



Statistics from the Northern Ireland Substance Misuse Database: 1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024 *Official statistics in development*



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Substance Misuse Database:
1 April 2023 – 31 March 2024
*Official statistics in development***

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Introduction

This bulletin summarises information on people presenting to services with problem drug and/ or alcohol misuse and relates to the 12-month period ending 31 March 2024. The statistics in this report are **Official statistics in development (previously called Experimental statistics)**; these are statistics that are published in order to involve users and stakeholders in their development and as a means to improve quality. Further detail can be found in the notes at the end of this report.

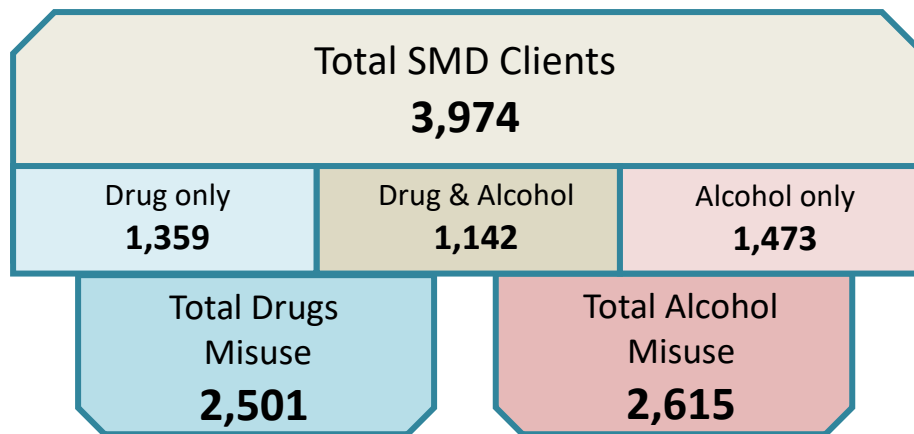
The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions resulted in some disruption to services during 2020/21 and 2021/22. This should be taken into consideration when making comparisons across years. Additionally, it should be noted that due to changes in service delivery following Covid-19 restrictions, it was not possible to obtain the majority of Substance Misuse Database records for those accessing treatment within HM Prison services. This situation continues. For this reason, records for those accessing drug and alcohol services within HM Prisons have not been included in this report, and similarly, they have not been included in the statistics for previous years to allow for appropriate comparisons. Hence, the figures for previous years in the accompanying statistical tables will not match those previously published. It is hoped that we will be in a position to resume including information on people presenting for treatment in prison in future reports.

This report provides summary information based on data entered onto the Substance Misuse Database. Drug and alcohol treatment services contribute to the SMD on a voluntary basis and it is important to note that not all services in Northern Ireland contribute to the database and within services that do contribute, in some instances there is not complete coverage of all persons seen in that service.

