

Evaluating the Queensland Drug Checking Services: Framework and Methodology

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Introduction: In February 2023, the Queensland Government announced the introduction of drug checking services to reduce risks and harms associated with illicit drug use, including commencement of services at fixed-sites and at music festivals. Queensland Health commissioned the Institute for Social Science Research at the University of Queensland to develop a monitoring framework for the Queensland services and conduct an evaluation of the first year of service operations (March 2024 - April 2025) to inform future state-funded drug checking service delivery in Queensland.

Method / Approach: The evaluation aims to assess the development, implementation and process of services, the demographics, experience and outcomes of clients accessing the services, and service and system level outcomes such as public health and clinician alerts. Experience evaluating ACT-based services and a rapid re-review of the literature provided an evidence base for the evaluation design, augmented by extensive consultation with local service providers, people with lived-living experience of substance use, research colleagues and funders.

Key Findings: We have developed a mixed methods approach that draws on a range of data sources and perspectives. These include service operational data, observation data, client measures within the service visit, follow up surveys and interviews with clients, qualitative interviews with stakeholders, and triangulation with complementary data. This presentation will focus on development and implementation of the evaluation methodology.

Discussions and Conclusions: Transparent evaluation of novel harm reduction services such as drug checking is vital to ensure that resources, practices and consumer involvement are optimised for effective delivery, robust and evidence-informed to meet local needs while generating information that can inform national harm reduction and public health measures. This alignment and comparability of findings is particularly important as further Australian jurisdictions move to implement drug checking.

Implications for Practice or Policy: This evaluation has the potential to inform and align with assessments of other upcoming drug checking trials and help create a cohesive picture of drug checking service outcomes in Australia. It also has the potential to support cross-state alignment of public health alert systems.

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