

Stop the Deaths 27th-28th August 2025

The Scottish Drugs Forum's (SDF) 2025 two-day conference – Stop the Deaths - was held in the Radisson-Blu hotel in the centre of Glasgow.

True to its title, the conference very much focussed on drug deaths and specifically deaths through unintentional overdose rather than wider substance use issues or harms associated with alcohol consumption.

The organisers' stated aims for the conference were to:

- Foster collaboration between key stakeholders to drive meaningful change.
- Amplify the voices of those with direct experience of drug-related harms.
- Explore innovative approaches to reducing overdose deaths and improving services.
- Create a space for dialogue, reflection, and action to shape the future of drug policy in Scotland.

At the busy city-centre hotel, visiting sports teams and tourists mingled with conference delegates in the foyer and on the pavement outside. Upstairs, stalls promoted third sector agencies and product vendors shared information and promoted their services, products and experience while delegates enjoyed pastries and caffeine-based refreshment. Acquaintances were renewed and new connections explored. Leaflets found their way into tote bags. The space buzzed with a familiar corporate polish.

SDF's purpose to **'bring[...] living experience voices into the heart of the conference'** was reflected in the attendees. This was thanks, in part, of 'free places' funded by a donor, Ethypharm, and to SDF's engagement with rights holders with **living** experience through their impressive **Advocates for Change** initiative.



Given the £272 price tag for the 2-day event, there were, clearly, significant barriers to wide participation otherwise.

The Government Bit

The focus on the first day was **Developing evidence-based policy and strategy**.

After the welcome from the SDF CEO, Kirsten Horsburgh, proceedings began with the video-linked message from Neil Gray, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, assuring conference delegates of Scottish Government's commitment to **Stop the Deaths**.

Updates on the detail were provided by Maggie Pyle, of the ScotGov's Drug Strategy Unit.

Maggie's update highlighted both the likelihood of changes in the current arrangements and the government's commitment to follow through on current initiatives such as Medically Assisted Treatment and Improved Rehabilitation Pathways.

There was a recognition that these measures are being implemented with a changing context with drug deaths increased in 1Q 2025 and 58% of recent drug deaths involving cocaine or street benzos, often in association with opiates.

It was encouraging to hear her state that the RADAR information was being brought closer to the front line...but, given a current increasing reduction in transparency in areas such as Aberdeenshire, it begs the question where exactly they think the front-line is?

Delegates were assured of the commitment to 'embed the voices of Lived and Living Experience' in strategy. Part of that implementation, she said, would be through embedding individuals with LLE into the 'workforce'.

Maggie informed the audience that National and Local Government arrangement will change over the next few years with

- the National Mission ending next year,
- a new Alcohol and Drug Plan being developed
- HSCPs being reformed under a new Public Health Framework being published this summer.

Advocacy for Change

The assurance that the voices of LLE would be embedded in the change provided a neat link into the next presentation by Jason Wallace who is leading the SDF's Advocate for Change initiative.

Advocates for Change have established a network of 12 Engagement Groups across the country (watch this space for the nearest one!) mobilising the energy and voices of people with LIVING experience.

Their key message is that people with LLE have to '**take charge**' and '**disrupt systems**' because the current systems do not serve us. Together, the group have developed a manifesto which is strong and inspiring and bases its claim on the recent Charter of Rights document. The Charter of Rights, Jason says, should be 'our weapon' and the Advocacy Network's manifesto announces to Scottish Government (and anyone else who might listen) the community's intention to offer government and agencies '**determined collaboration**' i.e. we're not taking 'no' for an answer!

The key messages in their platform were that

you don't need not be abstinent to advocate (that is, by its very nature stigmatising)

everyone needs to know what their human rights are and to insist upon them.

As a key test in agencies, it was suggested that they might ask each duty holder in their workforce what they know their human rights to be. If they don't know, how can they know what the right holders they encounter are entitled to?!

The first session closed with an appeal for support from the Families Campaign for Change, a network of 35 mothers whose lives have been affected by substance use who are lobbying for the inclusion of human rights associated with substance use to be included in the actual UN Charter of Rights. (It isn't at present!)