Key Findings

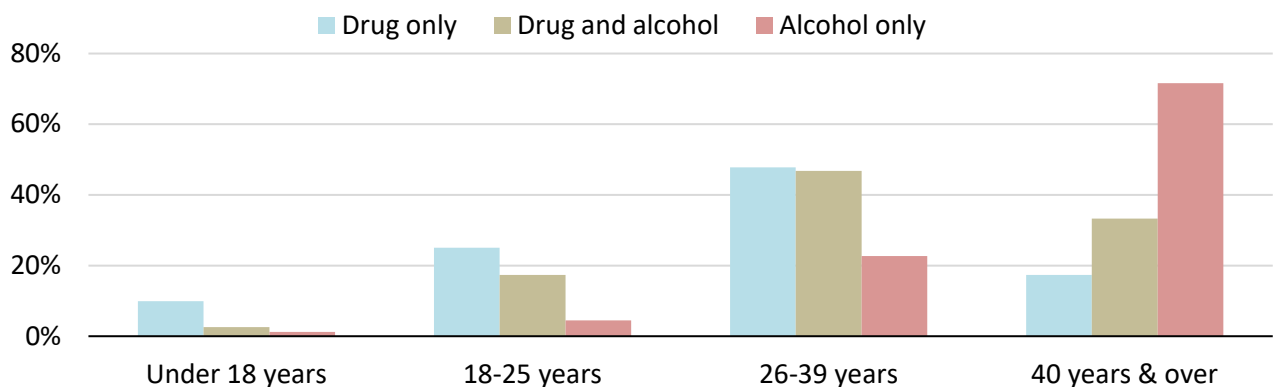
- In Northern Ireland in 2023/24, a total of 3,974 clients were recorded on the Substance Misuse Database as having presented to services for problem substance misuse.
- Around two-fifths of clients presented to services indicating alcohol misuse only (37.1%, 1,473 clients); over one-third of clients presented to services indicating problem drug use only (34.2%, 1,359 clients); 28.7% of clients presented to services indicating both drug and alcohol misuse (1,142 clients).
- The majority of clients were male. Over a quarter of clients presenting to services for drugs only (29.5%) and one-fifth for drugs & alcohol (21.5%) were female. For problem alcohol use only, the proportion of female clients was higher at 37.1%.
- Around half of clients presenting for treatment were aged 26-39 years for both drug misuse only (47.8%), and for drug & alcohol misuse (46.8%); however, clients accessing services for misuse of alcohol only tended to be in older age-groups with just under three-quarters (71.6%) being 40 years and over.
- Cocaine was the most commonly used drug with just over half of clients who use drugs reporting taking it (52.8%), this was followed by Cannabis (50.6%); Pregabalin (15.6%) and Benzodiazepines (13.7%).
- Around one in ten drug use clients reported ever having injected (10.1%).
- Of those clients presenting to services for drug misuse, almost three-fifths indicated daily use (56.6%); of those clients attending for problem alcohol use, just under half (47.7%) indicated daily consumption of alcohol.

SMD clients

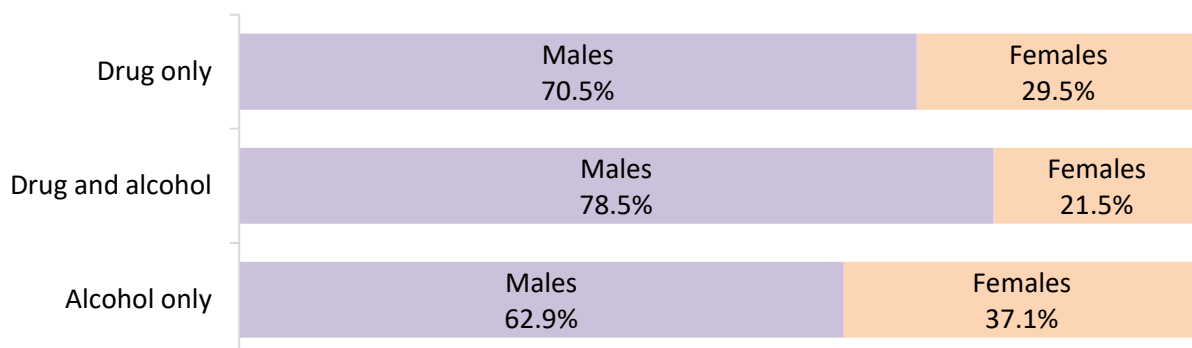


During 2023/24 a total of 3,974 clients were recorded on the Substance Misuse database as having presented to services for substance misuse; of these 62.9% indicated drugs misuse (2,501 clients) and 65.8% indicated misuse of alcohol (2,615 clients).

Clients presenting to services by age group



Around half of clients presenting for treatment were aged 26-39 years for both drug misuse only (47.8%), and for drug & alcohol misuse (46.8%); however, clients accessing services for misuse of alcohol only tended to be in older age-groups with 71.6% being 40 years and over.

