

Greater Manchester Police, Fire & Crime Panel

Date: 18th September 2024

Subject: The GM Drugs Intelligence System: An Overview of Drug Trends with a focus on Nitazenes

Report of: Kate Green, Deputy Mayor for Safer and Stronger Communities

Purpose of Report

To provide an overview of drug trend insights resultant from the GM Drugs Intelligence System commissioned by the Deputy Mayor.

Recommendations:

Panel members are requested to consider the contents of the report and raise any questions they may have, particularly in relation to the threat of potent synthetic opioids (e.g. Nitazenes).

Panel members are also requested to note that the GM TRENDS Report for 2023/24 will be published in October 2024 together with Trend Focus Reports on Ketamine and THC Vapes. These will be circulated to panel members.

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Equalities Impact, Carbon and Sustainability Assessment: N/A

Risk Management: N/A

Legal Considerations: N/A

Financial Consequences – Revenue: N/A

Financial Consequences – Capital: N/A

Number of attachments to the report: 2

Comments/recommendations from Overview & Scrutiny Committee: None

Background Paper: None (GM TRENDS reports will be published in October 2024)

Tracking/ Process: N/A

Exemption from call in No exemptions required

GM Transport Committee: N/A

Overview and Scrutiny Committee: N/A

1. The GM Drugs Intelligence System

1.1 The Deputy Mayor commissions a comprehensive GM Drugs Intelligence System to support partners working to reduce the harms caused by illegal drugs. This system comprises of three principal elements; the GM Drug and Alcohol Related Deaths Surveillance System, the GM Drugs Early Warning System, and GM TRENDS – a drug testing and research project.

1.2 GM Drug and Alcohol Related Deaths Surveillance System

1.2.1 This system is delivered by Liverpool John Moores University's Public Health Institute (LJMU) and aims to reduce the number of drug and 'alcohol toxicity' related deaths across Greater Manchester through the review of circumstances relating to such deaths and joint learning across public sector organisations to improve preventative measures. Each of the ten local authority areas utilise review panels involving key local partner organisations, and LJMU are able to co-ordinate where cross border issues become apparent in GM and across the wider northwest region.

1.3 GM Drugs Early Warning System

1.3.1 This system was developed and piloted in Greater Manchester and used to develop national guidelines for similar alert systems. Each of the 10 local authority areas has an online Local Drug Information System bringing together over 900 professionals to share national and local drugs knowledge and intelligence. Drug related incidents are reviewed by a multidisciplinary GM Drug Alert Panel who support partner organisations in providing clear information for professionals and drug users and decide when it is necessary to issue public warnings.

1.4 GM TRENDS (Greater Manchester: Testing and Research on Emergent and New DrugS)

1.4.1 This annual drug intelligence research project is conducted by Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and works in tandem with the Early Warning System. Alongside the research, MANDRAKE (a joint GMP and MMU initiative) enables routine drug testing and rapid drug testing when incidents occur.

1.5 Operation Vulcan

1.5.1 The value of the GM Drugs Intelligence System was demonstrated by GM TRENDS research which highlighted that the areas of Cheetham Hill and Strangeways, well known for trading counterfeit goods, had become central to the regional market for illicit prescription drugs often used alongside more traditional street drugs such as heroin and crack cocaine. Working with partners and the community, GMP carried out Operation Vulcan, resulting in the recovery of 2.4 million class C prescription drugs, the closure of 216 counterfeit shops, the seizure of over £500,000, 238 individual arrests, and a 62% reduction in violent crime.

2. An Overview of Drug Trends with a focus on Nitazenes

2.1 Xylazine

2.1.1 On 4th June 2024, the GM Drugs Early Warning System issued a public warning through MANDRAKE (via social media), and a specific briefing was prepared for medical staff because xylazine was detected in two samples of ketamine tested ahead of the Parklife festival after 2 night-time economy samples showed ketamine adulterated with xylazine (04/06/24). This warning was amended and reissued on

28th August 2024 following three similarly xylazine positive results ahead of Manchester PRIDE and re-issued.

- 2.1.2 Xylazine, is a substance used in veterinary medicine known to cause sedation, analgesia and muscle relaxation (Sue & Hawk, 2023). Xylazine reduces level of consciousness while lowering heart rate and blood pressure. Human case reports have also identified decreased respiratory rate and the need for mechanical ventilation in instances of very high dose xylazine administration. In the UK, there have been at least 16 cases (11 fatal) reported to coroners since 2022. Although xylazine has been detected in a range of street drugs, UK fatalities are mainly thought to involve heroin adulterated with xylazine (Copeland, et al., 2024).
- 2.1.3 On 4th September 2024, the Home Office announced that xylazine will become a Class C Drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. This announcement also noted that Xylazine-involved overdose deaths in the United States rose from 102 in 2018 to 3,468 in 2021.

