

# Dragon's den

According to the official statistics, the number of problematic heroin users has fallen for the first time across the UK. Yet Swansea appears to be bucking the trend, where according to one user, it's 'more hassle to buy a packet of fags' than heroin. Rebecca Lees investigates.

In a move reminiscent of the mid-1980s, a hard-hitting poster campaign featuring a grainy black and white image of a tombstone was launched recently in Swansea. *Heroin Ruins Lives*, led by South Wales Police, aims to raise awareness of the impact of the drug on users, their families, friends and communities, and encourages people with information about dealers to talk to police. But why has this campaign been considered necessary at a time when the national picture suggests that heroin use is declining?

The National Drug Treatment Monitoring System (NDTMS) data for 2010/11, published by the National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, reveals that the number of people accessing treatment for heroin and crack in the last two years fell by 10,000, a statistically significant figure. Other research supports this downward trend, with figures from the University of Glasgow suggesting an overall decrease in the numbers of people using those drugs problematically. NTA Chief Executive Paul Hayes welcomed the figures, but recognised that "addiction remains a serious problem for many communities," adding, "We need to remain vigilant, particularly in a tough economic climate."

Vigilance is undoubtedly a priority for police in Swansea. Since 2007, there have been 61 drug-related deaths in and around the city, while more than £500,000 worth of Class A drugs have been recovered since April 2010. Drug trafficking offences detected in the city rose to 188 between September 2010 and 2011, an increase of 100 per cent on the same period for the previous year, and 13 organised gangs were disbanded after

being caught attempting to establish heroin supply networks in Swansea.

Detective Inspector Jason Davies of South Wales Police is leading the *Heroin Ruins Lives* campaign. "Swansea is recognised nationally as having a significant heroin misuse problem. This makes the area vulnerable to infiltration by organised crime groups intent on supplying heroin on our streets," he says. "The focus has been on groups from London, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham. They're housed in Swansea by local people who deal for them in return for free bags of heroin".

The campaign poster, illustrated with the headstone of a heroin user, has been described by some as insensitive. But it's seen by agencies and users' families as essential in underlining the problem facing the city. One former heavy user says, "It's probably more hassle to go to the shop to get a pack of fags than heroin, to be honest. You just phone someone and they drop it off at the house." The 30-year-old started using the drug about 10 years ago. "Now and again, me and my mates would go clubbing and take some pills. Then my best mate got into gear and it was easy to follow him," he says. "In 10 years, it's got much easier to get hold of it. It's rife in Swansea. It's cheap too."

This man is one of the city's success stories. His use is now occasional, and he is planning a future after accessing support at Swansea Drugs Project, a flagship treatment service which recently moved into new £2m premises. "The staff are brilliant. I have done lots of courses," the client says. "It keeps me busy, which is essential to my recovery, otherwise I'd be at home twiddling my thumbs." The project has seen a 40%

jump in referrals in the last year alone.

Director Ifor Glyn said: "Heroin misuse is one of the biggest problems facing communities in Swansea. The number of deaths over the years is shocking and the cost to families and friends unbearable. You can't avoid it – it's a problem that's there on the streets. It's the usual mixture of alcohol, homelessness and heroin and it's quite visible in the city centre".

"Fifteen years ago this wouldn't have happened. When I came to Swansea there was no heroin at all. I went away for about three or four years to work in the valleys and when I came back about five years ago, the place was awash with it. I think once it gets a grip, it tends to spread like wildfire when there is a lack of jobs and prospects."

Jobs and prospects are certainly an issue in Swansea. The four wards where heroin use is most prevalent, including the Castle ward in the city centre, are among the top ten most deprived areas in Wales. But Swansea's problem doesn't stem solely from poverty, according to DI Davies. "Recent demographic analysis highlights a number of key areas that are being looked at," he says. "For example, Swansea does not have a gang culture, turf wars or gun crime issues, thus making the threat to organised crime groups limited when they infiltrate the area. This is opposed to the situation in Liverpool, for example, where to supply heroin brings severe risk to life from other suppliers who fight for territory."

Another theory is that Swansea is, to some extent, a victim of its own success. Previously, those seeking help had a confusing number of agencies to choose from. The Abertawe Alcohol and Drugs Assessment Service (AADAS) is now the

Photographer Adam Patterson also co-produced a documentary about the city's drug problem called *Swansea love story*.

View it at [www.vice.com/rule-britannia/rule-britannia-swansea-part-1-of-6](http://www.vice.com/rule-britannia/rule-britannia-swansea-part-1-of-6)



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first point of contact for all enquiries. The service was the first of its kind in Wales when it launched in 2010. The city was also the first place to make available the heroin antidote naloxone, which has since been rolled out to other parts of Wales.

"In the last five years there has been a year-on-year increase in people coming to the centre, but it's difficult to say whether it's become a bigger problem or whether there is more success in getting people into treatment," says Mr Glyn. "There is a shift in what we are doing. Before, we were just putting a plaster on the problem. Now it's about taking people from basic overdose prevention to working with them and supporting them back into work."

Cyrenians' Chris Skelton agrees. "There are definitely more people using heroin but we have a one-point-of-contact referral system, so it might be that the figures we are producing are more accurate. We also have a high number of people with hepatitis C, which could be because we do more screening and we target people who inject. We tackle substance misuse from all angles, including health, psychological and physical."

"The recognition of the problem 18 months ago brought it out from hiding into the public arena," says DI

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Davies. "Also we have seen a 50 per cent reduction in heroin overdoses since 2008. This is based on effective partnership working and the roll-out of naloxone." This partnership work also includes the Safer Swansea Partnership, which works with police and other agencies to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour.

All this, of course, requires funding. With the possibility of a double-dip recession looming, there are concerns as The Cyrenians' base in St Matthew's Church, High Street, is facing an uncertain future, while staff at the Swansea Drugs Project are all too aware of the demands on the public purse.

"Future funding is in question because of the pressure on governments," says Mr Glyn. "But they need to look at what would be happening without all this

money being spent. There would be an increase in costs from hepatitis and more children would be taken into local authority accommodation. There are loads of practical costs that people need to think about."

Above all, according to DI Davies, is the need to appeal to those communities where the drug is most conspicuous. "The purpose of the project is to raise awareness of the impact heroin has on the user, those closest to them and the community as a whole," he says. "Without the support of the community we are often one step behind in the fight against heroin supply and those closest to the user are often best placed to provide information on the supply networks. With the public's support, together we can respond to the needs of the community by acting dynamically on this intelligence. We can improve the quality of life for users' families by reducing heroin availability, which in turn offers opportunities for them to support the user to engage in rehabilitative programmes. Unless we strategically target the groups and change the mindsets of the locals who house the groups, then we will never succeed in the battle to save lives."

■ **Rebecca Lees** is a freelance journalist.