Police-led Drug Diversion Schemes in England: Learning from the PDD Evaluation

Alex Stevens and the PDD Project team. September 2026.

Cite as: Stevens, A., Bacon, M., Beerjaz, A., Berlin, J., Cunliffe, J., Glasspoole Bird, H., Hendrie, N., Gkekas, A., Ionescu, O., Lewer, D., Lloyd, C., Mills, A., Monaghan, M., Parrott, S., Reyes Pascual, G., Smith, R., Sutton, C., Williams, E, Quinton, P. (2026). *Police-led Drug Diversion Schemes in England: Learning from the PDD Evaluation*. Sheffield: University of Sheffield Centre for Criminological Research. Available online at: https://sheffield.ac.uk/ccr/our-research/police-drug-diversion-realist-impact-process-and-economic-evaluation

Summary

Between 2022 and 2026, we evaluated police-led drug diversion (PDD schemes) across 13 English police forces, with a particular focus on three forces that ran such schemes.

We examined the outcomes of PDD for two groups of people. Group 1 was made up of people who had been caught in possession of any drug controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act. Group 2 was made up of people who were suspected of other offences (including theft, assault, and criminal damage) and had some history of drug involvement.

We found that the use of diversion for the first group was associated with lower risks of reoffending, both when comparing police forces that did or did not have PDD schemes, and when comparing similar individuals who were or were not diverted.

At the level of police forces, having a PDD scheme was not associated with different levels of reoffending for the second group. But diversion was associated with lower reoffending when comparing cases that had been dealt with by diversion to similar cases that had not.

We developed a realist Theory of Change that explains these outcomes. It suggests that better outcomes are achieved by using diversion because: people do not experience the harms of criminalisation; and because they benefit from the educative and therapeutic interventions to which they are diverted.

We also inferred that the PDD schemes triggered mechanisms of the shock of police contact (especially among younger people), consequential thinking, learning and reflection, and (in the PDD scheme that offered longer-term support than a one-off session) hand-holding towards individualised support.

We found that diversion was being used far less than it could be, even in police forces that had established PDD schemes. The main reason for this was that police officers used their discretion to choose not to divert eligible offenders.

We found that diversion reduced criminalisation of people from across sexes, ethnicities, and socio-economic groups. But there was some evidence of Black people being less likely to be diverted than White people for similar offences.

Our economic analysis suggested that using PDD for cases of drug possession saves an average of £726 per person over the next five years in reduced costs to police, courts and prisons.

What is PDD?

Police-led drug diversion (PDD) provides alternatives to criminalisation for minor drug-related offences, including—but not limited to—simple possession for personal use. PDD schemes provide adults suspected of such offences with an educative or therapeutic intervention, rather than being processed through prosecution and conviction.

In our evaluation of PDD, we focused on two types of PDD:

- Type 1 PDD provides one-off educational sessions for people who are caught in possession of drugs (under any class under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971).
- Type 2 PDD provides lengthier, individually tailored support to people caught for a wider range of offences (e.g. theft, assault, criminal damage) that are often committed by people who have substance use disorders.

What is a realist evaluation?

Realist evaluation is an approach to understanding interventions by examining their contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes. This creates a fuller understanding of how the intervention works, for whom, and in what circumstances.

What was the PDD Evaluation?

The PDD Evaluation was funded by the Cabinet Office Evaluation Accelerator Fund to find out if and how PDD works, and what its cost consequences are.

The evaluation was carried out by a partnership led by the Universities of Sheffield and Kent, in collaboration with the College of Policing. See the end of this document for the full list of partners.

The evaluation consisted of six work packages:

WP1 Preparation and description: Documentary analysis and stakeholder fora create programme manuals of three police forces' PDD schemes.

WP2 Qualitative process evaluation: Interviews and focus groups with 221 people involved in PDD (diverted suspects, police officers and managers, diversion intervention providers, other stakeholders) to understand their experiences of PDD.

WP 3 Quantitative outcome analysis: Statistical analysis of records held by 13 police forces, the Ministry of Justice, and the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System on what happened after 62,286 criminal incidents, of which 16% were dealt with by diversion, and 84% were not.

WP 4 Economic analysis: Estimating the cost consequences of PDD for police and the criminal justice system.

WP 5 Equity analysis: Using qualitative and quantitative data to analyse how equitable the use of PDD was (e.g. by ethnicity, age, socio-economic deprivation, and sex)

WP 6 Realist synthesis: This produced a realist programme theory of PDD, following the EMMIE framework (Effects, Mechanisms, Moderators, Implementation, Economy).

Who gets PDD?

We identified two main groups of people who are targeted by PDD schemes:

- Group 1 consists of people who are caught by the police for simple drug possession (of any controlled drug).
- Group 2 includes people who have committed a wider range of offences (including theft, criminal damage, and assault) that are often linked to substance use disorders.

