

PRESS RELEASE

Release date:

26 January 2024

*****Professor Fiona Measham (Founder of the Loop), Katy Porter (CEO of the Loop) and Lydia Plant (Director of Operations at Bristol Drugs Project) will be available for interview today, Friday 26 January between 2pm and 6pm at Bristol Drugs Project, 11 Brunswick Square, Bristol BS2 8PE. Please contact George Herbert at george.herbert@bdp.org.uk or call 07809404370 to arrange.**

The UK's first regular drug checking service launches in Bristol this month.

The UK's first regular drug checking service is set to launch in Bristol this month, delivered by leading harm reduction charity The Loop. In partnership with Bristol City Council and Bristol Drugs Project, The Loop will be bringing its pioneering service, which combines personalised health advice with drug testing, to central Bristol.

Funded by Bristol City Council and operated by The Loop's team of professional chemists and health professionals, the new service is a multi-agency partnership together with Bristol Drugs Project (BDP), and the universities of Liverpool and Bath. The trailblazing evidence-based health service aims to reduce harm from dependent and high-risk drug-taking, increase understanding of local drug markets, and share information with stakeholders, including police and health services, to support harm reduction messages to wider drug using communities.

Professor Fiona Measham, Founder and Chair of Trustees of The Loop and Chair in Criminology at the University of Liverpool, said:

"This is a landmark moment for harm reduction. After 12 years of preparations, evaluations and negotiations, it is fantastic news that The Loop can start the UK's first regular drug checking service. With more cities due to follow soon, this launch represents the start of a new era for drug checking and it could not come at a more important time. The risks from adulteration of the illegal drug market have never been greater."

The new drug testing service aligns with the aspirations set out in the Bristol Drug and Alcohol strategy. Councillor Ellie King, Cabinet Lead for Public Health and Communities, said:

"I am proud that Bristol is the first city in the UK to have a regular drug checking service. This new initiative is ultimately going to save lives. It also means our communities will be able to access scientific and evidence-based information about the drugs that they may consume and that are in circulation. Bristol is leading the way in this innovative public health approach to keeping people safe around drugs which shows that, as a city, we put our people's wellbeing at the forefront of decision making. This is about working in partnership to help reduce harm to our communities and empowering people to make safer, more informed choices, with access to drug treatment and further support."

Substances of concern can be submitted for testing, with testing proven to reduce drug-related

harm. Completely confidential and free to access, it is set to open its doors for the first time on 27 January 2024 and will run once a month, with additional testing dates to be announced during the year ahead.

Licensed by the Home Office and in line with government policy, The Loop Bristol Drug Checking Service will focus on dependent, frequent and problematic use, the areas of highest need, with the aim of reducing consumption of adulterants and contaminated drugs and thus the risk of poisoning and overdose, whilst signposting service users to support services and helping to save lives.

Anna Smith, CEO of partner agency Bristol Drugs Project, said:

“As an organisation committed to reducing the harms caused by drugs and alcohol, we are excited by the possibilities this service has for people in Bristol who use drugs.

“We have a proud history of championing progressive harm reduction and public safety interventions. We cannot wait to contribute our experience and expertise from 37 years of working in the city to this service.”

Drug checking services have operated successfully across Europe for four decades and have been piloted in the UK by The Loop since 2016, and Bristol in 2018. Drug checking provides a vital opportunity for people to access accurate, timely, and relevant information to make more informed decisions about drugs, alongside support and treatment options. Service users surrender substances of concern, which are later destroyed, for laboratory analysis by chemists, and test results inform local harm reduction messages and alerts. The results also inform personalised consultations with health professionals.

The Loop Drug Checking Service provides non-judgemental support, and clear, factual information to communicate relative risk and help reduce potential harm, signposting and supporting people into treatment and other local health services, where appropriate. The Loop is clear that there is no such thing as safe drug use, all drug use carries risk, and it benefits all drug using communities and emergency services to better understand the nature and extent of dangerous drugs in circulation, to reduce the harm caused to individuals, communities and wider society.

Notes to Editors:

How will it work?

Service users take substances of concern to BDP, surrender them into an amnesty box on the ground floor, then about an hour return to receive individually tailored, non-judgemental, anonymous consultations from health professionals. In that intervening hour, a mobile lab in BDP will analyse the submitted substance using a number of chemical tests to identify the contents and strength of the substance of concern. The laboratory has a Home Office licence to handle controlled drugs and the conditions of the licence allow individual test results to be disseminated directly to service users who are over 18 years old and considered to be dependent users. Whilst this allows the drug checking service to focus on

those with the greatest need, in line with Government policy, it is not possible for The Loop to offer its full public drug checking service to everyone at the current time. No drugs are handed back to users of the service.

Additional Information:

Location: The amnesty bin drop-off and Loop mobile laboratory are located at Bristol Drug Project. The healthcare consultations will take place at a local community centre.

When: Once per month for a year, on payday weekend, the last weekend of the month, plus additionally dates to be announced during the year.

Who: The Loop is providing the drug checking service funded by Bristol City Council, using Bristol Drugs Project and local community premises. The Loop was established in 2012 and became The Loop Drug Checking Service charity in 2022 (registered number 1200533). For more information see: www.wearetheloop.org

HO licence: This is the first Home-Office licensed *regular* drug checking service in the UK. Anyone interested in lawfully undertaking activities which include the possession, supply or production of controlled drugs, including those who seek to provide drug checking or drug testing services, can apply for a Home Office controlled drug licence.

Set up for service users: Service users take substances of concern to BDP, surrender a small amount equivalent to one dose into an amnesty box on the ground floor, then an hour later return to the community centre where they receive a consultation from health professionals. In that intervening hour, a mobile lab in BDP will analyse the submitted substance using a number of chemical tests to identify the contents and strength of the substance of concern for harm reduction purposes, removing this substance from circulation, and providing drug market monitoring information to emergency and support services across the city.

Please note: No submitted substances are returned to service users, only information regarding the substance and professional healthcare advice.

-ends-