and advice from IT departments is advised.

The online forum should have an **owner** (usually the DAAT) and a **manager** (usually the relevant DAAT manager).
4. Network Support

**Aim:** The aim is to provide expert, real time advice and support to local Professional Information Networks (PINs) and to utilize the expertise and experience from networks for the benefit of other networks.

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**Example of PIN in action:** In August 2013 a local Mental Health Trust asked for help after they had four separate incidences in a month of patients on wards being rushed to A and E after using ‘Poppers’. All had similar symptoms, including ‘Cyanosed skin’ (blue skin). Within an hour of posting this request on the DrugWatch and Salford pilot networks we received information on the current contents of poppers bottles (isopropyl nitrite) and known risks posted by a toxicologist, a report of the effects of very heavy use (“gas masks and litres of the stuff”) by a former heavy user and poppers manufacturer and a post from an A & E consultant on the cause of the blue skin in heavy poppers use (methaemoglobinaemia), along with the correct standard treatment for this condition.

By the following day we had provided a briefing for staff and bespoke harm reduction advice for clients including warnings about the most likely explanation of these incidents (naïve users swallowing the drug).
5. Local Drug EWS - Information Input

**Aim:** The aim is to establish a system based around the PIN, for rapidly collecting and analysing local information/concerns about NPS and adulterated drugs.

**Internal Input**
- Information/alerts from local PIN members, i.e. concerns about local patterns of drug use, incidence from A & E etc. are posted on the PIN.
- Feedback from PIN members, i.e. are there similar local reports about the same drug/pattern of use?

**External Input**
- Information/alerts from outside local PIN are posted by DrugWatch, i.e. reports from near by area/ national alerts/concerns.

**Request for further information/investigation, sample tested etc.**

**UK DrugWatch**
- UK DrugWatch is seeking clarification on policies for workers sending samples.
- We also plan to develop protocols for further investigations and sampling.

**Output**

**EWS Manager**
- Feedback from UK DrugWatch, i.e. are there similar regional/national reports about the same drug/pattern of use?
- Distribution of appropriate information to PIN.
6. Local Drug EWS - Information Output

Aim: The aim is to establish a system for rapidly analysing information and if appropriate grading and distributing appropriate alerts to selected target audiences.

A simple system for grading alerts has been adapted from the NTA template. This is used for deciding the nature and type of the alert and the appropriate target audience (see appendix). This will be further enhanced as the project develops.

Currently working with City Council Press Office and plan to work with Greater Manchester Police Press Office. The plan is to produce a working EWS media guide/policy that complies with The Information Standard and enhances existing media policies/protocols.

With advice from PIN and DrugWatch - decision taken by EWS Manager on appropriate local output.

User alerts are often produced and distributed by local drug services. Plan is to provide Information Standard compliant templates and guidance to enhance this.

DrugWatch to provide digital briefings for professionals - PIN to aid in distribution. Format and template for briefings already established. Plan is to produce a whole range of briefings and to keep them updated and compliant with The Information Standard.
7. Establishing a Regional Network

**Aim:** The aim is to link the Salford pilot system with existing local networks/EWS to form a regional network. Those localities without a formal system will be encouraged to adopt the model proposed here. A regional conference is planned to promote this system.

Lancashire DAAT have a well established EWS. We are currently holding talks with them with the possibility of running a regional conference to proselytize this regional model.
8. Establishing a National Network

**Aim:** The aim is to eventually join all the networks together into a national network.
DrugWatch Network Support

Lancashire Area EWS

Salford Pilot EWS

Public Information/Alerts protocols with City/Police press offices

Local Targeted Information to drug users

Advice/Info to professionals

Key to diagrams
= Existing
= Planned

Local Area EWS

Local Area EWS

Local Area EWS

Local Area EWS

North West Regional Network
Appendix A  Intelligence reporting form (based on NTA template)

SALFORD DRUG EARLY WARNING SYSTEM

DRUGS EARLY WARNING

Complete this form if you wish to report intelligence or an incident that may lead to a drug alert
(You might want to include an example of a genuine drug alert incident here)

Form completed by:
Name: 
Job title: 
Address: 
Telephone: 
Email address: 
Date completed: 

Source of information: (please circle all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service user</th>
<th>Drug treatment staff</th>
<th>Police</th>
<th>Emergency services / ambulance</th>
<th>Other (please specify)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Do you know if the incident relates to any of the following? (please circle all that apply)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Death</th>
<th>Serious adverse reaction</th>
<th>Hospitalisation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Unusually high/low purity of drugs (delete as appropriate)</td>
<td>Contaminated drugs e.g. Anthrax</td>
<td>New drugs e.g. legal high</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other (please specify):

When did this incident occur? (please be as specific as possible)

Please provide details of the incident you are reporting*:

*Wherever possible this should include:
- Who was involved, e.g. ambulance, service user
- What happened
- Nature of substance e.g. name or street name, purity, description
- Extent to which substance is available e.g. widely on the streets
- Name of the area/city incident took place
- Whether the incident has been verified by another source
- Whether there is any clinical or laboratory evidence / confirmation
Are you able to provide supporting evidence / additional information for this incident? (If yes, tick all boxes that apply and provide further details in the space provided. Please do not send any evidence at this point)
- Test batch / sample of the drug used
- Documented evidence e.g. clinical or laboratory confirmation
- Name and contact details of those involved in the incident
- Other (please specify) ________________________________

Please provide further information about your supporting / additional evidence


Has a similar incident occurred recently (e.g. within the last couple of months)?
- Yes
- No

If yes, please provide details


Any other relevant information?


Please email this form to:
Name of partnership lead for local drug alerts:
Email address:
Telephone number:
Fax:
Address:

OFFICE USE ONLY:
Grade:  [ ] Drug alert  [ ] False alarm  [ ] Other  ___________
Action:
### Alert form (based on NTA template)

**SALFORD DAAT - DRUG EARLY WARNING SYSTEM**

**RED AMBER GREEN DRUG ALERT**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RED / AMBER / GREEN ALERT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red = urgent action to prevent confirmed risk of death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amber = action to prevent possible harm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green = for information only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What type of incident does this alert refer to?**
For example a drug related death, a high number of overdoses, drugs in the area may be contaminated (unusually high or low purity), drugs in the area causing concern, other (please specify):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug or drugs involved (if known):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Has this been confirmed by analysis/testing? Yes/No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Source of alert**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Summary of the alert:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Specific advice/harm reduction messages:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**Action required: (instructions and materials for distribution e.g. posters are attached)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action required: (instructions and materials for distribution e.g. posters are attached)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**DATE OF ALERT: (DD/MM/YYYY)**

**Withdraw or review alert on: (DD/MM/YYYY)**

**For more information or to report any related information**
For further information contact
michael@lifeline.org.uk