

**Press Release 26/10/2004**  
**Bloomsbury Association**

**Drugs - Health Impact Assessment (HIA)** – *Commissioned by Camden Council and Westminster City Council Drug Action Teams on the proposal to open a fixed site needle exchange near to Charing Cross Road.*

The BA posted its first public remarks about the non-appearance of this report 13 months ago. It has finally been released as a 140 page document full of facts and statistics but making no recommendations. **The October meeting of the West End Drugs Partnership (WEDP) was dedicated to discussion on the evidence and it was agreed by the Drug Action Teams (DAT's) and the WEDP that they would NOT pursue their proposal to open a fixed site needle exchange in the West End.** We believe the massive amount of evidence gathered by the HIA fully justifies this decision.

We have always agreed with the principle of supplying clean injecting equipment to addicts to minimize the spread of HIV and Hepatitis but have argued that alternative ways should be found to do this rather than those proposed and operated by the Drug Action Teams from Westminster and Camden Council's, namely a mobile unit (van) or a fixed site needle exchange. The DAT's responsibility is to ensure that addicts living in each borough have access to clean injecting equipment. It is not to encourage new addicts into that borough, which we believe mobile units and/or a dedicated fixed site needle exchange would do.

We have stated our objection to the way that the HIA was commissioned in the first place in that one of the the DAT's did not ask for alternative ways to be considered but stipulated that the opening of a fixed site needle exchange was 'non-negotiable'. This was a flawed judgment in our opinion and one of the reasons the proposal failed, notwithstanding the massive amount of negative evidence gathered by the commissioners. The HIA and subsequent discussion revealed that only one hostel in the West End had a needle exchange policy in place and that was only operating for a very limited period per day. It seems to us that all the hostels that house addicts should have an effective needle exchange service in place and that this would satisfy the DAT's obligation to supply clean injecting equipment.

We believe the HIA provides disturbing evidence about the adverse effect of existing services provided by the DAT, namely the mobile needle exchange (the van) at St Giles and elsewhere. Of the 285,000 needles and syringes given out from the van St Giles (2002-2003) alone some 80,000 syringes were never recovered. Evidence shows that many of these were dumped onto our parks, open spaces and onto private property. We believe this mobile service should be decommissioned.

The hostel managers have a social responsibility to the community to ensure that residents in their hostels are warned that sanctions will be taken against them if they act illegally outside the hostels and better methods of identifying those that do must be put in place. There must be a determination to ensure that ASBO's or other means are used to best effect for the future. We call for an audit on all hostel provision in the West End and the longer term policy must be to reduce the numbers of addicts that are housed in the West End.

We are greatly concerned that the DAT's are not being given adequate tools by the government to tackle this complicated problem in a meaningful way. The question of whether or not there should be a 'fixed site needle exchange' should never have arisen and over a year has been wasted by the DAT's when they should have ensured that addicts had access to clean needles where they live – not from a van OR a new fixed site! Addicts that come from outside Camden or Westminster should be given clean injecting equipment by the DAT's in the borough's they originated from and it is their responsibility to ensure this happens, and to house them. They must be held to account.

A further serious concern resulting from the HIA evidence is that the vast number of addicts that live in the hostels located between Kings Cross/Bloomsbury/Covent Garden/Soho (The Bloomsbury Triangle) – many of whom are on prescribed Methadone as part of a 'treatment' programme - also take a cocktail of Heroin and Crack that they buy illegally on the streets! We consider that the proliferation of hostels in a small geographic area created the existing serious street problems. It is this illegal drug street market that is the cause of all the anti social behaviour on our streets and the associated crime. The Bloomsbury Association and our fellow community reps on the West End Drugs Partnership (WEDP) are seriously concerned that so called treatment does not seem to be working and we consider that alternative ways need to be found to tackle this problem. We do not criticise the dedication of the practitioners in this field but feel that it is government policy that lets them down.

Some say that drugs policy should not be within the remit of community organizations but the fact remains that unless pressure can be brought to bear on the government to change their policy on drugs, things will continue to get worse. **Current Drugs Policy is NOT working and actively contributes to the degradation of our society.**

At the time of writing this report Bloomsbury is suffering an increase in drug activity that has been intensifying all summer with no effective measures in sight to reduce the problem, let alone get rid of it! The dealers are playing cat and mouse with the police, the police have no effective resources to control the problem, the DAT's don't seem to have the resources to ensure that **long-term** effective treatment is provided and the justice system seems to be failing everyone.

We subscribe to the following;

### **A crisis in UK drug policy**

- According to the EU funded European Monitoring Centre the UK now has the highest overall drug use in Europe.
- The Home Office has stated that as much 55% of property crime is related to fundraising to buy illegal drugs.
- Home Office research by York University estimates that the cost of illegal drug use in the UK is between **£12 and £18 billion**.

Significantly for all of these disturbing facts is that they all display trends that have worsened steadily over the past three decades, and continue to worsen.

This current crisis has been precipitated by the confluence of a number of issues:

- **The increase in use of prohibited drugs**  
The most dramatic example of this trend is that heroin use has risen by 2000% to over 250,000 since 1971.
- **Lack of government control over price of prohibited drugs**  
Due to the nature of the criminal market, the price of illegal drugs is unregulated and they are sold at hugely inflated prices. For dependent users this creates enormous pressure to offend to support their habit. Note that there is negligible crime associated with fund-raising by dependent users of legal drugs.
- **The exposure to scrutiny of UK drug policy through the application of performance indicators**  
Where evaluation of current drug policy effectiveness has been undertaken, it starkly demonstrates its failings – ***including the HIA report*** -. To quote Deputy Assistant Commissioner Andy Hayman (Chairman of the Association of Chief Police Officers Drugs Sub-Committee):

*"If we judge whether the existing drugs policy is working by measurable reductions in the number of people who use drugs, the number who die or suffer harm as a result, the supply of drugs, the amount of crime committed to get money to buy drugs and the organised criminality involved in transporting and supplying drugs, then we have to say that the results are not coming through."*

- **An unwillingness by successive governments to consider alternative policy options in light of changes in external conditions**

Drug legislation is essentially unchanged since the Misuse of Drugs Act (MDA) became law in 1971, the Act itself based on an approach to dealing with drugs that dates back to the Victoria era. The MDA is now colliding with dramatically changed circumstances, most significantly a massive increase in the use of illegal drugs.

Source: [http://www.tdpf.org.uk/Policy\\_Economics\\_WhyWeNeedAnAudit.htm](http://www.tdpf.org.uk/Policy_Economics_WhyWeNeedAnAudit.htm)

*We look to the WEDP to initiate and encourage more open debate in central London that may help lead to reform of the outdated Drugs Act (1971)*

*The HIA can be downloaded from West End Drugs Partnership web site;  
<http://www.wedp.org/>*

Jim Murray  
Chair  
Bloomsbury Association

Nov 2004