Offenders in Group 1 tend to have less serious criminal records than those in Group 2. They are also less likely to have histories of problematic drug use.

What did we learn about the **contexts** in which PDD works?

The circumstances in which PDD schemes worked were characterised by:

- **A wide range of use of controlled drugs**. The most common drug of which people were caught in possession in Group 1 was cannabis (64%), followed by powder cocaine (12%), heroin and crack (9%), and stimulants and hallucinogens (3%).

- **Youth**. The median age for suspects in Group 1 was 28. Group 2 offenders tended to be older, with a median age of 33.
- **Male**. This was the sex of 88% of Group 1 offenders, and 83% of Group 2 offenders.
- **Diverse needs.** People involved in drug-related offending have diverse needs, including neurodiversity.
- **High levels of reoffending**. In the absence of diversion, the probability of reoffending within one year after Group 1 offences was 29%. After Group 2 offences, it was 50%.
- **High levels of socio-economic deprivation**. Arrests for drug possession are concentrated in the most deprived neighbours.
- **Institutional racism**. It is people who are racialised as Black who are most likely to be stopped, searched and arrested for drug offences.
- **High degree of police discretion**, at both senior and street level. Police forces and officers have the operational independence to decide how they deal with drug-related offending.
- **Previous knowledge** on (a) the damage that criminalisation does to young people, and (b) evidence from Australia, the USA and two randomised trials in England that diversion may be more effective than criminalisation in reducing reoffending among people caught for low-level drug offences.

What did we learn about the **implementation** of PDD schemes?

The main thing we learnt about the implementation of PDD was that it is **being used far less than it could be**, even for offences that are eligible for diversion in police forces that have PDD schemes. Only a minority of Group 1 offences were dealt with by diversion in these forces. And only a small fraction of Group 2 offences were dealt with by diversion in the two forces that had PDD schemes that were open to such offenders.

The main reason for the low level of use of diversion was police officers using their discretion to choose not to divert eligible offenders.

We also learnt about:

- How **discretion** is used across the criminal justice system (from government ministers to street-level police officers) to shape how diversion works.
- How the partnerships that deliver PDD can achieve **collaborative advantage**.
- The role of **triage and needs assessment** in making PDD schemes work.
- How to enhance **motivation and engagement** in PDD schemes.
- How valuable it is to include **lived experience** in the design, delivery and dissemination of evaluations in criminal justice settings.

What did we learn about the **mechanisms** by which PDD schemes produce their outcomes?

Our PDD Theory of Change is based on the idea that there are two main mechanisms by which diversion improves outcomes for drug-related offenders:

1. Diversion **avoids the harms and costs of criminalisation** that have been shown by many other research studies.
2. Diversion provides an opportunity for drug-related offenders to **benefit from educative and supportive interventions**.

Our analysis confirmed that both our qualitative and quantitative data were consistent with these theorised mechanisms.

By combining our data analysis with previous knowledge, we also inferred that the following mechanisms were also triggered by PDD schemes:

- The **shock** of police contact created a turning point for some people, causing them to change their drug use, even in the absence of further punishment. This operated more for young people who did not have long histories of police contact.
- **Consequential reflection** triggered by police contact and the diversion intervention.
- **A chance to learn and reflect**, including on the harms of drug use, and on whether drug use was still something they wanted to do.

One additional mechanism was also triggered by Type 2 PDD scheme.

- **Hand-holding**. Some Group 2 offenders used the longer-term support offered by Type 2 PDD schemes to navigate their way to contact with wider support networks and services, and rebuild family relationships.

Individualised support (enabling hand-holding) was especially important for women, who were often outnumbered by men in group-based Type 1 PDD sessions, and could find these sessions off-putting and inappropriate to their needs.

We also observed that there were many divertees who chose not to engage with the PDD schemes, either by not turning up to diversion sessions, or by minimal participation when they did.

What did we learn about the **outcomes** of PDD schemes

We did two kinds of statistical analysis. One compares people in police forces which ran Type 1 and Type 2 PDD schemes to similar people in forces that did not have these types of PDD schemes. This was our primary analysis.

Our secondary analysis compared people who were diverted to similar people who were caught for similar offences, but were not diverted.

Reoffending

We measured reoffending by using the offence records held for each person in the Police National Computer for any crime committed after the initial offence.

For ***Group 1*** offences, our primary analysis showed that people whose cases were dealt with in forces with PDD schemes were significantly ***less likely to reoffend***, with an adjusted hazard ratio of 0.88 (about a 12% lower risk of reoffending than similar people in forces without PDD schemes). The 95% confidence interval (CI) for the hazard ratio went from 0.79 to 0.99, meaning that we are 95% confident that the true effect on reoffending of a police force having a PDD scheme was between these two numbers.