2.2 Nitazenes

- 2.2.1 As a result of the ban on opium production by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, it is estimated that production of opium fell by 95% (UNDOC, 2023). As nearly all UK heroin originates from Afghanistan there are widespread fears that heroin shortages in the UK will lead to more adulteration of street heroin with potent synthetic opioids.
- 2.2.2 In the United States the adulteration of heroin with a range of fentanyl derivatives (fentanyls) has been associated with tens of thousands of deaths a year (CDC, 2018). Fentanyls were largely manufactured in China and sold online for use as street drugs. In 2019, China introduced generic controls on fentanyls. It is thought that in response to this, Chinese producers switched to production of another group of potent synthetic opioids commonly known as 'nitazenes' (benzimidazole opioids), as these were not legally controlled in China.
- 2.2.3 A recent meeting of the OHID National Intelligence Network (07.06.24) a picture was shown from Scottish RADAR of a seized kilo block reportedly imported directly into the country and sold as 'China White'. It contained protonitazene, metonitazene, xylazine and heroin. Scottish RADAR said that detections now often involve a mix of nitazenes.
- 2.2.4 Since 2020/21 a growing range of nitazenes and some other potent synthetic opioids have been detected in Europe (EMCDDA, 2022). In March 2024, a range of 15 nitazenes were brought under the Misuse of Drugs Act as class A drugs. The government also accepted ACMD advice for a generic definition to cover any variants that could be produced in the future, although this legislation is yet to be enacted. In September 2024 the Home Office announced that these changes are expected to come into force later this year or in early 2025, depending on the parliamentary process.
- 2.2.5 In July 2023 a National Patient Safety alert was issued after a number of incidents in various parts of England and in particular a large number of overdoses and deaths in the Birmingham area, suspected and in some cases confirmed to be a result of heroin adulterated with nitazenes (OHID, 2023).
- 2.2.6 Test results from both WEDINOS (Public Health Wales, 2024) and Scottish RADAR (Public Health Scotland, 2024) have shown that not only heroin but other drugs such

as benzodiazepines, oxycodone, cannabinoid powder and THC vape liquid have been adulterated with a range of nitazenes.

- 2.2.7 The recently published WEDINOS Annual 2023/24 Report details 138 samples analysed as containing nitazenes (up from 36 the previous year). The majority of nitazenes analysed were submitted with diazepam as the purchase intent, 54 per cent (n=75). Followed by heroin, 17 per cent (n=24). However, it should be noted that heroin users are far less likely to send in samples of heroin, the number of samples analysed followed local concerns in Wales.
- 2.2.8 The third most common substance found to contain nitazenes were submitted with oxycodone as the purchase intent, 16 per cent (n=22). Other positive nitazene results were found in samples purchased as cannabis, synthetic cannabinoids, temazepam and zopiclone.
- 2.2.9 The most recent estimate recent from the OHID National Intelligence Network (August 2024) is that there have been 284 nitazene detections in deaths since July 2023, including 13 in the Northwest. These are probably underestimates given delays in toxicology and the fact that some coroners are not systematically testing for nitazenes or xylazine.
- 2.2.10 The OHID meeting also heard about numerous reports of xylazine and nitazene adulteration in a range of drugs. However, these are rarely confirmed by testing and it is thus difficult to distinguish speculation from intelligence.

2.3 GM Nitazene Response

- 2.3.1 GMP believe that at least 4 nitazene related deaths have occurred in GM, as highlighted in a recent BBC article (05.09.24) which warned of both the risk from street drugs and non-prescribed 'medications' adulterated with nitazenes [Nitazines: Warning over drugs that can kill in tiny doses - BBC News](#).
- 2.3.2 Drugs recovered by GMP at the scene of two deaths were tested by MANDRAKE and found to contain Etonitazene (March 2024) and Isotonitazene (August 2024). Warnings were accordingly issued through the GM Drugs Early Warning System.
- 2.3.3 Despite local and national concerns regarding the presence of nitazenes, in this year's GM TRENDS testing cycle, MANDRAKE has only been able to obtain 11 heroin samples for forensic analysis spanning five Greater Manchester areas. The forensic analysis found that heroin purity ranged from 4% to 28%, with an average of 16%. This represents a significant reduction in purity from last year when the average purity of heroin analysed by MANDRAKE was 42%.
- 2.3.4 Such variability in purity increases the risk of overdose and drug related death. Despite ongoing concerns that heroin may contain more potent synthetic opioids such as nitazenes, none were detected in any of these samples. Consistent with previous years, the main adulterants detected in these heroin samples were caffeine and paracetamol.
- 2.3.5 In preparedness for a major incident, the Greater Manchester Drug Early Warning System (LDIS) has updated the Synthetic Opioid Plan for Greater Manchester ([attached](#)). A GMP Gold command group has been established having proved effective when dealing with the recent nitazene death referred to above.