Towards a Recovery-Led Media

The rest of the morning focussed on media issues – how we communicate effectively and accurately) around substance use issues and how ongoing media bias impedes headway in stopping the deaths.

Peter Sàtori (drugreporter) provided a very informative and practical perspective on how to effectively frame our message and communicate with the public, especially in the face of a stigmatising media bias. This bias in the Scottish media was demonstrated, in the case of the Glasgow Safer Consumption rooms, by Thomas Delany (Youthwise).

Finally, Hannah Westwater, Bill McKay and members of the editorial board of *Buzz* presented about their new magazine – first issue just published. The magazine is created by people with living experience (who form its editorial board). The project is currently only funded for 12 months but hope to publish quarterly, reporting on current drug trends and issues crucial to the living and lived experience community and their wider communities.

Buzz represents an inspiring example of what Tom Delany called ‘recovery led media’ and chimed intriguingly with Maggie Pyle’s comments about getting RADAR data to ‘the front line’.

The Pros and Cons of Consultation

The afternoon session focussed on experience of Citizen’s Assemblies & Peoples Assemblies in Ireland and Scotland. Tony Duffin (Progressify) summarised his experience during the Citizen’s Assembly held in the Republic of Ireland around drugs policy. Though its clear the Irish administration under the previous Taoiseach invested in a well structured and resourced Citizen’s Assembly process, the impression remains that the process has been used to delay improvements. In the light of the failure to implement most of the assembly’s recommendations, one might suspect it allowed politicians to kick the issue into the long grass.

Tony emphasised, however, the role of the assembly in raising consciousness and engaging people with the issue, many of whom may have had no direct exposure before they became assembly members. The quality of debate and degree of awareness was, undoubtedly, enhanced, he said...but the incoming administration have not progressed the findings.

Ali Stoddart’s presentation on the Scottish Parliament and Peoples Assembly demonstrated that the Scottish Government had decided on a cut-price Citizen’s Assembly (the People’s Assembly) with far fewer community representatives or investment. Experience elsewhere, in areas like Climate Change for example, indicate that Citizen’s Assemblies are highly vulnerable to ‘who sets the question’ and the level of Governmental investment...there is a danger, familiar to many of us, that we end up with tokenistic consultation...‘well, ye were asked!’ (And then ignored.)

I won’t comment on the panel discussion of the five MSPs (one from each party). Suffice to say there weren’t many questions.

I skipped the evening networking event. Personally, I felt that the venue – Revolution (formerly The Tunnels) in Glasgow - might be a wee bit triggering!

I was struck by the two quite distinct messages of Day 1 –

- 1) Government and services say they are committed and working stop the deaths

- 2) Communities and people with LLE need to disrupt the system and demand their rights through ‘determined collaboration’

Safer Consumption

The theme of Day 2 was **Developing evidence-based services** but focussed on two specific areas : Safer Consumption Rooms and Advocacy.

Eddy Mullins and Geoff Corcoran summarised their experience with the Merchants Quay safer consumption room in Dublin while Lynn MacDonald and Dan Dailly shared similar perspectives on the Thistle safer consumption facility in Townhead in Glasgow. Both contributions were informative, inspiring and underlined the challenges and opportunities before our communities. Both of these facilities opened around the turn of 2025.

The immediate impact of these facilities seems to be wholly positive – reduced deaths, reduced stigma, improved experience and signposting into further support for those who want it. Both initiatives actively engaged with the local communities in which the rooms are sited . It was acknowledged that, even now, some members of the local communities are not happy with the presence of the facilities...but they are engaged in dialogue whilst the number of unintentional overdoses treated in both centres attests to the positive health outcome for individuals using the centres.

Both sets of speakers highlighted the limitations imposed by regulators: for example, the consumption rooms are for injection NOT inhalation, a problem exacerbated by current trends in poly-drug use especially around crack cocaine. Once again, policy focusses on the real hazards of intravenous use including BBVs and wound treatment but seems not yet equipped to address the parallel hazards associated with cocaine, crack, ketamine and street-benzos.

