

2006 and all that

As we prepare to leave this year and look towards the future, DDN glances back at the issues that have made an impact, whether for good or bad.

January

The beginning of the year brings the UK Drugs Act into effect. The launch of a pilot scheme of dedicated drug courts encourages offenders out of the downward spiral of drugs and crime. The hospitality industry demonstrates co-operation with the BMA against smoking in all public places by recommending a total ban. Charles Kennedy confesses his alcohol addiction: 'I've come to learn that a drink problem is a serious problem indeed.'

February

A leaked report from Downing Street's strategy unit revealed a call from the PM's former strategy adviser, John Birt, for free prescribed heroin to undercut the illegal drug market. The European Commission presents an EU Drugs Action Plan 2005-08 with the aims of halting the increased drug use within the European population and tackling the drugs trade. In the same month, the government reveals up to 35,000 UK children under 16 are using heroin.

March

London is the world's 'cocaine capital' with clubbers replacing ecstasy with the 'white gold'. The UN calls on rich nations to help drug-producing countries combat farmers' dependence on illicit crops such as opium and coca. Alcohol Concern warns that problem drinkers face homelessness because of lack of funds for residential services, and by the end of the month police have the right to drug test on arrest.

April

Home Secretary, Charles Clarke, warns the organised criminal underworld to 'be afraid' as intelligence is used to tackle drugs with the launch of new law enforcement agency, SOCA (Serious Organised Crime Agency). Controversy rises among the Scottish police force with requests, from the Strathclyde Police

Federation (SPF), to legalise all drugs. 'We should legalise everything from class A-C, including heroin, cocaine and speed,' said Inspector Jim Duffy, chairman of the SPF.

May

Alcohol and drug users with mental health disorders are included in the revised Mental Health Act 1983. A group of experts from the Independent Working Group suggested drug consumption rooms should be piloted in the UK: 'They are a unique and promising way to help lessen fatal overdoses as well as take drugs off the streets and would have an impact on some of the serious drug-related problems in the UK,' said Dame Ruth Runciman, chair of IWG.

June

Furious rows were ignited as Scotland's drug tsar admits defeat in the drug war: 'We can never as a nation be drug-free. No nation can, so we must accept that,' said Tom Wood, a former deputy chief constable. Crystal Meth was upgraded to Class A. At the end of the month, after weeks of worried speculation, the Pooled Treatment Budget was announced to DATS: 28 per cent more than last year, but still much less than the 40 per cent originally promised. Tier 4 was finally allocated £56m by the Department of Health for capital development.

July

MSP Duncan McNeil faced media hostility by suggesting drug users sign a 'social contract' to prevent them starting families until they had ended their habit: 'What's proposed dehumanises people who are in need of help and support,' said a spokeswoman for the Scottish Drug Forum. Consultation on smoke-free premises in England was launched through draft regulations for introduction the following summer.



August

A letter from 11 leading charities and academics was sent to Children's Minister, Beverly Hughes, calling for government to address the plight of 1.3m children in the UK affected by parental alcohol misuse. Turning Point's chief executive, Lord Victor Adebowale, said: 'The government cannot ignore the children and families affected by alcohol misuse any longer.'

September

Young People's binge drinking was targeted by Thames Valley Police and the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, with a 'four strikes and you're out' scheme. Proposals for an automated needle and syringe exchange machine in North Wales were met with mixed feelings. One project director, Danie Strydom, said: 'Police should take a zero tolerance approach to drugs rather than advocating the use of a machine to administer them.'

October

Neil McKeganey of Glasgow University's Centre for Drug Misuse Research blamed Scottish policy for failing Scottish heroin addicts as it 'aims to stabilise users

rather than getting them permanently off drugs' with 97 per cent still being stabilised after three years. The Home Office calls off a proposed drug class review: 'Those involved in the criminal justice system have not raised the classification system as a concern that affects them with me,' said Home Office Minister, Vernon Coaker.

November

Health Secretary, Patricia Hewitt, calls for higher taxes on booze following figures, from the Institute of Alcohol Studies, that 55 per cent of teenagers were binge drinkers. UN Drugs chief, Antonio Maria Costa, warns Europe on its upward trend in cocaine abuse: 'Europe is contributing to the environment's destruction, bankrolling drug traffickers, insurgents and terrorists,' he said.

December

The start of England's smoking ban is announced as 1 July 2007. Health Secretary, Patricia Hewitt, said: 'This is a triumph for public health and a huge step forward for health protection. Thousands of people's lives will be saved and the health of thousands more protected.' **DDN**