



Caroline Flint, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Home Office, talks to Drink and Drugs News about the government's thinking behind the drugs and alcohol strategies, both of which fall within her ministerial brief.

Photo by Andy Paraskos

How to get the **drugs** out of **crime**

CAROLINE FLINT'S EXPERIENCE AS MP for Don Valley (centred on the town of Doncaster) leads her to the view that 'a person addicted to class A drugs is a mini crime wave'.

She argues that stealing and begging have become inextricably linked with feeding a drug habit, and points to the high positive drugs test rate among those arrested for acquisitive crime. A recent study of the link between drugs and gun crime, 66% of people arrested in her constituency for gun-related offences tested positive for drugs (the second highest figure in the country, just behind Hackney).

It was primarily to try to break the cycle between drugs and crime that led the Labour administration to develop the national drugs strategy, first published in 1998 and updated in 2002 – and which has fuelled a significant increase in funding for both treatment and prevention initiatives.

Central to the government's focus on drugs and alcohol abuse is their link to offending – and it is their belief that tackling drugs and alcohol abuse will help to bring down crime that is at the core of both national strategies.

Flint points out that effective treatment for people with drug problems requires not only more and better services – the initial focus of the government's approach to treatment – but also on a more joined up approach between agencies, a key element of the new Drug Intervention Programme (DIP) initiative (the renamed Criminal Justice Intervention Programme).

As well as crime and anti-social behaviour, Flint lists education, family policy and welfare to work, among her policy interests. It's a background that she believes has equipped her well to understand 'the chaotic lifestyles involving crime... lack of education, lack of employment, lack of housing, that these individuals face'.

Flint launched a DIP in her own constituency in September. She is a great believer in joined-up thinking and the programme brought

together expertise from local authorities, health services, police, probation services and the voluntary sector.

The key word seems to be 'engagement' – from all of the agencies, and from the client themselves.

'If they have a problem that is making them commit crime, we engage with them and get them into treatment,' explains Flint. 'Having done that, treatment and support to stay off drugs is ongoing.'

Crucially, in Flint's view, this support extends beyond the end of any prison sentence – convincing proof she believes of the commitment to keeping clients out of the drug crime loop for good.

Having worked closely with many people within and around the substance misuse field, Flint is keen to advocate the benefits of joint working with the rest of the social care field, to get the best, most integrated plan of care for each individual.

'It's important to develop these links because individuals don't operate in silos,' she says. 'What's going on outside treatment support can affect the success of treatment. If somebody is involved in a substitute subscribing programme, but they've got nowhere to live, or something else is going wrong in their personal lives, if there are children involved in the family... these are all things that can affect the success of any drug treatment.'

Working across agencies, to 'get as much common understanding about all the different issues that affect successful outcomes' can be a major step towards helping someone get over and deal with their drug addiction, she believes. '[We need to] identify how we can share information in the best interests of the individual concerned.'

Alongside all of the discussion about well-meaning initiatives, Caroline Flint realises that for any strategy to be considered effective, the

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service users themselves must be impressed – or at the very least, interested that what's on offer might work for them.

There's an element of 'one last chance', which she's determined to prove.

'I've met drug users – and former drug users for that matter – who feel that they are passed from pillar to post. It's not that there's been a shortage of agencies and intervention in their lives... police, social services, treatment providers... it's just been very fragmented.

'They can be passed from one agency to another, information isn't shared, issues that are important aren't attended to, there's no follow-up. Is there any wonder that, at the end of the day, there isn't any successful conclusion to treatment?'

It's early days for the DIP, both in her own constituency and in the country as a whole, but Flint is convinced it's working.

'We're seeing early indications that crime levels are going down in intervention areas,' she says. 'Some of these people might have been in treatment before, but it hasn't been joined up... there haven't been the wraparound support services to sustain them,' she says.

Feedback from those in treatment has convinced the minister that efforts are worthwhile. 'I've met people in Doncaster and elsewhere, who have been through this process, and they say it's the best thing that's ever happened to them.'

A positive reaction from parents whose children had been involved in drugs was further encouragement: 'It was good to hear from them that this scheme is making a difference.'