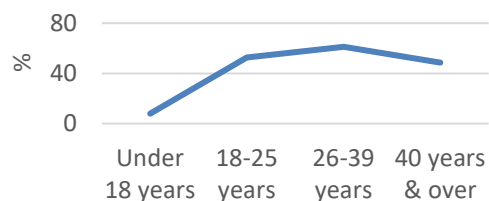
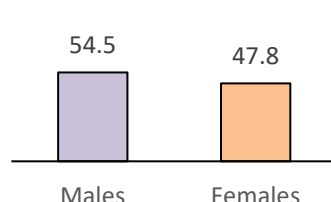


The majority of clients were male. Over a quarter of clients presenting to services for drugs only (29.5%) and one-fifth for drugs & alcohol (21.5%) were female. For problem alcohol use only, the proportion of female clients was higher at 37.1%.

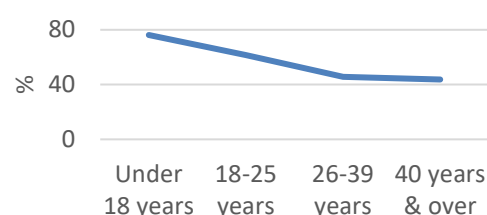
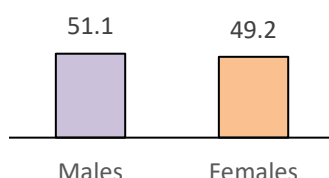
Drug Misuse

The drugs most reported by those presenting for treatment for drug misuse were Cocaine¹ (52.8% of clients); Cannabis (50.6% of clients); Pregabalin/ Lyrica (15.6% of clients); Benzodiazepines (13.7% of clients) and Heroin (5.8% of clients).

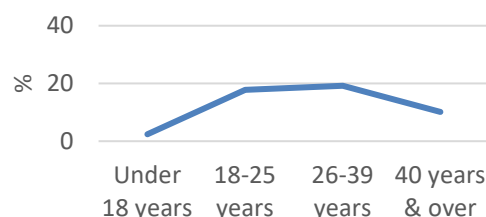
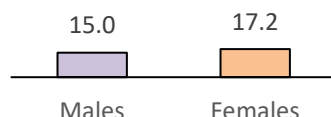
Cocaine¹ 52.8% of clients



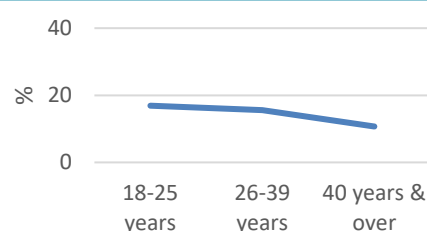
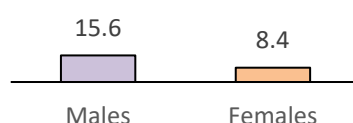
Cannabis 50.6% of clients



