



Item No. 7

Meeting Date

Wednesday 20th August 2025

**Glasgow City
Integration Joint Board
Public Engagement Committee**

Report By: Kelda Gaffney, Interim Assistant Chief Officer, Adult Services

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The Thistle (Safer Drug Consumption Facility) – Engagement Update

Purpose of Report:

The purpose of the report is to update the IJB Public Engagement Committee on the engagement activity that continues following the opening of the Safer Drug Consumption Facility (SDCF) in Glasgow City in January 2025, known as The Thistle. The report also updates the Committee on the support from the press office in addressing and handling media enquiries about The Thistle and mitigating the negative impact of this.

Background/Engagement:

The IJB approved the implementation of a Safer Drug Consumption Facility in Glasgow City in [September 2023](#).

The Public Engagement Committee was tasked with monitoring community engagement.

A full report was shared with the PEC in [February 2025](#).

Governance Route:

The matters contained within this paper have been previously considered by the following group(s) as part of its development.

HSCP Senior Management Team ☐

Council Corporate Management Team ☐

Health Board Corporate Management Team ☐

Council Committee ☐

Update requested by IJB ☐

Other ☒

SDCF Oversight Board

Not Applicable ☐

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Recommendations:	<p>The IJB Public Engagement Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">a) Note the contents of this report; andb) Agree that The Thistle lead officers provide updates on engagement activity to the PEC as necessary and no less frequently than once per year.
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Relevance to Integration Joint Board Strategic Plan:

The implementation of the Safer Drug Consumption Facility (SDCF) will support the IJB/HSCP to meet the Vision and Partnership Priorities laid out within the Strategic Plan 2023-26. In particular the SDCF will support the priorities of: Prevention, early intervention and well-being; Supporting greater self-determination and informed choice; Supporting people in their communities and; Strengthening communities to reduce harm.

Implications for Health and Social Care Partnership:

Reference to National Health & Wellbeing Outcome:	<p>The Thistle will contribute to meeting the following health and wellbeing outcomes for health and social care services: People who use health and social care services have positive experiences of those services, and have their dignity respected; Health and social care services are centred on helping to maintain or improve the quality of life of people who use those services; Health and social care services contribute to reducing health inequalities; People who use health and social care service are safe from harm.</p>
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Personnel:	<p>Alcohol and Drug Recovery Services have recruited, trained and now manage The Thistle staff team. All staff are in post. Staffside and GCC Unison were involved in the workforce planning for new posts.</p>
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Carers:	<p>Family members and carer representatives have been consulted as part of the engagement strategy and contributed to wider community engagement via their participation in a short video explaining the service.</p>
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Provider Organisations:	<p>Provider organisations operating within the proximity of The Thistle have been invited to participate in the engagement efforts. This includes local providers of services which are not contracted to deliver health and social care services by Glasgow City HSCP. Implications for provider organisations are considered through the SDCF Implementation Board.</p>
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Equalities:	<p>An EQIA has been completed and published and has informed engagement activity to date. This was reviewed in January 2024 following further engagement and has been updated since the service became operational.</p>
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Fairer Scotland Compliance:	<p>In offering a safer environment for drug consumption, co-located with a range of associated services and advice, the facility will contribute to supporting people to make</p>
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	choices that will help offset the impacts of socio-economic disadvantage often associated with this service user group.
Financial:	<p>The financial framework for the operational costs for the facility has been agreed with the Scottish Government, and operational costs will be delivered within this financial envelope. Full details are included in the report presented to IJB in June 2025.</p> <p>The implementation of the SDCF is likely to result in reduced costs for other parts of the health, social care and criminal justice system. The IJB agreed to earmark funds for the re-design work required to the Hunter Street Health and Care Centre to accommodate these services. Costs have been met from within this allocation.</p>
Legal:	<p>The Thistle will be delivered alongside other Alcohol and Drug treatment services aimed at reducing harms and providing pathways into treatment, care and recovery. Operational policies will be strictly adhered to and will be monitored closely. King's Counsel opinion confirmed that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and Glasgow City Council staff can deliver the facility within existing legislation.</p> <p>The Lord Advocate has provided a public statement of prosecution policy, so that service users will not be prosecuted for possession of drugs whilst using the Safer Drug Consumption Facility.</p>
Economic Impact:	There may be economic benefits to the city as a result of the reduction in the visibility of drug misuse in public places and a reduction in drug-related litter being visible on the streets. Any economic impact experienced will be considered as part of the independent evaluation.
Sustainability:	None.
Sustainable Procurement and Article 19:	None.
Risk Implications:	The implementation and delivery of the first SDCF in the UK carries with it a degree of reputational risk for Glasgow City Council, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde and Glasgow City IJB. Such risks are identified, monitored and mitigated through the SDCF Implementation Board and will continue to be monitored via appropriate governance routes.
Implications for Glasgow City Council:	There are a number of implications for both Glasgow City Council and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, including political and reputational impacts, positive impacts on the

