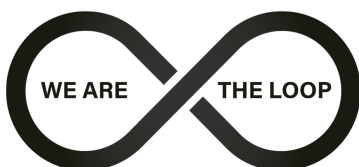


Drug Checking Services

An innovative healthcare intervention to reduce drug related harm in the UK



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Introduction

Drug-related deaths and associated harms have been increasing in the UK since [2012](#), with mis-sold drugs, as well as high and variable strength, key contributing factors.

In December 2021, the UK government published its 10-year [Drug Strategy](#) calling for 'innovation' to help reduce increasing drug harms.

Drug checking is exactly that: an innovative healthcare response to the risks associated with drug use which is shown to reduce harm.

There is a [growing evidence base](#) showing that drug checking:

- ↓ Leads to reduced drug use
- 🔗 Results in lower levels of polydrug use
- ⊕ Has a lasting, positive health impact on service users

Drug checking also contributes to the national surveillance of illicit drug markets, which facilitates more targeted interventions when responding to drug use.

The Loop is an award-winning specialist organisation dedicated to delivering high quality, evidence-based drug checking.

We are uniquely placed to deliver drug checking in the UK, given our track record of successfully delivering healthcare consultations to over 10,000 service users since introducing drug checking in the UK in 2016.

In 2022, The Loop Drug Checking Service became a registered charity (number 1200533); appointed a full time CEO and administrator; and was granted a Home Office licence in order to provide a regular drug checking service, commissioned by Bristol City Council, with more city centre drug checking services in the pipeline.

We are excited to work with ever more partners in the coming years, as drug checking becomes more widely accessible around the UK.





What is drug checking?

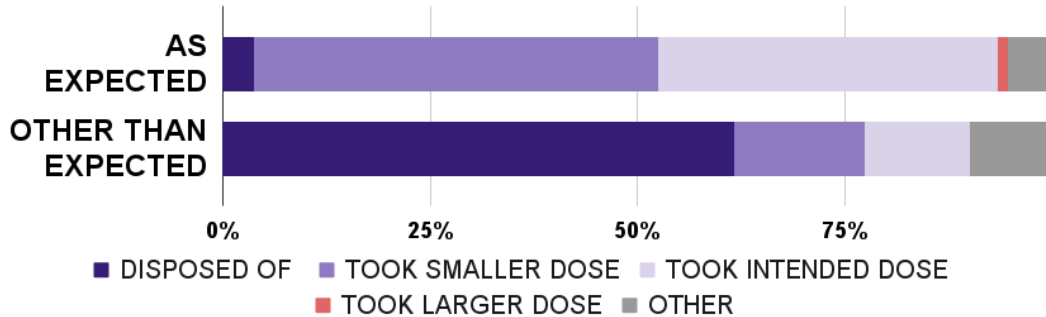
Drug checking, first introduced in 1965 in California, is a public health intervention which has the primary aim of reducing drug-related harm by directly engaging with people who use drugs. Members of the public submit substances of concern to The Loop for rapid [laboratory analysis](#). Teams of chemists then determine the content and strength of submitted substances. The results of these analyses are reported to service users embedded in individually tailored healthcare consultations delivered by multidisciplinary teams of qualified and experienced health professionals. Results are also disseminated to stakeholders and emergency services. [Alerts](#) about substances of concern in circulation can be shared through public health surveillance networks, early warning systems, the media and social media to reach at-risk communities, practitioners and other interested parties.

The evidence behind drug checking in the UK

The Loop is an evidence-making health service with a team of academics and associated professionals conducting in-house research and evaluation. [Over 15 peer reviewed academic papers and reports](#) have been published to date exploring the [effectiveness](#) and [outcomes](#) of drug checking and associated findings. Our studies have found that:

Drug checking reduces drug use

When service users are informed that their submitted substance of concern contains something other than what they thought they had bought or been given, nearly two thirds dispose of it.



When service users are informed their submitted substance of concern contains the expected contents, half choose to take a lower dose after receiving a Loop healthcare consultation.

Given mis-sold and high and variable strength drugs result in poisoning and overdose, both key factors in the UK's current crisis in drug-related deaths, drug checking is an innovative intervention focused on risk communications which can reduce drug-related harm and hospital admissions.

Drug checking reduces polydrug use

Polydrug use (taking more than one drug in a drug-taking episode) increases the risk of someone coming to harm; the vast majority of drug-related deaths in the UK involve the use of more than one drug. Since polydrug use is a known cause of drug-related harm, The Loop's drug checking service can alert service users to particularly high risk drug combinations. This leads to an immediate outcome of nearly half of service users reporting being more careful about combining drugs after receiving a Loop healthcare consultation.