Even the two forces that had PDD schemes that were open to ***Group 2*** offences, rarely used them for these offenders. We **did not detect a significant difference in reoffending** between forces that did or did not have such PDD schemes.

In our secondary analysis of reoffending, the **odds of reoffending were significantly *lower* for people who were diverted** in both ***Group 1*** (odds ratio: 0.66, CI: 0.63 - 0.70), and ***Group 2*** (odds ratio: 0.90, CI: 0.81 - 0.99), representing about 34% and 10% lower odds of reoffending among people who were diverted.

We note that the secondary analysis is vulnerable to selection bias. It may have been that police officers chose to divert people who were already less likely to reoffend. The primary analysis was not vulnerable to this form of selection bias.

Drug treatment entry

In our primary analysis of the outcome of whether people entered treatment for substance use disorders after being caught by the police, we **did not detect a significant difference** between forces that did or did not have such PDD schemes for either Group 1 or Group 2 offences.

In our secondary analysis, the **odds of drug treatment entry were significantly *lower* for people who were diverted** in ***Group 1*** (odds ratio: 0.84, CI: 0.75 - 0.94), but ***higher***

in ***Group 2*** (odds ratio: 1.53, CI:1.20 - 1.95), representing about 16% lower and 53% higher odds of entering drug treatment.

So diversion was associated with higher entry into drug treatment for Group 2 offenders (who were more likely to need drug treatment), but lower drug treatment entry for Group 1 offenders (who were less likely to need it).

We note again that the secondary analysis is vulnerable to selection bias. It may have been that police officers chose to divert people with different likelihoods of entering drug treatment in each group.

What did we learn about the **cost consequences** of PDD schemes?[1]

We estimated the costs of dealing with people over five years following the incident for which they entered into our study by police forces. We included the costs of diverting or arresting the suspect, and of dealing with the subsequent offending through the police, courts and prisons.

For ***Group 1***, our estimate is that the average total of these costs was **£726 lower** per case for people who were diverted than for those who were not diverted. The confidence interval of this estimate (showing the range within which we are 95% confident that the true estimate falls) is from £923 to £544 in savings per case.

What did we learn about **equity** in the use of PDD schemes?

In statistical analysis that controlled for various aspects of individuals and the police force area in which they were, we found that **Black people were less likely to get diverted** than White people when they were caught in possession of drugs. People recorded as Asian were more likely to be diverted than White people in this analysis.

In our qualitative interviews and focus groups, **we did not receive any reports of directly racist behaviour** by White police officers against members of ethnic minorities.

In data from the one force that gave us data over time on their use of diversion (data which are not adjusted for individual characteristics), we found that:

[1] Please note that the estimated cost consequences are provisional, as our economic analysis is still ongoing.

- **People living in the most socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods** were most likely to be policed for drug possession, and least likely to be diverted once they were caught.
- **Women** were less likely to be policed for drug possession than would reflect the proportions of men and women who report past year drug use to the Crime Survey for England and Wales.
- There was some evidence of **net-widening**. When this police force introduced its PDD scheme, it also increased the number of people who were formally contacted by police for drug possession. This effect fell away after two years. After three years, police contacts for drug possession returned to the previous level.
- As this temporary net-widening had the greatest effects for young people, Black people, and people from socio-economically deprived neighbourhoods, this does suggest the presence of **institutional discrimination** (i.e. introducing diversion may have had unequal effects by age, ethnicity and social class, even though it was designed as equally applying to all).
- However, the consequences of this net-widening were not severe, as there was no further punishment for people who were diverted, even if they did not comply with the diversion to an educative intervention.
- Overall, the introduction of diversion in this police force was followed by **lower levels of criminalisation** across all sexes, social classes, and ethnic groups.

Our research outputs (at September 2026)

Published journal articles

Stevens, A., Hendrie, N., Bacon, M., Parrott, S., Monaghan, M., Williams, E., Lewer, D., Moore, A., Berlin, J., Cunliffe, J., & others. (2023). Evaluating police drug diversion in England: Protocol for a realist evaluation. *Health & Justice, 11*(1).

Smith, R., Bacon, M., Monaghan, M., Glasspoole-Bird, H., Hendrie, N., Sutton, C., & Stevens, A. (2025). Achieving collaborative advantage in policing: Strategic and frontline partnership in police-led drug diversion schemes in England. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice,* 19, 1–9.

Sutton, C. E., Bacon, M., Glasspoole-Bird, H., Hendrie, N., Monaghan, M., Smith, R., & Stevens, A. (2025). Triggering motivations for change: Exploring engagement in adult police-led drug diversion programs. *Drugs: Education, Prevention & Policy.* DOI: 10.1080/09687637.2025.2566921.