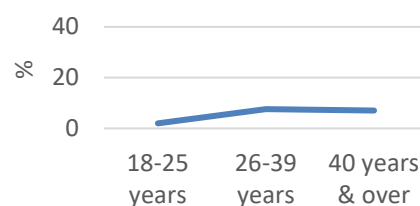
Pregabalin/Lyrica 15.6% of clients



Benzodiazepines 13.7% of clients²



Heroin 5.8% of clients²

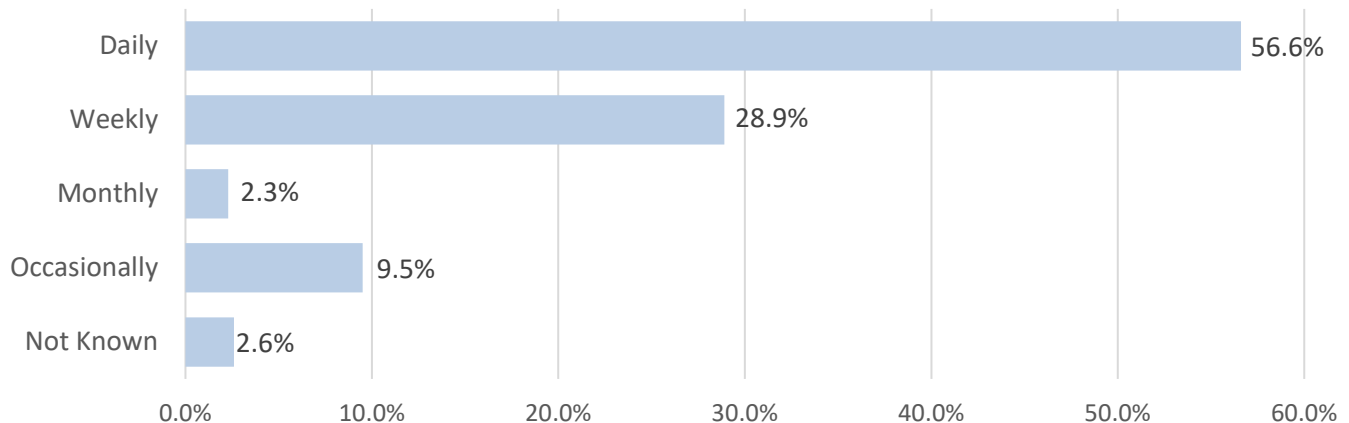


¹ Excludes cases where crack cocaine was explicitly specified.

² Due to the low proportion of clients aged under 18 presenting to treatment for Benzodiazepines and Heroin, the 'under 18' group has been removed from this chart to prevent disclosure.

Frequency of use

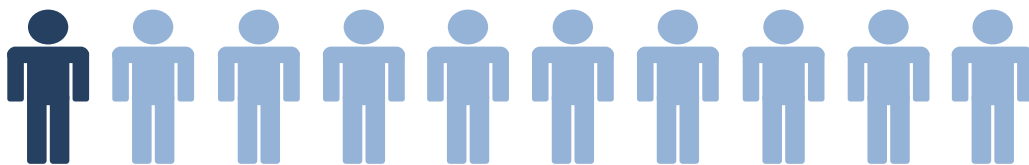
Over half of clients presenting to treatment for drug misuse (56.6%) reported daily use of drugs.



Prescribed Drug use

Less than one-in-ten clients (6.6%) presenting to treatment for drug misuse indicated they took at least one prescription drug.

Injecting Drug Behaviour



1 in 10 drug use clients reported ever having injected (10%)

Most common reason for attendance

- 63%** Psychological
- 33%** Family
- 18%** Medical
- 10%** Legal
- 4%** Financial

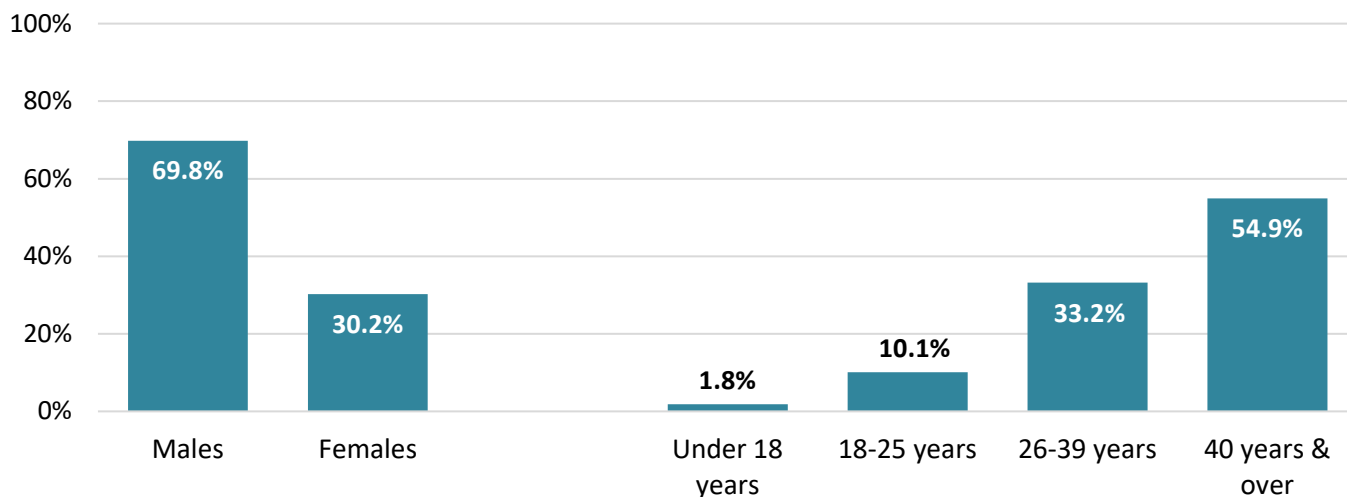
Most common proposed treatment options

- 48%** Counselling
- 37%** Education/Information
- 32%** One to one intervention
- 25%** Harm reduction
- 15%** Psychosocial intervention