Crucially, these risk reduction behaviours persist: three months later, nearly one third of The Loop's drug checking service users report continuing to be more careful about polydrug use and continuing to take smaller doses.





The international evidence

Drug checking has been operating in Europe for over 30 years. There is ongoing drug checking in countries including Switzerland, the Netherlands, Portugal and Austria. Further afield, there is drug checking in the USA, Canada and New Zealand. In 2021, [New Zealand](#) became the first country worldwide to pass legislation to legalise drug checking nationwide and create a regulated, government-funded licensing scheme.

[Systematic reviews](#) of drug checking services across the world have found that using a service can result in a number of risk reduction behaviours. Recent research in the [UK](#) and [overseas](#) suggests that this positive behaviour change can last several months afterwards and that intentions at point of care are significantly related to subsequent outcomes.



Drug checking is reducing drug use through knowledge, harm reduction and welfare and for a considerable number of people who are receiving this information for the first time in their lives, drug checking is crucially saving lives.

— Jason Kew, (retired) Detective Chief Inspector



Other important considerations

The results of drug checking are shared with emergency services, public health surveillance networks, early warning systems and wider drug using communities via evidence-based and culturally appropriate alerts and associated harm reduction information.

Drug checking provides monitoring and surveillance of illicit drug markets and is able to assess the discrepancy between what drugs are sold as and what they contain, because a key feature of drug checking is the communication directly with service users.

The benefits of the intelligence gathered stretch beyond the venue in which drug checking occurs and can feed into local, national and international monitoring systems, as happens with The [Loop](#). This facilitates quicker and more comprehensive trend monitoring which informs better targeted evidence-based interventions and broader health services.

In the Netherlands, for example, the Drugs Information and Monitoring System (DIMS) is a long established government funded drug checking service which is funded primarily to collect intelligence on the illicit drug market.

The information gathered by The Loop can be used to target health communications to the public, such as via The Loop's drug alerts which circulate to over 150k social media followers, obtaining up to and over 500k viewers on occasion.





Who is The Loop?

The Loop is a non-profit non-government organisation founded in the UK in 2012 by Professor Fiona Measham and colleagues. Our mission is to provide high quality evidence-based and evidence-making drug checking services, associated harm reduction advice and information, as well as in-house research, evaluation and training. The Loop is staffed by a senior team of 40 and a general team of approximately 300 - all volunteers, all professionals - predominantly qualified and experienced chemists, health professionals and academic researchers - who commit their time to supporting the organisation. In order to conduct drug checking at a given location, The Loop partners with local stakeholders - including local authorities, public health, substance misuse services, event management and police - to ensure that there is an agreed memorandum of understanding between parties. The Loop only ever operates with police support.

[Our History](#)

The Loop introduced the UK's first onsite harm reduction testing service at nightclubs in 2013 and at festivals in 2014. The Loop introduced the UK's first event-based drug checking service in 2016 at Secret Garden Party and Kendal Calling festivals; and the UK's first community-based drug checking service in 2018 in Bristol and Durham city centres. City centre testing attracted a diverse demographic of service users, including people experiencing homelessness and injecting opiates. Along with introducing drug checking in the UK, The Loop also pioneered the use of Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy (FTIR) for onsite harm reduction and drug checking services, a method of chemical analysis which is now widely used by drug checking services across the world. FTIR is a rapid and reliable analytical laboratory method which is ideal for mobile labs.



Awards, recognition and supporters

The Loop has gained considerable attention for our work, winning ten awards and gaining national and international recognition. The Loop and its founder have won multiple awards from UK Festival Awards, as well as from the Association for Independent Festivals, the Night Time Industry Association, Event Production Awards and DJ Magazine, amongst others.

