

# Position Statement

## The 2024 NSW Drug Summit: An opportunity for research and lived experience to shape policy reform

## 18 September 2024

The [Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use](https://www.sydney.edu.au/matilda-centre/) and our Youth Advisory Board strongly support the announcement of a NSW Drug Summit that will bring stakeholders together to find new ways to tackle this complex and difficult problem. The Matilda Centre has prepared this position statement to advocate for the inclusion of the latest evidence in the upcoming Drug Summit, aiming to contribute to meaningful policy outcomes.

“The summit is a wonderful opportunity to ignite action across government to consider and address the significant personal, social and economic burden associated with drug use as well as the co-occurring and complex factors that people who use drugs experience.” - Distinguished Professor Maree Teesson, Director of the Matilda Centre

**We make the following recommendations for the NSW Drug Summit;**

1. Incorporate research evidence on changing trends in alcohol and other drug (AOD) use
2. Centre the voices of populations most impacted by AOD use
3. Address stigma around AOD use
4. Focus on prevention and early intervention
5. Increase access to evidence-based resources and treatments
6. Enhance support for families and friends affected by a loved one’s AOD use
7. Invest in an AOD workforce for the future

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**Background**

The 1999 NSW Drug Summit was a landmark event in shaping alcohol and other drug (AOD) policy, bringing together experts, policymakers, and community leaders to emphasise harm reduction and treatment over punitive measures. This Summit led to significant policy and legislative reforms that have saved countless lives in NSW.

More recently, the 2018 NSW Special Commission of Inquiry into the Drug 'Ice' consulted widely, receiving more than 250 written submissions and hearing from more than 150 witnesses at public hearings. At the conclusion of the Inquiry, the Commissioner made 109 recommendations, including better coordination of drug policy, decriminalisation, and increased investment in treatment and education programs. The previous Government took over two years to respond, indicating support, or support in principle, for only 86 of the recommendations. However, there have been limited outcomes to date.

The 2024 Drug Summit, announced by Minn’s Labor Government, has said that it will bring together people with lived experience, alongside key stakeholders, to urgently build consensus on how NSW should address AOD use and harm. But for the 2024 Drug Summit to achieve real-world impact, this consultation needs to lead to evidence-based policy reforms which are implemented and evaluated. Stakeholders are ready for action to improve health and wellbeing outcomes in NSW.

**What we know about the impacts of substance use disorders**

* Substance use and mental disorders account for six of the ten leading causes of disease burden in those aged 10-24 and are responsible for 12% of Australia’s total burden of disease [1].
* Every year, substance use and mental disorders conservatively cost the Australian community over $40 billion [2].
* When the full impact of productivity loss, reduced life expectancy, and the social and emotional costs are considered, annual costs are estimated to be as high as $200–$220 billion (11% of Australia’s GDP) [3].
* The peak and median age of onset of substance use and mental disorders is 14.5 and 18 years respectively [4], meaning that the bulk of disease burden occurs during adolescence.
* People who use methamphetamine are more likely to report a mental health condition and to experience high or very high levels of psychological distress compared to people who had recently used any other illicit drug [5].
* People living with a mental health condition are two times as likely to report recent use of cannabis than people without a mental health condition [5].
* E-cigarettes are rapidly becoming unintended illicit drug delivery systems [6] – in NSW at least three overdoses and one death have recently been linked to black market synthetic cannabinoid e-liquid containing nitazines [6].
* Although substance use preventive interventions are cost-effective [7], currently only 6.7% of the total Australian government drug policy expenditure is spent on prevention [8].
* While approximately 650,800 Australians experienced AOD disorders in 2020-21, AIHW service data shows that in 2020-21 only 139,300 Australians received AOD treatment (most commonly counselling, 38.1% of episodes) [9].
* AOD services have been chronically underfunded. In financial year 2021-22 only 0.63% of total government expenditure ($5.45 billion) was spent on AOD, with two-thirds (67.9%) spent on law enforcement and less than a third (29.1%) spent on AOD treatment [8].
* The lack of investment in the Australian AOD sector has resulted in workforce shortages [10, 11]. For example, the inaugural 2022 NSW AOD Workforce Census found that 1 in 8 AOD sector roles (12%) were vacant on the day of census, and services reported ongoing difficulties in recruitment and retention [12].