Problem Alcohol use

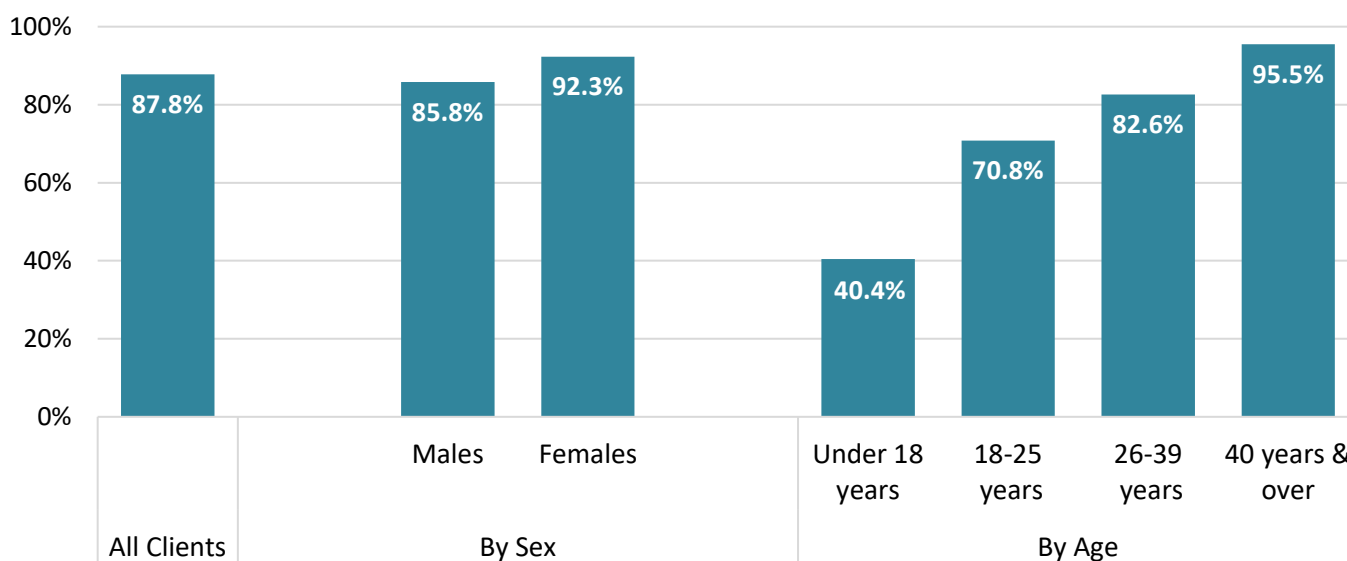
During 2023/24 around two-thirds of clients (69.8%) presenting to services indicating problem alcohol use were male. Over half of clients (54.9%) were aged 40 years or over with a small proportion under 18 years of age (1.8%).