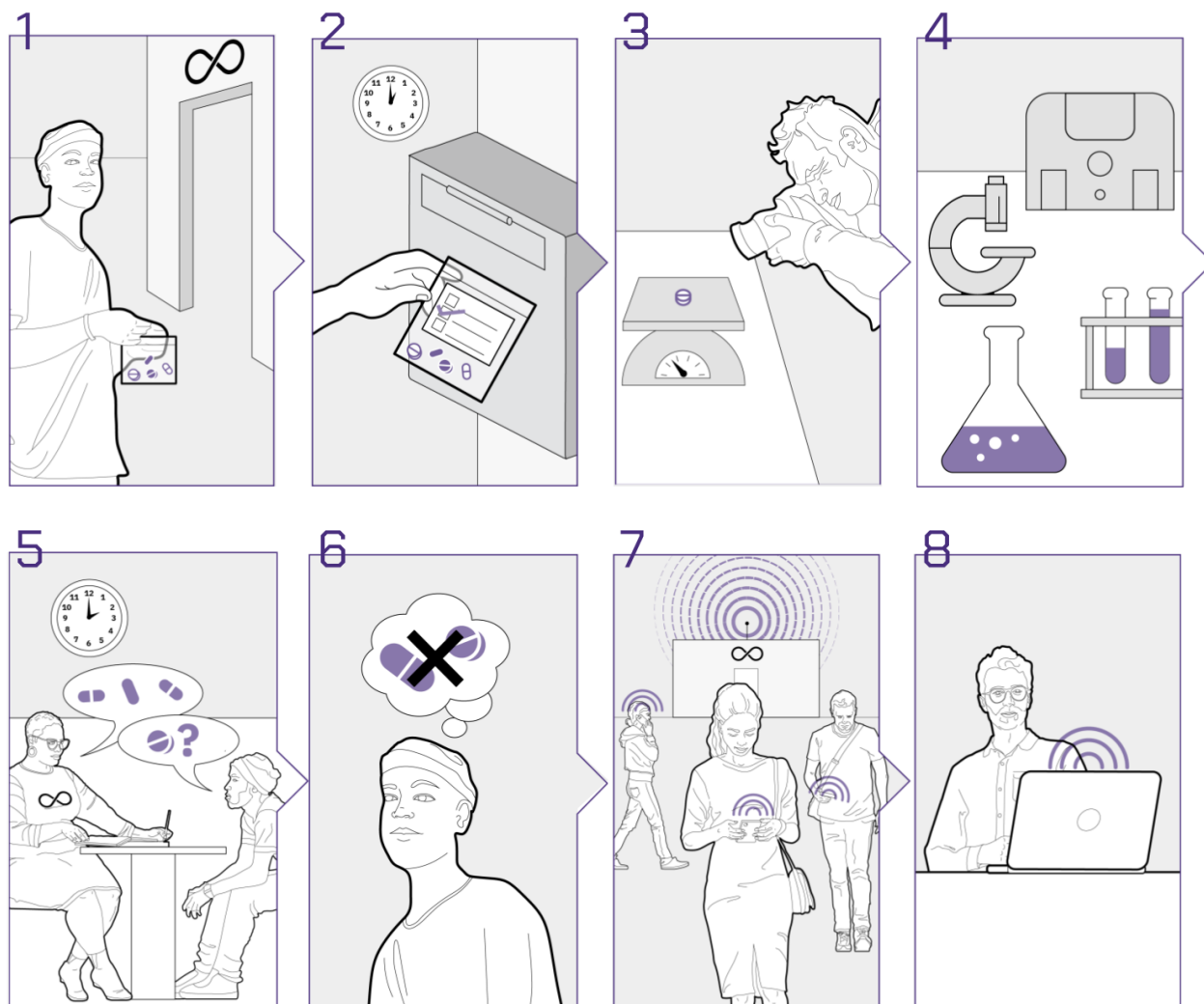
The Loop was also included in the Royal Society for Public Health's list of the Top 20 public health achievements of the 21st century, as voted by its members.

The Loop is supported by or works in partnership with a wide range of stakeholders including:

- Police forces;
- Police and Crime Commissioners;
- MPs;
- Substance misuse services;
- Charities (including Drug Science, Release, Transform and Anyone's Child);
- Hospitality and events industries (including NTIA, AIF, Resident Advisor, Fabric, Warehouse Project, Parklife, Boomtown, Motion and others);

Drug checking is supported by a range of organisations across the political spectrum, including the Green Party, the Labour Campaign for Drug Policy Reform, the Conservative Drug Policy Reform Group and the Scottish Liberal Democrat party.

The process of drug checking



A service user brings a substance of concern to the drug checking service for testing, which they surrender into a secure box. The substance is then taken to the laboratory using approved transportation where it is catalogued and analysed by professional chemists using a number of analytical methods. This process generally takes around an hour. Substances are destroyed in the testing process and none are returned to the service user.

The service user returns for a Loop healthcare consultation with a health professional, where the result is discussed within a wider conversation about health, wellbeing and harm reduction. The results of the testing process are disseminated to stakeholders, associated professionals (such as substance misuse practitioners), support services and wider drug using communities.

Three months later, two thirds of The Loop's service users continue to engage in at least one behaviour to reduce their risk of harm.