2.3.6 We are also planning a resilience exercise to be conducted by the GMCA Greater Manchester Resilience Unit to assess the local response should a major incident occur. This accords with advice contained in a recent letter from Chris Philp, the former Combating Drugs Minister (attached).

2.4 THC and Synthetic Cannabinoid ('Spice') Vapes

2.4.1 Youth vaping has drawn significant media attention. The configuration of incidents that have occurred in different parts of the country can result in misleading conclusions about illicit drug content - especially when not evidenced through testing.

2.4.2 GM TRENDS survey findings indicate the increased use by young people of vapes containing THC (the active ingredient in cannabis) and Synthetic Cannabinoids ('Spice'). MANDRAKE testing found the synthetic cannabinoid ADB-BUTINACA in four vape liquids purchased as THC vapes by school aged children. A further four vapes contained THC but the content in these samples varied significantly, ranging from 18% to 90%, with an average THC content of 48%.

2.5 Spice

2.5.1 In this year's GM TRENDS testing cycle, MANDRAKE tested three samples of herbal plant matter that contained 'Spice'. While all three samples contained the same synthetic cannabinoid - MDMB-4en-PINACA – the percentage content varied considerably, ranging from 2% to 14%.

2.5.2 It should be noted that while 2% is the typical purity detected since MANDRAKE began regular testing in 2016, the 14% SCRA content is the highest recorded since April 2017 (16%) when the batch in circulation in Manchester city centre led to 58 emergency callouts in one weekend.

2.6 Naloxone

2.6.1 There is Home Office support for making naloxone as widely available as possible to help reduce drug related deaths. Naloxone reverses opioid overdoses and is therefore effective against Nitazenes.

2.6.2 Xylazine is not an opioid and it was thought naloxone would be ineffective at reversing the effects of an overdose, which often manifest as deep sedation. Recent research indicates xylazine is an agonist at kappa opioid receptors, so naloxone may well work to reverse the effects of a xylazine overdose.

2.6.3 Synthetic cannabinoids, as the name suggests, attach themselves to the brain's cannabinoid receptors, and the assumption would be that naloxone would also therefore be ineffective. However, research suggests that synthetic cannabinoids may also interact with opioid receptors and so naloxone may well work to reverse the effects of a Spice overdose as well.

2.7 Ketamine

2.7.1 GM TRENDS reports increasing use of ketamine with younger people and school-aged children taking this psychedelic dissociative anaesthetic. Changing patterns of use have seen it moving beyond being seen as just a 'club drug.' This has been accompanied by increases in the number of young people and young adults presenting to services for treatment (many with ketamine as their primary substance), incorporating mental health and urological needs.

2.7.2 MANDRAKE tested 16 ketamine samples during 2023/24. The samples ranged from 14% to 100% with an average purity of 61%. Almost half (7/16) were above 90% purity with three containing 100% ketamine.

2.8 Powdered cocaine (Cocaine hydrochloride)

2.8.1 GM TRENDS respondents indicate increased powder cocaine prevalence with professionals and young people commonly reporting that it was more accessible and 'easier to buy'. Use also appears to be on the increase across a wider demographic than many other substances.

2.8.2 MANDRAKE analysis supports the hypothesis that powdered cocaine purity is increasing. Compared to the previous annual cycle, the average purity of samples tested increased from 51% to 64% (range: 29% to 100%). Of 47 samples tested, four-fifths were over 50% purity, two-thirds were at least 70%, over half 80% or more, and almost a third over 90% purity.

3. Concluding Remarks

3.1 This report has attempted to summarise the extensive drug trend insights resultant from the GM Drugs Intelligence System commissioned by the Deputy Mayor.

3.2 Panel members are invited to raise any questions they may have, particularly in relation to the threat of potent synthetic opioids (e.g. Nitazenes).

3.3. The GM TRENDS Report for 2023/24 will be published in October 2024 together with Trend Focus Reports on Ketamine and THC Vapes. These will be circulated to panel members.