

Briefing for the Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee on petition [PE2024](#): ‘Create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators, and other performance enhancing drugs’, lodged by Cael Scott

[PE2024](#) calls on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to create a national, public information programme to raise awareness of the impacts of using steroids, selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs), and other image and performance enhancing drugs (IPEs). The information programme should be particularly focused on the impact on young people aged 16-25. The petitioner also suggests that the Scottish Government works with community learning development practitioners, gyms, and community coaches to raise awareness of this issue.

The petition further asks the Scottish Parliament to call on the Scottish Government to develop a public health campaign to highlight the negative impacts of IPEs, encourage regular health check-ups for users, and introduce a screening programme allowing users to test the safety of their IPEs.

Brief overview of issues raised by the petition

Health impact of IPEs

PE2024 refers to a range of image and performance-enhancing drugs commonly used to improve physical performance. [Anabolic steroids](#) are manufactured drugs that mimic the effects of testosterone. They are prescription-only medications; however, they are sometimes taken without medical advice by people seeking to increase muscle mass and improve athletic performance. Anabolic steroids are [class C drugs](#), which can be issued by pharmacists with a prescription. [Possession of anabolic steroids](#) for personal use is legal; however, the manufacturing, import, export, and supply of anabolic steroids is illegal.

Anabolic steroids are addictive, and carry [a range of side effects](#), including liver and kidney failure, blood clots, high blood pressure, and infertility. Their use can also lead to heart problems and heart attacks. Anabolic steroids are commonly injected, and therefore carry the same risks associated with injecting recreational drugs, including damage to veins, and the transmission of blood-borne viruses such as HIV if needles are shared.

Selective androgen receptor modulators (SARMs) is an umbrella term for a class of drugs, such as [ostarine](#) and [testolone](#), that have recently gained popularity as an alternative to anabolic steroids. [Both types of drug work](#) by binding to androgen receptors; however, SARMs are thought to carry fewer side effects than anabolic steroids. SARMs can currently be legally purchased in the UK without age restrictions, due to a loophole enabling them to be sold as “research chemicals”. The sale and production of SARMs is unregulated, and [a 2021 drug test analysis](#) of SARMs available to UK consumers found significant discrepancies in the ingredients of SARMs analysed.

The safety of SARMs is [under-researched and poorly understood](#). The availability and current legality of SARMs has contributed to the perception that they are safe. However, according to a warning issued by the [United States Food and Drug Administration](#) in April 2023, SARMs are associated with serious side-effects including increased risk of heart attack or stroke, liver failure, and infertility.

As the petitioner notes, SARMs are heavily promoted on social media. A 2022 [study exploring the impact of social media](#) on SARMs abuse reported that videos promoting SARMs on TikTok had over 115 million views as of 2 June 2021. In mid-June 2021, TikTok banned the hashtags ‘SARMs’ and ‘steroids’, along with associated terms. These hashtags can no longer be searched on TikTok; however, the content remains available.

Usage and prevalence of image and performance-enhancing drugs

Data on the usage of image and performance-enhancing drugs (IPEDs) in the UK is limited, and the data that does exist largely concerns anabolic steroid use. A [2019 report by UK Anti-Doping](#) (UKAD) suggested that up to one million people regularly use steroids in the UK, and that 34% of gym-goers surveyed by UKAD were aware of the use of IPEDs in their gym or club. The report identified exposure to “body image influencers” on social media, the “Love Island effect”, and a normalisation of injecting practices as drivers of increased IPED use, noting that the most common demographic for the onset of IPED use was among 20–24-year-old males.

Existing support and information

Information about the risks of IPEDs is available from sources including [FRANK](#) and [UK Anti-Doping](#). In April 2020, UK Anti-Doping [launched a digital campaign](#) to highlight the risks and side-effects of anabolic steroid use, directed towards social media users who may be influenced by online promotion of IPEDs.

Some local services, including [NHS Lothian's Edinburgh Steroid Clinic](#) and the [Glasgow Image and Performance Enhancing Drugs Clinic](#), have established specialist clinics for users of anabolic steroids and other IPEDs, to offer harm reduction advice, sterile injecting equipment, psychology support, and blood tests for hormone levels and blood-borne viruses.

Scottish Government actions

In its [written submission to the Committee in response to PE2024](#), dated 9 June 2023, the Scottish Government stated that it began working with young people in Spring 2023 to develop a series of standards for local areas to implement to support young people who use drugs. The Scottish Government has previously funded work through the Scottish Drugs Forum (SDF) to develop information and training programmes to meet the needs of “at-risk” groups, which included people who use IPEDs. SDF continues to deliver training on IPEDs as part of its sexual health and blood-borne viruses workstream.

The response also expressed the Scottish Government’s commitment to further enhancing its public health surveillance data to include IPED use. The letter added that the Scottish Government would be supportive of increasing the awareness of Injecting Provision Services for people who inject IPEDs.

Scottish Parliament actions

The Citizen Participation and Public Petitions Committee is currently considering petition [PE1919](#), which calls for a ban on the sale of fast release caffeine gum to under 18s for performance enhancement due to risk of serious harm.

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The purpose of this briefing is to provide a brief overview of issues raised by the petition. SPICe research specialists are not able to discuss the content of petition briefings with petitioners or other members of the public. However, if you have any comments on any petition briefing you can email us at spice@parliament.scot

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