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	local community and media attention. There may also be increased demand for support services as a result of successful engagement with a cohort of vulnerable individuals with severe and multiple disadvantages. Resource implications may be offset by a reduction in demand for unscheduled care services such as acute health services and crisis / emergency social care services.
Implications for NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde:	There are a number of implications for both Glasgow City Council and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde, including political and reputational impacts, positive impacts on the local community and media attention. There may also be increased demand for support services as a result of successful engagement with a cohort of vulnerable individuals with severe and multiple disadvantages. Resource implications may be offset by a reduction in demand for unscheduled care services such as acute health services and crisis / emergency social care services.

1. Purpose

- 1.1 The purpose of the report is to update the IJB Public Engagement Committee on the engagement activity that continues following the opening of the Safer Drug Consumption Facility (SDCF) in Glasgow City in January 2025, known as The Thistle. The report also updates the Committee on the support from the press office in addressing and handling media enquiries about The Thistle and mitigating the negative impact of this.

2. Background

- 2.1. The Communication and Engagement subgroup, chaired by the Alcohol and Drug Recovery Service (ADRS) Associate Medical Director, has been meeting since final proposals for the facility were developed in August 2023. The Engagement Strategy was presented to, and approved by, the IJB on [29th November 2023](#), and has since been presented quarterly to the IJB Public Engagement Committee.
- 2.2 Engagement activity during the pre-implementation stage took place over three phases and included 12 community drop-in sessions, attendance at community councils, area partnerships and local engagement forums, and engagement with local residents, elected members, people with lived and living experience of injecting drug use, family members, housing providers, local businesses, third sector providers, and HSCP services. The [Safer Drug Consumption Facility webpage](#) was developed with information for service users, family members and community members, videos, FAQs and a 'You Said We Did' section. Since the service opened in January 2025, it has hosted over 200 visitors to tour the service. Local community members are prioritised for these.

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- 2.3 A full report on the phased engagement plan, pre-launch activity and opening day was presented to the Public Engagement Committee in [February 2025](#).

3. Ongoing Community Engagement Activity

- 3.1 Following extensive pre-implementation community engagement, a formal Community Engagement Forum has been established. The forum has met on four occasions to date and membership includes Police Scotland, local residents, local businesses, Elected Members, NRS (Neighbourhoods, Regeneration and Sustainability), and ADRS and The Thistle clinicians and managers. The meetings thus far have been constructive, and partners have been able to respond tangibly to issues raised.
- 3.2 The forum has heard concerns about the ongoing impact of discarded drug-related paraphernalia and away from home drug use in the Calton area, with some members claiming this has worsened since The Thistle became operational. Whilst there is no evidence from NRS or Police Scotland of an increase in reports or activity, it is recognised that residents do not always report concerns. It is well established however that the issues relating to drug use and drug related litter have been longstanding in the local area, as noted in previous IJB reports dating back to 2017.
- 3.3 A range of actions have been/are being taken to address these concerns including “deep cleans” of the most established public injecting drug use sites, increased frequency of drug related litter pick-ups, and the placing of new drug related litter bins in the Calton and Trongate areas. Outreach services to these sites and surrounding areas will encourage movement from public sites to the use of The Thistle to reduce risk of displacement to new drug use sites. A full NRS action plan is underway for the Calton area.
- 3.4 There are concerns that misinformation is being shared with community members and the wider public, and that this may be impacting on people’s confidence in using the service. The Alcohol and Drug Partnership has run a ‘Mythbusting’ communications campaign on social media to challenge the misrepresentations and stigmatising language (Appendix 1).
- 3.5 The Thistle team continue to offer tours of the service on a fortnightly basis as a means of showcasing the service, dispelling myths and addressing concerns. Demand for these has been high and slots are currently fully booked until October. More recently, additional slots have been introduced on Wednesday mornings specifically for local residents and businesses in order that they are prioritised.
- 3.6 Lead managers and clinicians continue to be invited to a range of events, academic meetings and conferences across Scotland and the UK to share the experience and learning from the implementation of the service. Evidence has been presented to the UK Government’s Scottish Affairs Committee in relation to The Thistle and visits have been hosted for the Scottish Government Cross-Party Committee on Tackling Drug Deaths and Drug Harms and the Global Commission for Drug Policy. Officers are due to attend the Scottish Government Cross-Party Committee on Tackling Drug Deaths and Drug Harms in October 2025 to provide further evidence.

