

This week I am looking forward to national tackling drugs day, a chance to celebrate the wonderful work that often goes on, often unsung, around the country. On Wednesday, groups in places as diverse as Camden, Durham, Blackburn, Milton Keynes and Ceredigion will highlight the dangers posed by drugs and the work that goes on to tackle this menace.

A drug treatment centre will be officially opened in Barking and Dagenham, there will be information stalls across the country and Gateshead will host a concert with a song, called 'Kick It', written and performed by a former drug user.

On Wednesday drug action team partnerships will be organising events to support the day, from police crackdowns, information stalls in supermarkets, sports activities for young people to balloon releases to mark the numbers of people in treatment, and football and rugby matches featuring people involved in the effort to tackle drug misuse.

In all, six ministers will be out and about, demonstrating just how much of a priority this government places on tackling drugs and reducing the harms they cause. I will be leading the ministerial activity by opening a new treatment centre in Barking and Dagenham. Alongside other ministers, I will be playing a football match against Lambeth North Positive Futures scheme and the Hull-based charity, Dads Against Drugs to launch the Tackling Drugs Changing Lives Awards 2007.

This isn't just talk: since 1998, when we launched our ten-year Drug Strategy, this government has made tackling drugs a top priority. We have backed our strategy with unparalleled investment of over £9 billion in enforcement, education, early intervention, and treatment.

We have spent this money well: overall drug misuse has fallen by 16 per cent since 1998 while the misuse of Class A drugs has stabilised. I am particularly heartened that drug misuse among young people has fallen by over a fifth in the last ten years.

More and more people are entering and staying in drug treatment. Nearly four-fifths of the 181,000 people who underwent drug treatment programmes in the last financial year completed their programmes.

Despite these successes, I am keenly aware the debate over drugs remains highly charged and the challenge for government is to navigate a way through competing demands. I fully understand the strong emotions involved; but too often the debate is framed in extreme terms – some people argue for legalisation while others argue for tough enforcement – leaving little space for a rational debate in the centre ground.

For example, in recent months we have heard from people who think drug legalisation would be the answer to solving the social problems associated with drug misuse. On the other hand, I do not have to go far to hear from people who call loudly for even tougher enforcement against

drug dealers and drug users. Others will refer to drug policies abroad, whether in the Netherlands, Sweden or the United States, and say we should adopt the extreme policies of zero-tolerance or legalisation.

Each country has to tailor the drug strategy that is appropriate to its own culture, history and traditions. But the truth is that any drug strategy cannot succeed without a comprehensive approach that focuses on enforcement, education, early intervention and treatment. Tough enforcement stops criminals and takes harmful drugs out of circulation; education empowers young people with knowledge of the harms caused by drugs; early intervention with vulnerable groups in order to prevent them from becoming drawn into drug misuse and treatment improves individual lives, and cuts crime and anti-social behaviour.

Our latest figures show that more than 15,300kg of cocaine and 2,200kg of heroin were taken out of the supply chain in 2005/06. Almost 200 illegal criminal gangs were disrupted and £30 million of drug related assets were seized. That matters. I know, when I meet people in my constituency and elsewhere, that people want tough action on dealers, the people who drag down their communities.

However, as a former teacher I know that drug education has a significant role to play. We no longer wag the finger at young people and tell them simply not to do drugs. Instead, through the multimedia FRANK campaign, we empower young people by warning them of the harms caused by drugs and the risks involved with drug misuse, targeting vulnerable young people who are most at risk and providing specialist interventions for young people with developing drug problems. This approach has paid dividends with drug misuse falling among young people.

After a decade of success, we are looking to renew our Drug Strategy and will shortly consult on the way forward for coming years. I want to hear fresh ideas on how we can enhance the drug strategy, but I am clear that I want to focus on what works: enforcement, education, early intervention and treatment.

In talking to drug treatment professionals it is evident to me that drug classification is important in setting out the legal framework for drug control. It has stood the test of time and I want to focus on the most important aspects of tackling drug misuse: how we can enforce the law against dealers and supplies; how we can empower our young people with knowledge of the harms illegal drugs cause; and how we can provide treatment most effectively so that even more drug misusers are treated for the benefit of them and their communities. This strategy has worked and I want to enhance it.

I remain fully committed to our strategy of enforcement, education, early intervention and treatment, focusing at all stages on harm reduction. Working together, we can reduce even further the harm caused by illegal drugs.



We invite Home Office minister Vernon Coaker to give us insight to his approach to revising the Drugs Strategy. He explains his direction of travel.

'I want fresh ideas and a focus on what works'