### Matilda Centre Recommendations for the 2024 NSW Drug Summit

1. **Incorporate research evidence on changing trends in AOD use**

We are enthusiastic about the plan to develop a new whole-of-government Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) Strategy for NSW. The upcoming Drug Summit and the new strategy should address AOD use as both a health and social issue, placing priority on health-focused and community-based responses.

Responsiveness to changing trends in AOD use and emerging risk factors will be critical for designing the new whole-of-government AOD Strategy. Timely responses to drug trends requires investment not only into the collection and analysis of data, but also the ability to link data across health care systems. In particular, better collection and synergy across data sources for co-occurring substance use and mental health would help provide key information for prevention and treatment.

“Investment in collection and analysis of drug trend data is critical for preparing effective prevention, treatment and harm reduction strategies.” - Professor Tim Slade, Director of Biostatistics and Epidemiology, the Matilda Centre

It is also important to gather, monitor and collect information on both the short-term and long-term health outcomes and impacts of substances across the life course. Improving health outcomes through responsive harm reduction and evidence-informed treatment strategies, will reduce the social and economic burden along with improving health outcomes.

“We advocate for the NSW Drug Summit to consider evidence from researchers on how NSW can follow the example of other jurisdictions and integrate new tools into its harm reduction policy framework.” - Dr Jack Wilson, Postdoctoral Research Associate, the Matilda Centre

1. **Centre the voices of populations most impacted by alcohol and other drug use**

It is critical that the Drug Summit centres the voices of people with lived experience of AOD use. Involving people most impacted will help ensure that policy reform is relevant and effective for the target audiences, and ultimately leads to improved health outcomes.

The Matilda Centre also advocates for the Drug Summit to hear from a broad range of other stakeholders including priority populations such as young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people who are culturally and linguistically diverse, people who identify as LGBTIQ+, and people living in regional and remote communities.

Culturally safe approaches to engaging with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and organisations will be critical to ensuring that the Summit is inclusive of Indigenous perspectives and will help increase the likelihood that the Summit will lead to the co-development of AOD reforms that that reduce to inequities and racism while also strengthening social and emotional wellbeing.

However, involvement of people with lived experience and those impacted by AOD use needs to continue beyond the Summit. Co-design and co-production throughout development, implementation and evaluation of AOD policies is crucial to success.

“Stigma is a barrier to recovery, especially for young people. By investing in evidence-based, youth-centred approaches, we can build a culture of understanding and compassion, break down barriers to care and empower individuals to engage with support.” - Heidi Berry, the Matilda Centre Youth Advisory Board

**3. Address stigma around substance use**

Negative public attitudes about those who use drugs in Australia are widespread [13]. Stigmatising attitudes are more common among those with less accurate knowledge and leads to significant psychological distress and a reluctance to seek support among those who use substances. Both stigma and need for support, or care, are significantly higher among those in regional areas.

It is vital that the NSW government develops and implements a multi-pronged strategy to reduce the impact of stigma and discrimination associated with substance use. This strategy needs to engage key stakeholders including media outlets and the AOD workforce to use evidence-based, non-stigmatising language and best-practice when communicating with the Australian public about AOD use.

Co-development of the strategy with people who have lived experience along with a strong evidence-base, and increased investment into accessible resources and services are critical to achieve meaningful change. Additionally, providing the general Australian community with sources of information that offer trusted, evidence-based, non-judgemental AOD and mental health information is a critical step towards overturning stigma.

“Reform initiatives that are focused on improving access to support services through reducing stigma have the potential to save lives and improve health and wellbeing outcomes across the NSW community.” - Dr Steph Kershaw, Research Fellow at the Matilda Centre

**4. Focus on prevention and early intervention**

Effective prevention and early intervention can significantly reduce disease burden by halting, delaying, and interrupting the onset and progression of disorders [14-19].

