

Britain's First Supervised Drug Use Room Is Set to Open in Glasgow

Scotland, which has the highest rate of recorded drugs deaths in Europe, is opening a new facility for users to inject illegal drugs under medical supervision.



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Reporting from London

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A facility where users can inject drugs under nurses' supervision is set to open in Glasgow on Monday after almost a decade of debate over how to deal with the city's unwanted status as a European capital for narcotic-related deaths.

Offering hot drinks and a lounge with sofas, as well as booths for injections, the Safer Drug Consumption Facility is the first of its kind in Britain and follows similar initiatives in other cities around the world, including New York.

Those using the facility, which has been named the Thistle in a reference to a national emblem of Scotland, will bring their own drugs. Staff will not administer injections but will be on hand to monitor safety.

Here's what you need to know:

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- [What do organizers hope to achieve, and why in Glasgow?](#)

- What do critics say?

How will the drug consumption room work?

The new facility, which will operate throughout the year, has a reception and waiting area, a separate space with individual booths where injecting can take place, a recovery area and an aftercare area where advice will be offered by charities and support organizations.

Users will have access to clean syringes, needles and swabs, and will be allocated one of eight booths.

Lynn Macdonald, service manager at the Thistle, told Scotland's public broadcaster, STV, that users "don't have to show us what drugs they are going to use." But they will be asked to do so, she added, "so we can talk to them about harm reduction. In the using space, there will be nurses who will supervise injections."

Each booth has a mirror that is slightly tilted so that staff can observe the injection is taking place safely, without being too close to the person. "This also gives them a bit of dignity," Ms. Macdonald said. "That's key to this service — that people are treated with respect and dignity when they come here."

The Scottish government is funding the initiative by providing £2 million, or about \$2.4 million, a year.

What do organizers hope to achieve, and why in Glasgow?

There are now more than 100 drug consumption rooms worldwide, researchers say, including in Europe, Canada, the United States and Australia. Supporters say such facilities cut the risk of overdose and infection, reduce the costs of acute hospital admissions, and put users in touch with health care professionals who can offer drug addiction treatment.

In Scotland, which has the highest rate of recorded drugs deaths in Europe, the Thistle is seen as one answer to a lengthy debate about how to combat the harm from drugs. In 2023, 1,172 people died from drug misuse — a rise of 12 percent on the previous year.

Opioids such as heroin, morphine and methadone were the most common drugs connected to fatalities, being implicated in 937 deaths.

In 2015, there was a significant outbreak of H.I.V. in Glasgow, particularly among those injecting in public places. The virus was linked to homelessness and injecting in public spaces, according to the Glasgow City Council.

Calls for a safe drug consumption facility gained traction after a 2016 report that estimated that around 400 to 500 people were regularly injecting drugs in Glasgow's city center, increasing the risk of infection and causing a wider hazard to the public from discarded equipment including needles.

The City Council said that research showed such facilities reduce drug-related harm, including overdose and death, and the transmission of infectious diseases, and produced “an overall cost saving” by reducing calls on the health service, and cutting the time spent by the police and courts in handling drug-related issues.

Glasgow's initiative marks a significant, if contested, moment for British drugs policy after years of debate over how to reduce overdoses and take consumption off the streets. Drug laws that cover Scotland are set by the British Parliament at Westminster, but are enforced by Scottish courts, which operate their own system.

The new facility became legally possible after Scotland's most senior lawyer, who is known as the Lord Advocate, said that it would not be in the public interest to prosecute users for possession of illegal drugs in a safe consumption facility.

The British government said that it respects that decision and will not interfere with the Glasgow project. While it says it will watch the results of the initiative, it said there are no plans to reintroduce such schemes in England or Wales.

What do critics say?

Some local residents oppose the opening because they fear it could bring more drug dealing into the area.

Other critics worry that it will be counterproductive. One charity, Faces & Voices of Recovery U.K., said in a statement that there was “nothing kind about offering people a place to continue destructive behaviors that keep them trapped in cycles of chaos, compulsion, and despair.”

By focusing on consumption rather than recovery, it added, “these rooms communicate a devastating message: ‘We don’t believe you can get better.’”

But Scotland’s first minister, John Swinney, welcomed the opening, saying in a statement on Friday that “while this facility is not a silver bullet, it is another significant step forward and will complement other efforts to reduce harms and deaths.”

Stephen Castle is a London correspondent of The Times, writing widely about Britain, its politics and the country’s relationship with Europe. More about Stephen Castle

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