

Number of drivers failing drugs tests rises

Scotland's drug driving epidemic is leaving toxicology labs snowed under, forcing police chiefs to effectively ration roadside testing.

The Scottish Police Authority (SPA) provides Forensic Services to the criminal justice sector and carries out analysis of blood samples after positive drink or drug roadside tests by Police Scotland.

In a report, Forensic Services director Fiona Douglas said there had been a sustained increase in demand for three months and warned they will be “unable to meet the increasing drug driving demands without the delivery of a sustainable long-term solution”.

Critics have called on The Scottish Government to ensure the battle against the growing drug driving menace is properly funded and resourced.

Police Scotland and Forensic Services have agreed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to “manage” capacity regarding samples of 250 cases a month stretching to 270 when required.

Data showed Forensic Services received 352 samples in October, 312 in November and 294 in December, pushing them 148 over the agreed outer limit for the three month period with processing subject to a six-month legal deadline.

Scottish Conservative shadow minister for community safety

Sharon Dowey MSP said: "The public will be seriously concerned that forensic services appear unable to meet the growing demands placed upon them.

"SNP ministers need to urgently address these issues and ensure resources are in the right place to punish those who drive under the influence of drugs.

"They should start by ensuring police are properly funded so they can properly prioritise safety on our roads."

Scottish Liberal Democrat justice spokesperson Liam McArthur MSP said: "People using drugs while driving pose a very real threat to road safety.

"The Scottish Government should be taking that threat seriously and removing any loopholes that could see perpetrators escaping prosecution.

"Ministers need to look closely at what more can be done to stop drug driving and support forensic services working on cases."

Capacity issues also mean large numbers of samples are having to be outsourced to a private company with 1094 processed by an external testing lab in the last year.

There are limits on numbers that can be outsourced due to budget constraints and concerns that private testing capacity is also limited.

Ms Douglas estimates outsourcing costs for the year ahead as between £250,000 and £1million assuming demand stays roughly the same.

The SPA says a long-term solution had been developed with a view to creating a new laboratory to expand capacity with talks about funding the next step.

A spokesperson said: "The costs of the long-term sustainable

model are still being finalised and will be presented in a full business case to the SPA later this year which will, in turn, inform an ask to the Scottish Government for 2026/27 budget – and beyond.

“However, the costs will require Forensic Services to build a new lab, purchase the required equipment and recruit new people.”

The spokesperson added that until that becomes a reality Forensic Services will “continue to require to work with Police Scotland and the Crown Office to manage the demand and utilise outsourcing to meet it”.

Roadside Drug Wipes were unveiled in Scotland in 2019 but are currently restricted to road policing officers and give an instant result for cannabis and cocaine.

A six-month pilot extending their use to local policing officers has been ongoing in Shetland since December.

Police Scotland says it will be evaluated as they continue to work closely with SPA laboratories to “ensure testing capacity can be managed” and say all officers can “use other legislation to deal with potential drug drivers”.

That many Scots are ignoring the drug drive message was underlined by 522 positive results from 963 roadside drug wipes during the festive period.

According to road safety charity IAM Roadsmart, its research shows one in two motorists pulled over on suspicion of drug-driving in Scotland failing roadside drug tests.

Stewart Mackie, Road Safety Manager for Scotland, said: “We urgently need a new approach to combat drug-driving which focuses on both greater enforcement and establishing rehabilitation courses to reduce reoffending.

“The evidence shows that those taking equivalent drink-drive

courses are almost three times less likely to reoffend than those who don't."

Chief Superintendent Hilary Sloan, head of Road Policing, said: "Being able to use roadside drug wipes has significantly enhanced our ability to detect drug drivers and keep the public safe.

"We continue to work closely with the Scottish Police Authority to ensure testing capacity can be managed.

"Police Scotland is committed to our role of enforcement and we will take action against people who take drugs and drive."

A Scottish Government spokesperson said: "We support the enforcement efforts of Police Scotland and the Scottish Police Authority in tackling the scourge of drug driving and continue to work closely with SPA and criminal justice partners to ensure that testing capacity is resilient and able to meet demand.

"While testing falls within the remit of the SPA, the Scottish Government has since 2018-19 allocated additional funding of more than £2 million to assist SPA Forensics in delivering testing for drug driving.

"This has paid for capacity to be built in SPA Forensic Services, as well as outsourcing to ensure statutory time limits are met."



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