

## Executive summary

Cornwall Area Meeting has raised a concern about the negative consequences of criminalising personal drug use. This concern focusses on the need to decriminalise the possession of all drugs for personal use. The concern does not address the production, importing or selling of drugs, nor does it address drug related crime (crimes committed to enable the purchase of drugs).

Criminalising personal drug use exacerbates the social exclusion of vulnerable individuals, as it impacts negatively on educational attainment, employment, travel and generally on life chances and future wellbeing.

Substantial numbers of people are criminalised in the UK for their drug use. In the years 2011/12, 42,067 people were sentenced for the possession of an illegal drug: 1,247 people were sentenced to immediate custody; 655 were given a suspended sentence; 8,136 were sentenced to community service, 21,862 were fined; 10,167 received other disposals. All received a criminal record. Recent studies show that people from BAME communities are disproportionately affected at all stages of the criminal justice process, from arrest to sentencing.

A good minority of the UK population uses, or has used, drugs recreationally. For a much smaller group of people recreational use may develop into problematic use. This latter group of people are the ones who are in need of support. The major determinants of drug use becoming problematic are deprivation and childhood abuse or trauma. In 2013 – 2014 there were estimated to be over 293,000 opiate and crack cocaine users in England. Of these 193,000 were in contact with treatment services.

A range of international studies conclude there is little or no relationship between the legal status of drug use of a country and the rate of drug use within it. Removing penalties for drug use does not result in an increase in overall drug use. It is accepted by many analysts that the prevalence of drug use tends to rise and fall in line with broader cultural, social or economic

trends. Portugal is perhaps the clearest and most relevant demonstration that decriminalisation does not increase the prevalence drug use. The whole administration addressing drug use is under the healthcare sphere with a consistent and coherent policy which has been functioning since 2001.

A decriminalisation approach coupled with investment in harm reduction and treatment services can have a positive impact on both individual drug users and society as a whole. Decriminalisation does appear to direct more drug users into treatment, reduce criminal justice costs and shield many drug users from the devastating impact of a criminal conviction.

Calls for reform to the drugs policy framework have come from a number of eminent sources. They include the United Nations, the World Health Organisation, the Global Commission on Drug Policy, the UK Drug Policy Commission, the UK Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, Human Rights Watch and eminent medics. Many authoritative voices call for the end of the criminalisation of drug users.

We raise this concern as Quakers because it is not ethical to punish people for their vulnerability and we feel deep concern and compassion for those harmed by criminalisation. By advocating for this concern we are expressing our love in action.