Case study: The feedback loop

Adulteration of post lockdown MDMA market

In summer 2021 The Loop communications team issued a number of alerts after its chemists identified extensive misselling of synthetic cathinones as MDMA. These drugs caused a number of hospitalisations across the UK. The alerts reached hundreds of thousands of people via The Loop's social media platforms; national press coverage including the [BBC Online](#), [The Metro](#) and [the Daily Mirror](#); posters displayed in festivals, pubs and clubs across the country; and subsequently a peer reviewed journal [article](#).

The benefits of monitoring and disseminating information on drug trends therefore can extend beyond the boundaries of The Loop's individual drug checking service and can help inform stakeholders, practitioners and other interested parties across the UK of emerging substances of concern.



CAUTION: Pharaoh pills
4 pills - 4 different drugs

- **Yellow** pill contains **benzocaine**, a local anaesthetic used in dentistry & as a bulking agent for cocaine, but not psychoactive.
- **Blue** pill contains **4-CMC**, a cathinone with more stimulation & less euphoria than MDMA.
- **Pink** pill contains **eutylone**, a potent cathinone that can cause severe insomnia & psychosis.
- **Brown** pill contains **MDMA**.

Pills that look similar can contain completely different drugs.
Drug checking services like The Loop reduce your risk of taking an imposter drug.
#GoSlowStayLow #TimeToTest

  **@WeAreTheLoopUK**  **@TheLoop_UK**
 **@WeAreTheLoopUK**



Frequently asked questions

Does drug checking give the impression that taking drugs is safe?

The Loop informs service users that all drug use poses risk and the safest option is not to take drugs. However, some people may still decide to take drugs and they are at risk of harm. This risk is amplified when consuming drugs of unknown strength, or mixing drugs. Our healthcare consultations provide people with risk and harm reduction information. While all drug use is risky, some forms of use are less risky than others.

How does drug checking deal with the harms of polydrug use?

In the UK, most drug-related deaths involve polydrug use (consuming more than one drug in a drug-taking episode). Due to this risk, our healthcare consultations embed the test result in a wider discussion about drug interactions and the risks of polydrug use. After using the service, approximately 2 in 5 service users were more careful about mixing drugs. This positive health change is lasting: 3 months later 1 in 3 were still more careful about mixing drugs.

Does drug checking encourage people to take drugs?

Drug checking results in people consuming less drugs. The Loop has found that if the substance identified is other than expected, nearly 2 in 3 service users dispose of further substances later. If the substance is as expected then 1 in 2 take lower doses. Substances of concern are surrendered into secure boxes for collection and safe destruction by police. Our service thus directly takes high risk substances out of circulation. Tested substances are never returned to service users and the limitations of laboratory analyses are always explained.

Could drug checking have 'unintended consequences'?

There is currently no evidence from decades of drug checking around the world that it causes unintended consequences or increases risk behaviours. The evidence base for drug checking is still growing, and these questions are still being researched, but the evidence so far from The Loop and other drug checking NGOs suggests that after using drug checking services, the overwhelming majority take steps to reduce risk.

Could drug checking services be used by drug dealers?

We do not give any written results to service users or allow people to film or record the healthcare consultation. This means that even if a drug supplier used our service, they would be unable to use test results to quality assure or advertise their

products to consumers. We always stop a consultation if we believe someone is selling drugs.

How does drug checking help vulnerable drug users?

In Canada, for example, drug checking has been used to identify the presence of highly potent and dangerous opioids that have entered the drug supply chain. In the UK The Loop has provided drug checking services for a variety of drug using demographics, including injecting opioid users and people experiencing homelessness. For over 95% of service users, visiting The Loop is the first time they have spoken with a health professional about their alcohol or illicit drug use and younger adults and polydrug users are disproportionately more likely to use our services.

Why do we call them 'substances of concern'?

Substances tested by The Loop are called a 'concern' because their contents are unknown and could have the potential to cause harm. Service users and stakeholders often have a question or concern that prompted them to submit the substance for testing, with about one third of The Loop's drug checking service users submitting something which they or their close friends already tried and experienced a significant unexpected or negative effect from.

Substances surrendered for testing are not called 'drugs' because until tested we do not know their composition. Whilst the majority subsequently are identified as psychoactive drugs, a significant minority turn out to be inert substances or contaminants such as salt, sugar or boric acid.

Surrendered substances are not called 'samples' because it is a condition of using our drug checking service that service users agree to submit all drugs in their possession beforehand and therefore the submission cannot be considered a portion taken from a larger whole. Additionally, there are variations within and between batches of illicit drugs so the Loop cannot test a sample, provide a quality check or give assurances about a substance or the wider batch from which it was drawn. The purpose of our service is to communicate relative risk and monitor drug trends. The Loop does not encourage or assist future criminal offences.