Clients presenting to services for alcohol misuse by age and sex

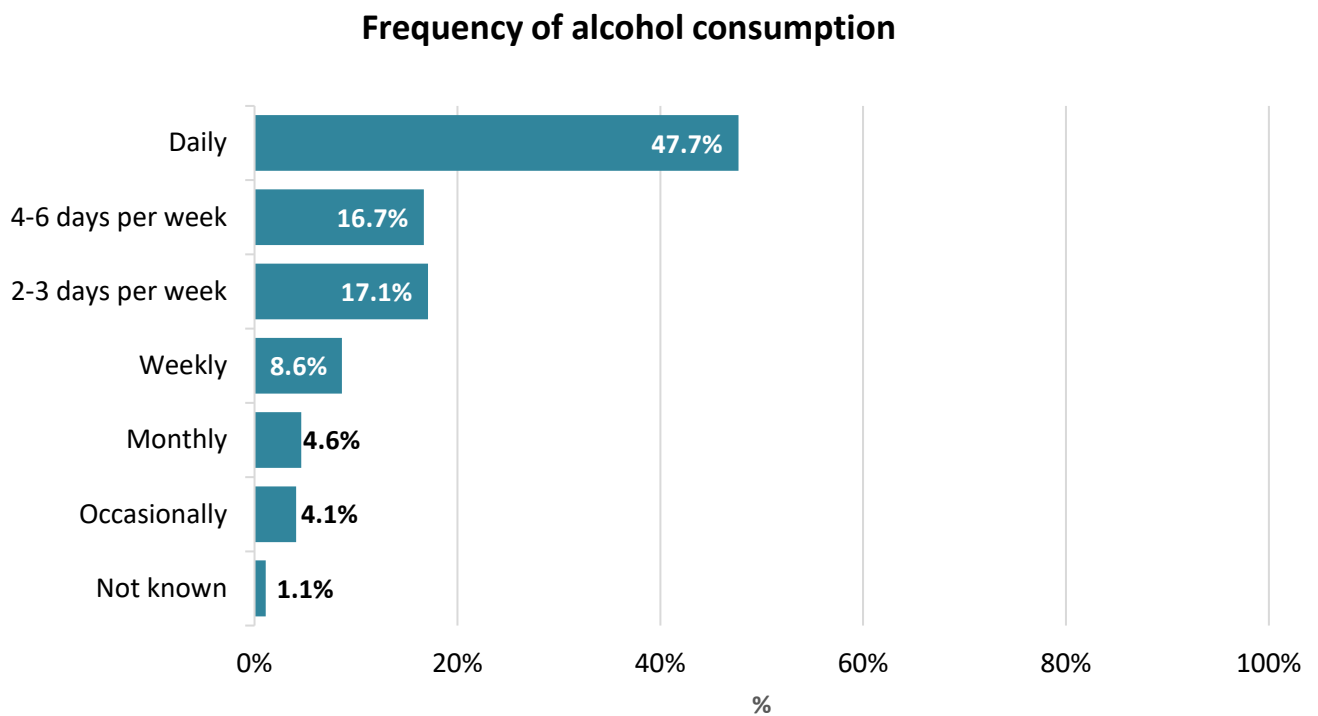


For more than four-fifths of clients reporting problem alcohol use (87.8%), alcohol was their primary problem substance. Females (92.3%) were more likely than males (85.8%) to report problem alcohol use as their primary problem substance. The vast majority of clients presenting to services with problem alcohol use, who were aged 40 years and over, indicated that it was their primary problem (95.5%).

Proportion of those with problem alcohol use for whom alcohol is the main problem substance



Four-fifths of clients indicating problem alcohol use (78.5%) reported drinking within the last four weeks; around half indicated daily use of alcohol (47.7%).



Official statistics in development

This bulletin summarises information on people presenting to services with problem drug and/ or alcohol misuse and relates to the 12-month period ending 31 March 2024. This is the sixth bulletin reporting on information collected through the Northern Ireland Substance Misuse Database (SMD), the previous reports covered the 2022/23, 2021/22, 2020/21, 2019/20 and 2016/17 time periods. Statistics covering 2017/18 and 2018/19 were not published due to concerns that information returns received by the Department of Health were not sufficiently comprehensive and that coverage was not at a level suitable for publication.

During this time period the Department has continued to liaise with service providers to improve the quality and coverage of the information. This process is still ongoing and the release of 2023/24 information as **Official statistics in development** allows users and stakeholders to be involved in the development of this statistical series. Feedback is welcome and will be utilised to improve the quality and value of the statistics in line with user requirements; any comments should be sent to phirb@health-ni.gov.uk.

