



# POLICE DRUG OFFENCE DIVERSION SCHEMES

“ THE CHECKPOINT DIVERSION  
PROGRAMME IN DURHAM...SEEMS TO ME  
A WHOLLY LAUDABLE PROJECT.

KIT MALTHOUSE MP, UK POLICE MINISTER (2019)

## INTRODUCTION

Since 2010, over 80% of all drug offences recorded by police have been minor possession offences. This consumes significant police resources with negligible impact on use, can harm individuals with a life-scarring criminal record, and damage police-community relations. So it would be better if the law changed so possession of drugs was not an offence at all. But in the meantime, drug offence diversion schemes can steer people away from the criminal justice system, towards effective drug education and support instead.

## WHAT IS 'DIVERSION'?

All UK police forces divert people committing a range of minor offences away from the criminal justice system, to measures which address root causes of offending. A new 'Out of Court Disposals' framework was implemented from April 2023, including the option of community resolutions for drug possession offences.

Drug offence diversion involves police, usually on the street, diverting people in possession of illegal drugs for personal use to a health intervention and assessment, and further support e.g. drug education or treatment, instead of arresting, prosecuting or formally cautioning them. This occurs after the drugs have been confiscated and normal police checks have been done with, for example, a community resolution recorded. Expansion of this approach is based on research

showing positive outcomes for individuals, police, and society. Pre-arrest schemes are preferable, with post-arrest only needed if other more serious offences are involved which require custody e.g. Durham Checkpoint Scheme.

## WHO BACKS DIVERSION?

**Over a dozen police forces in England and Wales, and Police Scotland use diversion**, backed by:

- College of Policing; National Police Chiefs' Council, and Police and Crime Commissioners of all parties - Conservative (e.g. Thames Valley, West Mercia, Avon and Somerset); Labour (e.g. West Mids, Durham, North Wales); Plaid (Dyfed Powys).

- The Scottish and UK Governments, and the UK Government's Independent Review of Drugs. One 'D' in the Home Office's flagship ADDER drugs programme is Diversion.
- The Faculty of Public Health; Royal Society for Public Health; Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs; multiple parliamentary committees; World Health Organisation; UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

**POLICE-LED DIVERSION OF LOW-RISK YOUTH WHO COME INTO CONTACT WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM – INCLUDING FOR DRUG POSSESSION – IS MORE EFFECTIVE IN REDUCING FUTURE CONTACT WITH THE JUSTICE SYSTEM COMPARED TO TRADITIONAL PROCESSING.**

COLLEGE OF POLICING, OCT 2022

### WHY USE DIVERSION?

The vast majority of the 3.2 million people cautioned or prosecuted for drug offences in the UK between 1973-2018 were caught with drugs for their own use. Yet UK and global evidence shows criminalisation does not significantly reduce drug use. Diversion schemes can:

- Avoid criminal records that undermine life chances - disproportionately impacting young, black and poor groups, and can reduce other racial disparities in the criminal justice system.
- Reduce reoffending of drug and non-drug related offences. A Bristol police evaluation found "offending has reduced for those who attended the Drug Education Programme and the Universal Harm Score for this cohort has seen a step-change reduction".
- Save police resources. ~12 hours of police time to process a possession offence through criminal justice routes vs 20 minutes to divert someone to drug services using a phone app, so officers can stay on the beat longer.

- Save money. Drug education or treatment is cheaper than using overwhelmed police, custody and courts.
- Improve physical and mental health. All UK schemes have noted increased referrals for treatment, and engagement with other health services.
- Improve social and employment circumstances.
- Provide good quality drug education to a key group reducing drug harms - over 40% of drug possession disposals in 2020/21 were for 18-24 yr-olds.

### CASE STUDIES:

#### **Avon and Somerset Police 'Drug Education Programme'**

Since 2016, Avon and Somerset Police have operated a pre-arrest street drug offence diversion scheme with no further action taken if the person attends a drug education programme akin to a speeding awareness course. The scheme was rolled out in 2019 after a Bristol pilot saw significant savings to police, reductions in reoffending, and improved relations between police and people who use drugs. Over 1000 people per year are processed this way.

#### **'DIVERT' West Midlands Police, expanded to West Mercia Police**

In its first two years, this scheme saw police on the street use a community resolution and an app to refer over 7000 people caught with drugs for their own use to Cranstoun's drug services for a health intervention, including assessment within the first 48 hours, followed by a drug education course, treatment or other support as needed.

For more information see diversion resources on [transformdrugs.org/diversion](https://transformdrugs.org/diversion)

For references contact [info@transformdrugs.org](mailto:info@transformdrugs.org)

## **TRANSFORM** Drug Policy Foundation



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