Currently Australia spends only 1.7% of total health expenditure on prevention, less than two thirds of all other OECD countries [20]. Therefore, better investment into prevention and early intervention would strengthen NSW’s response to illicit drug use and its related harms. This investment will help future-proof NSW’s response and bring immense benefit for young people now and into the future.

“We advocate for a Drug Summit focused on preventing alcohol and drug use disorders from developing in the first place.” - Professor Nicola Newton, Director of Prevention Research at the Matilda Centre

Given the rise in use and associated harms of e-cigarettes among young people, NSW needs a strong preventive and harm reduction health approach comprising both supply and demand reduction strategies.

School-based AOD education and skills-based programs have been shown to prevent AOD use later in life [15, 17-19], however, there is a gap between this knowledge and implementation of effective AOD prevention approaches in schools. ***Positive Choices***([www.positivechoices.org.au](http://www.positivechoices.org.au)) is an online portal, funded by The Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care designed to address this evidence-practice gap, supporting implementation and access to evidence-based drug education resources by teachers, parents and students across Australia.

There are several evidence-based AOD prevention and early intervention programs available through the Matilda Centre:

***Our Futures* (**<https://ourfuturesinstitute.org.au>**)** is a suite of universal prevention programs that utilise interactive cartoon storyboards to engage and educate secondary students, empowering them to improve their health and wellbeing. This influential program of research and school-based AOD and mental health intervention has revolutionised school-based prevention education, informing national and international policy and practice.

***The Illicit Project*** (<https://www.theillicitproject.com/)> is a neuroscience-based alcohol and drug harm reduction program targeted at adolescents in Years 10 to 12. The program upskills young people in strategies to reduce the harms of AOD use and leverages positive psychology and neuroscience to engage adolescents in health promotion.

Beyond the school context, the ***Inroads*** (<https://inroads.org.au/>) early intervention program for emerging adults targets the link between anxiety and hazardous alcohol use. By equipping young adults adaptive coping strategies, the program prevents the escalation of symptoms and progression to alcohol use disorders.

It is critical that teachers, parents, guardians, and students in NSW have greater support to access to these evidence-based resources.

“If the vaping epidemic in NSW has taught us one thing, it is that supply-reduction alone is not sufficient: young people need to be equipped with healthy coping mechanisms early in life before substance use disorders develop.” - Associate Professor Emily Stockings, Program Lead of Smoking, Vaping and Mental Health at the Matilda Centre

1. **Increase access to evidence-based resources and treatments**

We advocate for the Drug Summit to be focused on increasing access to evidence-based information and resources in NSW, which is achievable, quickly and effectively, through the targeted promotion in NSW of the national [*Cracks in the Ice* toolkit](https://cracksintheice.org.au/), [*Positive Choices*](https://positivechoices.org.au/), the [*Family and Friends Support Program*](https://ffsp.com.au/)*,* the [*Crystal Clear Program*](https://crystalclear.org.au/) and the [*Guidelines on the management of co-occurring alcohol and other drug and mental health conditions in alcohol and other drug treatment settings*](https://comorbidityguidelines.org.au/)*.*

These resources are based on a strong foundation of evidence and are well received by the Australians who have engaged with these tools [21, 22]. More can be done in NSW to promote and support their uptake across the state, as well as to support development of additional resources to fill identified gaps in the current reach and content of these programs (e.g., adaptions for young people and peer workers).

Online approaches to disseminating evidence-based information have the advantage of maximising reach and overcome geographic, structural and attitudinal barriers to accessing information and support via other sources. Online resources have become the primary sources of information and research across communities, and, through appropriately managed portals, facilitate the promotion of credible research and information, ready review and update, and the provision of tailored resources and information.