Bacon, M., Glasspoole-Bird, H., Hendrie, N., Lewer, D., Mills, A., Monaghan, M., Pascual, G., Quinton, P., Smith, R., Sutton, C., Williams, E., & Stevens, A. (2026). Implementation fidelity matters: insights from a realist evaluation of police drug

diversion schemes in England. *Policing & Society*. 1–24. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2026.2651196.

Berlin, J., Bacon, M., Beerjeraz, A., Duckworth, P., Glasspoole-Bird, H., Hendrie, N., Monaghan, M., Obed, S., Smith, R., Sutton, C., Williams, E., Woodfinden, K., & Stevens, A. (2026). Involving lived experience peer research in programme evaluation: the case of police-led drug diversion schemes in England. *Drugs: Education, Prevention & Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687637.2026.2723077

Glasspoole-Bird, H., Bacon, M., Smith, R., Sutton, C., Hendrie, N., Williams, E., & Stevens, A. (2026). Analyzing the Role of Needs Assessments in Police Drug Diversion Schemes: Findings from a Realist Process. *Contemporary Drug Problems*. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00914509261454970.

Mills, A., Lewer, D., Reyes Pascual, D., Hendrie, N., Quinton, P., & Steven, A. (2026). Ethnic disparities in police diversion and criminalisation for drug possession in England: a study of 32,758 incidents. *Drug and Alcohol Review*. 45(6): e70230, https://doi.org /10.1111/dar.70230.

Smith, R., Bacon, M., Monaghan, M., Beerjeraz, A., Beriln, J., Duckworth, P., Glasspoole-Bird, H., Hendrie, N., Obed, S., Woodfinden, K., & Stevens, A. (2026). More Than a Second Chance: Realist, Qualitative Insights on the Outcomes of Police Drug Diversion in England. *Criminology and Criminal Justice*. https://doi.org/10.1177/17488958261462143

Stevens, A., Agnew-Pauley, W., Bacon, M., Glasspoole-Bird, H., Hendrie, N., Hughes, C. E., Lloyd, C., Monaghan, M., Smith, R., Sutton, C., Williams, E., & Quinton, P. (2026). Cascading constraint and subsidiary discretion: Perspectives on police discretion from police-led drug diversion and stop and search in England. *The British Journal of Criminology*. 66(2): 448–466.

Forthcoming articles (manuscripts available on request)

Lewer, D., Mills, A., Reyes Sanchez, G., Eastwood, B., Hendrie, N., Cunliffe, J., Bacon, M., Williams, E., Monaghan, M., Quinton, P., Stevens, A. (under review). The impact of police-led diversion for drug possession on reoffending and access to substance use treatment in England: a cohort study. Target journal: *Nature Human Behaviour*.

Hendrie, N., Ionescu, O., Bacon, M., Beerjaz, A., Glasspoole Bird, H., Monaghan, M., Obed, S., Quinton, P., Smith, R., Sutton, C., Williams, E., & Stevens, A. (in preparation). Equity and net-widening in the implementation of police-led drug diversion schemes in England: a mixed methods study. Target journal: *Drug Science, Policy and Law*.

Internal Reports[2]

University of Loughborough (2026). *A Realist Synthesis of Police-led Drug Diversion*.

University of York (2026). *Overview of the PDD cost-consequence analysis*. University of York.

University of Kent (2026). *The relationship between the presence of diversion schemes, individual diversion referrals, with reoffending and entry into drug treatment: technical report*.

Descriptive Manuals

Hendrie, N., Bacon, M., Smith, R., Bostock, M., Quinton, P., & Stevens, A. (2023). The Durham Drug Diversion Scheme. Checkpoint: Descriptive manual [Manual]. University of Kent. Police Drug Diversion PDD West Mids Manual

Hendrie, N., Williams, E., Glasspoole-Bird, H., Spyt, W., Brown, L., Quinton, P., & Stevens, A. (2023). The Thames Valley Police Drug Diversion Scheme. TVP: Descriptive manual [Manual]. University of Kent. Police Drug Diversion PDD TVP

Hendrie, N., Monaghan, M., Sutton, C., Lloyd, N., Taylor, A., Quinton, P., & Stevens, A. (2023). The West Midlands Police Drug Diversion Scheme DIVERT: Descriptive manual [Manual]. University of Kent. PDD Police Drug Diversion PDD Durham Checkpoint

Media

University of Sheffield. (2025). *Alternatives to criminalisation: Police drug diversion* [Video]. University of Sheffield.

https://player.sheffield.ac.uk/events/alternatives-criminalisation-police-drug-diversion

[2] These will form the basis of future research articles.

The PDD partnership



Funding

This work was funded by the UK Government Evaluation Accelerator Fund.

For more information

You can also contact the lead researcher, Professor Alex Stevens (alex.stevens@sheffield.ac.uk) or the project coordinator, Nadine Hendrie (n.hendrie@kent.ac.uk).