Technical Notes

1. The Substance Misuse Database is an online data collection system that captures information on people presenting to services for treatment with problem drug and/or alcohol use. Both statutory and non-statutory organisations contribute to the database on a voluntary basis. A list of contributing services can be found in the statistical tables accompanying this report.
2. In some instances, clients may refuse consent for their data to be entered on the SMD. Where this occurs, a 'consent withheld,' record is entered into the system without any client details. Where an SMD entry is missing data crucial to analysis, it is removed from the analysis dataset. During 2023/24 consent was withheld, or crucial data required for analyses was not provided in 146 cases.
3. An entry in the Substance Misuse Database is completed for every client who presents at an Agency with a drug and/or alcohol related problem for treatment. Only those clients attending for the very first time or those who have not attended for treatment within the previous six months are recorded on the SMD. This means that a small number of clients may be recorded twice on the SMD within one year. This amounted to 51 clients in 2023/24.
4. Annual report: data collection is continuous; for reporting purposes, a download from the live system is taken after the end of the financial year. The statistics in this document reflect the download taken in September 2024.
5. All percentages are rounded to one decimal place.

Considerations & Limitations of the data

6. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions resulted in some disruption to services during 2020/21 and 2021/22. This should be taken into consideration when making comparisons with previous years. Additionally, it should be noted that due to changes in service delivery following Covid-19 restrictions, it was not possible to obtain the majority of Substance Misuse Database records for those accessing treatment within HM Prison services. This situation continues. For this reason, all records for those accessing drug and alcohol services within HM Prisons have been removed from this report, and similarly, from previous years to allow for appropriate comparisons. Hence, the figures for previous years in the accompanying statistical tables will not match those previously published. It is hoped that we will be in a position to resume including information on people presenting for treatment in prison in future reports.
7. This report provides summary information based on data entered onto the Substance Misuse Database. Drug and alcohol treatment services contribute to the SMD on a voluntary basis and it is important to note that not all services in Northern Ireland contribute to the database and within services that do contribute, in some instances there is not complete coverage of all persons seen in that service.
8. Due to the ongoing development work on these statistics, care should be taken when making comparisons between this and previous statistical releases, and when considering the implications of the data presented in an historical context.
9. It should be noted that findings in this report may differ from those presented in other reports due to the discretionary engagement of individual services in SMD collection.

Information Analysis Directorate (IAD) sits within the **Department of Health (DoH)** and carries out various statistical work and research on behalf of the department. It comprises four statistical areas: Hospital Information, Community Information, Public Health Information & Research and Project Support Analysis.

IAD is responsible for compiling, processing, analysing, interpreting and disseminating a wide range of statistics covering health and social care.

The statisticians within IAD are outposted from the Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency (NISRA) and our statistics are produced in accordance with the principles and protocols set out in the UK Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

About Public Health Information and Research Branch

The role of Public Health Information and Research Branch (PHIRB) is to support public health policy development through managing the public health survey function while also providing analysis and monitoring data. The head of the branch is the Principal Statistician, Mr. Bill Stewart.

In support of the public health survey function, PHIRB is involved in the commissioning, managing and publishing of results from departmental funded surveys, such as the Health Survey Northern Ireland, All Ireland Drug Prevalence Survey, Young Persons Behaviour & Attitudes Survey, Patient Experience Surveys and the Adult Drinking Patterns Survey.

The branch also houses the NI Health and Social Care Inequalities Monitoring System which covers a range of different health inequality/equality based projects conducted for both the region as well as for more localised area levels. In addition, PHIRB is responsible for the production of official life expectancy estimates for NI, and areas within the region.

PHIRB provides support to a range of key DoH NI strategies including Making Life Better, a 10 year cross-departmental public health strategic framework as well as a range of other departmental strategies such as those dealing with suicide, sexual health, breastfeeding, tobacco control and obesity prevention. It also has a key role in supporting the Departmental Substance Use Strategy, by maintaining and developing key departmental databases such as, the Substance Misuse Database, Impact Measurement Tool and the Census of Drug & Alcohol Treatment Services, which are all used to monitor drug misuse and treatments across Northern Ireland. In addition to Departmental functions, PHIRB also support the executive level Programme for Government and its strategic outcomes through a series of performance indicators.