Sharon Hutchison (Caledonian University) followed the presenters with a review of ‘*What Outcomes Can We Expect & Measure.*’ Her talk summarised her research and the approach being taken to evaluate the effectiveness of safer consumptions rooms.

From a cost-benefit perspective, the approach seemed sound in method, with measures ranging from reduction in fatalities to the impact on local house-prices. Her evaluation is scheduled to continue until 2029, however, and I felt death vs a decline in house prices (driven by stigma) wasn’t exactly comparing apples with apples. I’m sure the method will involve some sort of weighting but how many individuals will die before the common sense of this is accepted and more centres opened. Certainly, the people I spoke to who had used the facility felt it was a no-brainer and that pop-up facilities should be being implemented in small towns as well as the major cities asap.

There were also useful presentations from very engaged practitioners on the impact of Long-Acting Buprenorphine and (from Fife) a pilot on Benzo prescribing. These seemed encouragingly in step with recent presentations on support for cocaine users hosted by SRC and by the Cocaine Toolkit recently developed in Glasgow.

Harm is a class-issue

As an ice-breaker for the final session on Advocacy, SDF invited Senator Lynn Ruane, a member of the Irish Parliament, to deliver a keynote address.

Lynn was beyond inspiring! Heartfelt, well-informed, streetwise and politically savvy, Lynn spelled out the key issues around decriminalisation, public health and human rights. Her comments echoed and amplified Jason Wallace's presentation on Day One.

Although substance use is ubiquitous in Scottish and Irish society, the harms associated with substance use are massively concentrated among the poor and those experiencing current and historical deprivation. Substance related harm are, she said, a **class-issue** and we should beware of the 'middle-classification of trauma' that enables politicians to deflect attention from the effects of assertive action and criminalisation focussed on areas of high deprivation.

All deaths – indeed all harms – are equally unacceptable and there are, evidently, patterns of harm in less deprived areas. But the drivers to self-medicate and the social and mental health pressures which underlie them are amplified in areas of multiple deprivation. Echoing David West's comments at the *Connecting Recovery* conference, harm reduction in the long term depends on offering every individual on our society

- Something to eat
- Somewhere to be
- Someone to love
- Something to do

The new Scottish Minister for Drugs & Alcohol Policy and Sport, Maree Todd, joined the afternoon session as the next keynote speaker and reiterated that she -and Government – cared and remained committed to stopping the deaths and reducing harms. In the course of the session she also contributed to debate as well as hearing from individual audience members some reflections of the difficulties of accessing and engaging services especially in rural areas of Scotland.

Advocate – to call for help

Next and following on from Senator Ruane's speech, the audience heard presentations on advocacy from Niamh Eastwood (Release) and Jed Brady (Reach Advocacy). Both speakers told us of both the effectiveness of good advocacy and the woeful unavailability of advocates and resources.

Reach Advocacy have developed a Level 7 SVQ in Advocacy and offer training across Scotland (although penetration here in the North East seems currently to be low). In his presentation, he highlighted that advocacy was only present in less than 10% of cases where it would be appropriate in Scotland. There remains a massive gap in the support that community members deserve in having someone – anyone! – help them in demanding their human rights, especially in the context of the Charter of Rights.

Inspiring and Thought-Provoking

On reflection, having attended both *Connecting Recovery* (see our blog here) and *Stop the Deaths*, both events were inspiring and daunting. Each looked at the issues from very different

perspectives and, although there were some delegates who attended both events, the overlap did not feel very substantial.

In both, however, the importance of the Charter of Rights and of the empowerment and activism of people with Lived and Living Experience were emphasised.

As Niamh Eastwood emphasised, although a lot of people are working hard to improve the quality of life of people and communities affected by problematic substance use, a lot of the experiences of individuals seeking help and support is 'very bad' and there is a way to go. Through education, communication and advocacy, through recovery-led media and direct political engagement (including getting the vote out) we can make a difference.

Aberdeenshire Community Recovery thank the Scottish Drugs Forum and its supporters for their work in in organising and hosting this event.

John Bolland September 2025