



Home Office

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Rt Hon Dame Diana Johnson DBE MP  
Chair, Home Affairs Select Committee  
House of Commons  
London  
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23 April 2024

## Home Affairs Select Committee report on Drugs.

Dear Dame Diana,

I am writing to update you on the risk of synthetic opioids to the UK and the Government's work to address it following the Home Affairs Committee report 'Drugs' (HC 198) published on 31 August 2023. In the report the Committee recommended that the Government should increase its monitoring of synthetic opioids with the Devolved Administrations and that the Government must prepare a strategy to mitigate the risk of an increase in the supply and availability of synthetic opioids in the UK before the end of this Parliament.

The UK Government's 10-Year Drugs Strategy, From Harm to Hope, was a landmark moment bringing the whole of government together to break drug supply chains, build the treatment system and reduce the demand for drugs. Since then, we have made significant progress through record investment in the treatment system, with more people in treatment and more staff recruited, and made further progress in tackling the supply of drugs by mobilising a robust and innovative plan which attacks every phase of the supply chain. This work is already underway across departments and agencies, both nationally and locally, to deliver on the goals of the strategy and has undoubtedly put us in a stronger position to respond to the threat of synthetic opioids.

### The threat of synthetic opioids in the UK

As you are aware synthetic opioids, which include fentanyl and a class of compounds called nitazenes, present a significant risk to people who consume illegal drugs. In the UK in 2017 there was a spike of overdose deaths linked with illicit fentanyl, and in 2021 deaths linked with isotonitazene, but these spikes were not sustained. However, since June 2023, there have been continued overdose deaths linked to nitazenes across the UK,<sup>1</sup> and a sustained level of nitazene detections in drug seizures and

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted deaths in the UK relating to synthetic opioids remain low compared to those from heroin or other opiate related overdoses.

other samples. To support improving our understanding of the threat, the NCA and DHSC have established enhanced real-time monitoring of synthetic opioids working with police forces, Border Force and local drug information systems and have now reported more than 100 drug related deaths involving nitazenes across the UK since June 2023, with at least 40 more cases awaiting further analysis.<sup>2</sup>

In response to a cluster of overdose deaths related to nitazenes in the West Midlands and in the South West in June and July 2023, the National Crime Agency (NCA) established a multi-agency operational response to intensify and coordinate efforts to ensure that all lines of enquiry are prioritised and vigorously pursued to stem the supply of nitazenes to and within the UK and prevent further deaths. This response includes representatives from the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), Border Force, policing and local partners. The NCA works with Border Force, Home Office Intelligence and international partners to prevent illegal substances entering the UK and, with police forces and Regional Organised Crime Units, is delivering a zero-tolerance approach to arrest offenders responsible for the supply of these drugs. We will not tolerate those who put lives at risk by supplying illicit drugs, including the most potent synthetic drugs where risk of fatalities is highest.

This reinforces the Government's overall approach to the misuse of drugs. Those who misuse drugs need to know their actions have consequences and the Government has been clear that there should be a zero-tolerance approach to public drug use embedded within policing.

### **Strategic preparedness**

The Government is already taking swift action to stay one step ahead of the threat and last Summer, together with law enforcement partners and other government departments, I established a cross-Government taskforce to improve our understanding, preparedness, and mitigation against this evolving threat. Members include the Home Office, Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), Ministry of Justice, NCA, HM Prisons and Probation Service, Border Force and the police.

The Taskforce is overseeing a number of mitigations and activities to address this threat, including:

- controlling 15 synthetic opioids (14 of which are nitazenes) under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, which came into force on 20 March and following advice from the ACMD have consulted on a generic definition for nitazenes which will enable a wider group of these compounds to be controlled in law;
- ensuring the Sentencing Council considers the seriousness of synthetic opioids and their potency within their sentencing guidelines;
- delivering a series of intensifications at the UK border to develop our intelligence on how these substances reach the UK;

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<sup>2</sup> OHID is in the process of developing systems for collecting, analysing and reporting data relating to potent synthetic opioids in England, including developing a public-facing report.

- working to improve our drug harms surveillance and establish an early warning system that will provide information on the presence and impact of synthetic opioids or other drug threats to inform decisions and response;
- widening naloxone access and use, by seeking to expand the number of services, healthcare professionals and organisation who can supply the antidote on a 'take-home' basis, and to expand carriage by the police and prison staff;
- supporting closer working with the Chief Coroner for England and Wales to encourage better and faster access to post-mortem toxicology results;
- engaging with Devolved Administrations on a regular basis to monitor the threat and share information;
- learning from experts, including from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, and international partners to share best practice.

This work builds on, and complements, our existing effort to reduce the number of deaths associated with drug misuse more widely in the UK, set out in the Ten-Year Drugs Strategy.

To be able to deliver the work of the Taskforce and enhance our understanding and preparedness of the threat, I have recently written to all Combating Drugs Partnerships regarding the importance of local multi-agency planning to manage the risk of synthetic opioids, as set out in updated guidance by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities in July 2023.

Additionally, we believe firmly in the importance of engaging with experts and international partners to respond swiftly to the evidence of emerging drug threats, including participating and sharing learning in international fora such as the US-led Global Coalition to Address Synthetic Drug Threats of which the UK are proudly involved in and chair the sub-working group on 'Information Sharing, Interagency Collaboration and Policy Formulation'. On 15 March I attended the 67th United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna and hosted a high-level side event on sharing perspectives on tackling synthetic opioids. The event highlighted the importance of international cooperation, enhanced early warning systems and sharing of best practice. I met a range of international leaders, including US Secretary of State Anthony Blinken, to agree close working to tackle this threat.

### **Early Warning System**

A key strand of work under the Taskforce is ensuring that we remain ahead of the threat from synthetic opioids and any new emerging drug threats by enhancing our surveillance and early warning system. We have a longstanding surveillance system in place to collect information on the nature and location of novel drug use, drug markets and reports alerting us to harms experienced, however through the Taskforce, work is ongoing to improve these systems and establish new data feeds, including ambulance call-out data. It will include state-of-the-art monitoring for the presence of synthetic drugs by analysing wastewater or recording spikes in overdoses in specific locations, enabling a rapid response. These findings will be cascaded down to

law enforcement and public health agencies, at national and local level, meaning rapid action can be taken in communities where they are detected. The enhanced system will also bring together data from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland's existing systems.

### **Prioritising People who use Opiates into High Quality Drug and Alcohol Treatment**

The Drugs Strategy has set out ambitious commitments to increase the number of opiate and crack users (OCU) in treatment by 21,000 by 2025 and we are beginning to see improvement towards achieving this ambition. In the third year of strategy delivery, local areas are forecasting significant growth in OCU numbers which is supported by record levels of investment in 2024/25. We have also recruited an additional 1,255 drug and alcohol workers to support this drive. Progress against this key commitment is reported to the Prime Minister's office every quarter and managed through the cross-government drug strategy governance arrangements.

In July 2023 a National Patient Safety alert was issued by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. This alert promotes awareness and provides clear instructions for staff in health settings and across the country to ensure they are prepared for anyone that may present with an overdose caused by synthetic opioids.

A copy of this letter will be deposited in the libraries of both Houses.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Philp', written in a cursive style.

**Rt Hon Chris Philp MP**  
**Minister of State for Crime, Policing and Fire**