“To prevent illicit substance use and harms it’s critical that people in NSW have increased access to evidence-based information and resources, including the effects, how to manage use, seek help and supporting friends and family.”- Professor Cath Chapman, Director of Research Development and Strategy at the Matilda Centre

1. **Enhance support for families and friends affected by a loved one’s AOD use**

It is essential for the Drug Summit to consider comprehensive approaches to meet the needs of families and friends impacted by a loved use’s substance use. Carers' experiences must be heard to ensure that policy responses best address their significant support needs.

It is well recognised that families and friends can also play a critical role in prevention, treatment and recovery, however, these relationships often break down, leaving the person who is using substances feeling isolated.

There is an opportunity to widely promote and increase access in NSW to existing effective evidence-based support services such as the ***Family and Friends Support Program*** (FFSP; <https://ffsp.com.au/>). This wellbeing and resilience program, including stories from people with lived experience, is a free online program which can be accessed at any time, from anywhere.

“There is a big role for online support to play because it helps people not feel so bad... half the problem is, people don’t tell anyone because it’s so shameful, particularly once they’re an adult.” - Family member affected by a loved ones’ use of substances in feedback to the Family and Friends Support Program

**7. Invest in an AOD workforce for the future**

We highlight the importance of the Drug Summit to consider investment in workplace development in general in NSW and specifically the need to acknowledge the high prevalence of co-occurring substance use and mental health conditions.

One in two Australians will develop a substance use, anxiety or mood disorder in their lifetime [23-25], and one in five Australian adults meet criteria for a substance use, anxiety or mood disorder annually [25]. Co-occurring substance use and mental health issues often interact in ways that maintain one another, making it difficult for people to recover.

People with co-occurring substance use and mental health issues also generally experience worse overall health and wellbeing compared to people experiencing these problems in isolation.

Strengthening the response of health workers in the AOD and mental health sectors to address the high rates of co-occurring mental health and AOD use issues is key to improving treatment outcomes across both sectors. It is likely that this will have a significant impact on rates of AOD use and recovery.

“Strengthening the response of health workers in the AOD and mental health sectors to co-occurring mental health issues is key to improving treatment outcomes and there are clear opportunities for national leadership in NSW.” - Professor Katherine Mills, Director of Early Intervention and Treatment Research at the Matilda Centre

The [National Comorbidity Guidelines Online Training Program](https://comorbidityguidelines.org.au/training-programs) holds enormous potential for upscaling at a national level, and by being incorporated into a national Minimum Qualifications Framework, would greatly enhance AOD workforce capacity to identify and manage comorbidity in healthcare settings throughout Australia.

**Conclusion**

The upcoming NSW Drug Summit presents a rare opportunity to bring stakeholders together to build consensus on how NSW should address AOD use and harm. We hope the Summit will emphasise the importance of prevention, focusing on health and community-based solutions to effectively address the challenges associated with AOD use.

In this statement, we have made recommendations on how the government could immediately increase access to evidence-based resources and treatments as well as enhance support for families and friends affected by a loved one’s substance use in NSW.

We have also identified significant opportunities for national leadership in NSW in improving treatment outcomes by strengthening the response of health workers in the AOD and mental health sectors to co-occurring mental health issues.

We encourage the NSW government to consider our recommendations and include our researchers alongside other stakeholders including people with lived experience in the Summit.

# About the Matilda Centre

The [Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use](https://www.sydney.edu.au/matilda-centre/) (“The Matilda Centre”) is a Faculty of Medicine and Health Flagship multidisciplinary research centre at the University of Sydney, committed to improving the health and wellbeing of people affected by substance use and mental disorders.

The Matilda Centre brings together >100 world-leading researchers, clinicians, people with lived experience and community to share skills, synergise data, harness new technologies and trial innovative programs to **prevent and treat mental and substance use disorders**. While our research covers the entire lifespan, we are world-renowned for our focus on young people, those most vulnerable to the effects and impacts of drug use.

# Contact

For more information or to discuss this position statement please contact, **the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use**, Faculty of Medicine and Health, The University of Sydney at [matilda.centre@sydney.edu.au](mailto:matilda.centre@sydney.edu.au)

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