



17 April 2024

Dear Combating Drugs Partnership Senior Responsible Owner,

I am writing to update you on the threat posed by synthetic opioids and the initiatives the HMG Synthetic Opioids Taskforce has taken to mitigate this threat. Your role as local leaders of Combating Drugs Partnerships is crucial to tackle this threat. We recognise that many of you already have plans in place to respond to outbreaks of synthetic opioids, and this letter sets out our asks in more detail.

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 has been continued overdose deaths linked to nitazenes across the UK,¹ and a sustained level of nitazene detections in seizures and drug checking.

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 - which includes the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), Border Force, policing and local partners - 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 to prevent further deaths. As part of this, the NCA and DHSC have established enhanced real-time monitoring of the threat working with police forces, Border Force and local drug information systems (LDIS), 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.²

The Joint Combating Drugs Unit wrote to you about synthetic opioids in July 2023, drawing attention to the need for improved LDIS capability, and

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

² 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.

emphasising the importance of timely information sharing where possible across the CDP.

Consumption of heroin fortified with nitazenes has been seen most prominently in these drug related deaths, however, drug checking data shows nitazenes are also being used to adulterate other drugs, such as illicit painkillers and illicit benzodiazepines, which therefore presents a threat to a wider cohort of drug users.

We currently assess there is a significant risk that synthetic opioids could become more prevalent in the UK's illegal drug market in the future, especially as OCGs are adapting in the market.

Strategic preparedness

Last summer, I established a cross-government Taskforce to improve our understanding, preparedness, and mitigation against this evolving threat. The Taskforce is overseeing a number of mitigations and activities to address this threat, including:

- controlling 15 synthetic opioids under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, which came into force on 20 March;
- delivering a series of intensifications at the UK border to develop our intelligence on how these substances reach the UK;
- 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 and international partners.

Local planning and response

Given the evolving situation, it is important that all CDPs have plans in place to manage the risk of synthetic opioids and use multi-agency working to galvanise this work at speed.

Prepare: All local areas should have a plan in place on managing this risk, including an incident response plan that is tested regularly with their Local Resilience Forum partners, and your CDP should be providing oversight. Updated guidance on this was published by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) in July 2023³. CDP sub-groups may be best placed to take forward work, ensuring alignment to the Drug Strategy outcomes, which include reducing deaths and hospital admissions from drugs misuse.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/fentanyl-preparing-for-a-future-threat/guidance-for-local-areas-on-planning-to-deal-with-fentanyl-or-another-potent-opioid>

Monitor: CDPs should have up-to-date information about local patterns of use and need incorporated into their CDP needs assessment, which should inform the action plan and performance framework. As outlined in the guidance for local delivery partners, all these products should draw on a range of local data and intelligence which CDPs should be monitoring through their LDIS, including police force drugs market profiles, and be continually reviewed and developed. This will align with the work being undertaken by OHID to enhance our national surveillance and early warning system.

CDPs and LDISs should engage with their coroners and support last year's advice from the Chief Coroner to all coroners about the likelihood that some drug deaths will involve synthetic opioids, and the need to commission testing for synthetic opioids from labs that have the capability to detect them.

Treat: Delivering the scaled up high-quality treatment and recovery goals of the 10-Year Drug Strategy are our central response to this challenge. Every CDP across England is allocated additional funding to deliver services with funding going into Local Authorities. You have flexibility to allocate funding based on local need to reduce drug-related deaths, harms, crime and use.

Given the potency of synthetic opioids, CDPs should be aware of cohorts at greatest risk of overdose and dependence including individuals with an existing opioid dependence and should inform them of any synthetic opioid detection in the supply chain and, as outlined in July 2023 guidance, make efforts to ensure quick, attractive and easy access to treatment, especially for people who are reluctant to engage. These issues should be considered and analysed in the needs assessment of your local Combating Drugs Partnership, so all partners are clear on affected cohorts and what treatment services are most appropriate.

CDPs should have a clear understanding of naloxone availability, purchasing and supply arrangements in their system, including needs assessment and which individuals (and, if legislative change is agreed, organisations and professional groups) naloxone is supplied to in what volumes by drug services, or directly obtained by other routes. CDPs should also consider engaging with police forces on their naloxone provisions.

Enforce: If synthetic opioids are detected in your local area, your local police should be proactively alerted in the event they are not already aware. This will allow the police to continue to prioritise investigations into the supply of these drugs, and work with the national coordinated response through the National Crime Agency.

Police should also be fast tracking submissions for forensic testing if they suspect synthetic opioids are present.

Many CDPs now have first-hand experience in responding to outbreaks of nitazene related harms. Over the coming months, we will be looking to review and assure local plans on this issue and help support you in sharing best-practice and expertise.

If you have any questions, please contact your colleagues in DHSC, the JCDU, or the Taskforce at SyntheticOpioidsTFSecretariat@combatingdrugs.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely,

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

Rt Hon Chris Philp MP
Combating Drugs Minister