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- 3.7 In response to the number of enquires and Freedom of Information requests regarding service activity, the webpage is now updated on a monthly basis with a [dashboard](#) detailing number of attendances, number of injecting episodes, substances used.

4. Service User Engagement

- 4.1 A service user forum has been established, supported by the ADP Senior Officer with lived experience, to influence service model and delivery. Feedback has been largely positive, re-enforced by feedback from partner organisations, particularly Third Sector partners. The current legal framework has not allowed the provision of tourniquets, the sharing of drugs or an inhalation/smoking area within the facility. The latter two issues have been consistently highlighted as barriers for use by service users. Further work on this will be brought to a future IJB.
- 4.2 The recent peak in press coverage in May 2025 coincided with reduced attendances at the service. Whilst this may have been a consequence of a range of factors including the weather and local drug supply, service user feedback highlighted the negative press coverage and attention as a reason for non-attendance.

5. Media and Press Engagement

- 5.1 The media were invited to tour the facility prior to official opening. This initiative was undertaken to grant them comprehensive and unobstructed access, allowing for a direct and informed understanding of the facility's operations without disrupting service delivery. The approach also served to proactively address and clarify any circulating rumours or misinformation concerning the facility.
- 5.2 Over the course of two days, the Council's Press Office facilitated interviews and Q&As with 25 media outlets (12 broadcasters, 13 newspapers, 13 photographers). They were given access to the facility, the services available, a step-by-step guide to what happens when a service user walks through the door, plus interviews with key staff and the City Convener for Addiction Services. A detailed [press release](#) was issued.
- 5.3 On the day of opening, there were concerns that media coverage or apprehension about being recorded might deter service users from accessing the facility. Although the Council is unable to prohibit filming on public roads, media representatives were requested, where feasible, that they refrain from filming in order to provide the service with adequate time and space to become established. Interviews with the media were facilitated during the first day of operation away from Hunter Street to redirect focus away from the facility and service users.
- 5.4 Since opening, careful consideration has been given to the level of detail provided to the media, in order to balance transparency with the need to protect the privacy and safety of service users.

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- 5.5 As the first facility of its kind in the UK, there was considerable interest from both the media and the public in understanding both the benefits and challenges associated with its operation. During the first week, information was disseminated to the press via an official [press release](#).
- 5.6 Media interest has remained significant throughout the past six months, with particular attention given to the facility's usage statistics. Updates have been provided in alignment with the attendance of officers and officials at the Scottish Affairs Committee ([press release](#)).
- 5.7 Media were advised of the decision to publish monthly figures on usage and other stats on the SDCF website and provided the link to the site. The Press Office continues to respond to media queries and provide interviews with key officials when appropriate and in consultation with staff.
- 5.8 Should any inaccuracies be reported in the media, the Council will address these matters via the Press Office and request corrections where appropriate. Information contained within official Council, NHS GGC and IJB/HSCP reports is frequently referenced and cited by the media; as this information is already part of the public record, media representatives are not required to seek permission from the press office to use these details or to request an official comment from the council.
- 5.9 The Press Office's Public Relations Officer remains involved with the Oversight Board and operational leads to support requests from the media and responses to enquiries.