From its early beginnings, the DIP has now reached phase two. Still plotted on the basis of levels of drug-related crime, it now covers 66 areas of the country. If it is still found to be effective – 'and it does seem to be working and having an effect, in terms of getting people into treatment and bringing crime levels down', according to Flint – the home office and partner agencies will be looking to expand the scheme elsewhere.

And 'we are also working upstream, on people who bring drugs into distribution,' she adds. But while it is crime which is the fundamental driver behind the drugs strategy, Flint also acknowledges the importance of wider health and social benefits of tackling drug use and of treating drug users as people, in spite of her comment about 'mini crime waves'.

When asked if there is sufficient emphasis on treatment for people with alcohol problems, Flint is quick to draw attention to the government's Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy, launched in March this year – though again the main focus here is on crime.

Two pilot programmes are in the pipeline, recently given the green light by the Home

Secretary. 'We are looking at applying the intervention programme that we're currently doing for illegal drugs, and seeing if the programme could be adapted for people for whom alcohol abuse and substance misuse is a real problem and a factor behind their crime.'

And there is the audit of existing alcohol treatment services, results of which will be available early next year, which will be used to help ensure that there are sufficient services available to meet the needs of people with alcohol problems.

And as well as treatment, Flint points out that the alcohol strategy includes working with 'the licensing trade, local authorities and others, to try and tackle to problems that excessive drinking causes within our communities'.

Flint also sees sense in encouraging the Drug Action Teams (DATs) to develop as Drug and Alcohol Action Teams (DAATs).

'I think there is common ground on what the issues are – how drugs, legal and illegal, can sometimes take over your life,' she says.

So what does the minister think of the Shadow Home Secretary, David Davis's recently declared 'hard line on drugs' and his pledged ten-fold increase in residential rehabilitation places, to justify the choice of rehabilitation or the criminal justice system?

'Well, there are a couple of things I'd say,' she answers in measured tones.

'I think you have to have a thought-out strategy on links between drugs and crime. We need to have an approach to strategy that understands the issues behind what causes people to commit those crimes.'

The present government, she points out, 'are putting record amounts of money into funding not only the treatment side, but also the criminal justice side, making these programmes work.'

Flint refers again to the DIP as evidence of breaking the links between drugs and crime, 'stopping the revolving doors for people who have been on drugs'.

'It's very easy to say "we're going to set up x number of residential rehabilitation places" and I would like to see treatment places grow,' she says. 'But at the same time, while residential treatment is very important for some people, and essential for some people, at the end of the day, people don't spend the whole of their life in residential treatment. They have to come out, have to come back into the community, and unless you have the support services in the community, residential treatment won't have the success that we want it to have. I think that's an important area that is missing from the Shadow Home Secretary's analysis of what is a very complex and difficult area.'

Flint obviously feels that her colleague is missing the point of joined-up thinking and the holistic approach, and she warns against alienating those involved.

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'People working in agencies, working with people with drug problems want to know that there is a thought-out strategy and that there are real resources to sustain not only treatment, but the support services that are needed in our communities. And that's really important.'

While seeing some merit in random drug testing in schools, Flint is also cautious about taking this too far.

'It's down to schools to decide,' she says, suggesting that if the school thinks there is a serious problem they need to address, they should look at a range of options.

While acknowledging that 'we need to know where there are children who may be misusing drugs, and where there are young people who are actively dealing in drugs', she resists a diktat: 'I don't think that I as a minister can say you should do this... I think each school has to decide.'

Flint is anxious too that schools know in advance what they plan to do with the results of such tests, and what the outcome will be for the child involved.

'If they do find someone has a substance misuse problem, how are schools going to tackle it? What is the outcome going to be of anything they might discover as a result of test? That's very important.'

Flint's approach is consultative: she told the FDAP conference last month, that to make progress the government needed to have feedback on whether new resources are making a difference. Whatever the Intervention Programme is named, there will certainly be plenty of people involved who are willing to comment. **DD**

Coming soon in Drink and Drugs News: David Davis on plans for Tory spending on drink and drugs issues.

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