6. Recommendations

- 6.1. The IJB Public Engagement Committee is asked to:
- a) Note the contents of this report; and
 - b) Agree that The Thistle lead officers provide updates on engagement activity to the PEC as necessary and no less frequently than once per year.

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Appendix 1

Some of the language used in the media and on online platforms recently has been especially stigmatising and potentially harmful.

Such language can prevent people in distress from reaching out for help and support. We introduced The Thistle to meet the needs of a population who experience challenges in accessing services. We are concerned that some of the narrative and misinformation is discriminatory and will prevent people from engaging with support.

With so many sources of information, it can be difficult to know which are true. These are some of the common myths we've been seeing surrounding Glasgow's Alcohol and Drug services:

For more information, contact:
ADP@glasgow.gov.uk



Myth: There are more needles being discarded since the opening of The Thistle

Fact: There are no reports of an increase in discarded needles. Since the opening of The Thistle, there have been 171 needle reports. In the same time period and covering the same area in 2024 there were 186, and in 2023 there were 181 reports. In time, we anticipate that The Thistle and other activity should contribute to a reduction in drug related litter in the community.

It is crucial that communities continue to report any discarded needles to ensure we can provide a swift response. We encourage you to report any discarded needles via the council's online form or phone 0141 287 9700.

For more information, contact:
ADP@glasgow.gov.uk



Myth: Discarded needles found across the city have come from The Thistle

Fact: We understand the distress and impact on communities caused by discarded needles and have been working with ADP Partners to reduce the problem.

Injecting equipment provision (IEP) has existed across Glasgow for almost 40 years to reduce some the harms associated with injecting drugs, including blood borne viruses.

The equipment issued at all of these services is the same no matter where in Greater Glasgow and Clyde it is provided. Equipment can be collected from a large number of community pharmacies and all Alcohol and Drug Recovery Services (ADRS) across the city.

For more information, contact:
ADP@glasgow.gov.uk



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Myth: Glasgow only spends £300,000 per year on recovery

Fact: Glasgow City Alcohol and Drug Partnership (ADP) and Alcohol and Drug Recovery Services (ADRS) have made a significant financial investment in recovery for a number of years. We commission a range of recovery based supports, including: 3 Recovery Hubs, 3 Recovery communities, a community abstinence based rehabilitation and funded 174 residential rehab placements in 2024.

The total yearly spend on recovery focussed care exceeds £5 million.

For more information, contact:
ADP@glasgow.gov.uk



Myth: You cannot access residential rehabilitation more than once.

Fact: Many people in Glasgow have accessed residential services at different points in their journey. Glasgow City does not limit the number of times a person can access treatment or residential rehab because we understand that people may need multiple attempts.

To find out more about residential services in Glasgow, and for information about accessing those services, go to: www.glasgow.gov.uk/help

For more information, contact:
ADP@glasgow.gov.uk



Myth: The Thistle is palliative care

Fact: Palliative care services provide invaluable support to people and their families with end of life care. However, The Thistle is not a palliative care service.

The Thistle service is designed to engage vulnerable people at risk of significant harm and death, many of whom have been living in chaos for years and have felt unable to access existing supports.

SDCFs do not encourage drug use, but promote harm reduction, safer drug use and reduce drug related health issues and fatal overdoses. They support people to make and maintain contact with other services to help with treatment and recovery.

For more information, contact:
ADP@glasgow.gov.uk



Myth: The only support in Glasgow outside of harm reduction is 23 rehab beds

Fact: Glasgow City has recently been able to increase capacity in abstinence based residential rehabilitation, funded by Scottish Government.

In addition to residential rehab, there is a suite of options available, supporting people through their recovery journey. One size does not fit all.

There are multiple routes people can take on that journey. This includes, but is not limited to, stabilisation beds, the residential crisis service, outreach teams, choice of prescribed treatment, 30 inpatient detox beds and a huge variety of community-based support.

For more information, contact:
ADP@glasgow.gov.uk



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