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Mayor of London launches UK's first compulsory sobriety 'tag' scheme for binge drinkers

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31 July 2014

The Mayor of London today (31 July) launched the first scheme in the UK that will enforce alcohol abstinence among offenders who binge drink through compulsory use of ankle tags. The mandatory round the clock tag monitors alcohol perspiration in an offender. Today's launch follows a 2012 manifesto pledge by the Mayor and successful lobbying of Government for new sentencing powers in a bid to tackle alcohol related crime and disorder.

A year-long pilot of the scheme begins today in the South London Local Justice Area, covering the Croydon, Lambeth, Southwark and Sutton. It is anticipated that between 100-150 offenders will be sentenced by the courts to an 'alcohol abstinence monitoring requirement' where they will be banned from drinking any alcohol for up to 120 days and tested constantly using the new ankle tag.

Building on similar successful schemes in the US, and using tried and tested technology, the aim is to reduce alcohol related re-offending, ease the pressure on the police and the criminal justice system and make our streets and town centres safer, particularly at night. Alcohol related crime is estimated to cost the UK between £8bn and £13bn every year and places a heavy burden on public services - 40 per cent of all A&E attendances are related to alcohol misuse. According to Public Health England, alcohol-related crime is significantly higher in London than all other English regions.

If an offender breaches the sobriety order, they can be returned to court where further sanctions can be imposed. These sanctions can include a fine, making the order more onerous by adding additional requirements, or revoking the order and resentencing the offender. Persistent non-compliance may ultimately result in imprisonment.

Offenders on the scheme will be carefully selected according to their circumstances, for example it is not aimed at people who are alcohol dependent and who need specialist support. However people identified as suitable for the programme will be directed to treatment advice services.

The Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, who visited Croydon Magistrates' Court to launch the scheme, said: 'Alcohol-fuelled criminal behaviour is a real scourge on our high streets, deterring law-abiding citizens from enjoying our great city especially at night, placing massive strain on frontline services, whilst costing businesses and the taxpayer billions of pounds. I pledged to tackle this booze culture by making the case to Government for new powers to allow mandatory alcohol testing as an additional enforcement option for the courts. This is an approach that has seen impressive results in the US, steering binge drinkers away from repeated criminal behaviour and I am pleased we can now launch a pilot scheme in London.'

Metropolitan Police Commander Simon Letchford, MPS lead for alcohol related crime, said: 'We want people to enjoy London's vibrant night-time economy. However, the misuse of alcohol can result in disorder and anti-social behaviour that causes misery for others and we welcome any initiatives that tackle repeat offending.'

Professor Keith Humphreys, former White House Drugs Advisor, who has advised City Hall on the project, said: 'I applaud Mayor Johnson, the judges and the police for pushing back against the alcohol-fuelled violence and disorder that has robbed many Londoners of their health, safety and right to walk the streets at night. 24/7 sobriety schemes have had a transformative effect on alcohol-fuelled crime in the US and I am delighted that it is now being piloted in the UK, where it is clearly much needed.'

The Mayor's Office for Policing And Crime (MOPAC) will evaluate and review evidence from the pilot to develop recommendations regarding a wider introduction of the scheme. The tags register alcohol consumption but do not monitor movement or location of the individuals and data will be held in accordance with data protection laws.

Ends

Additional quotes:

Nick Smart, Chief Executive of the London Community Rehabilitation Company, said: 'The London Community Rehabilitation Company is committed to working with our partners in the National Probation Service, the Police and the Courts to reduce the impact of alcohol misuse on our communities. We look forward to the learning about new approaches that this pilot will deliver.'

Notes to editors

- MOPAC has contracted Alcohol Monitoring Systems Ltd (AMS) to deliver London's Alcohol Abstinence Monitoring Requirement technology including transdermal tags. The monitoring bracelets are worn 24 hours a day and automatically samples a person's perspiration every 30 minutes to test for alcohol consumption via a base station placed in the subject's home. Any breach will trigger an alert which will be sent to the offender's probation officer. The courts will be informed in order to recall the offender in the event of a breach. The base station's data is remotely transferred to a central monitoring base.
- The tags are designed with a number of anti-tamper features and any disruption will also trigger an alert which will also be sent to the offender's probation officer.
- This is a year-long 'proof of concept' trial that is designed to gather evidence ahead of any wider introduction.
- For more information, visit: www.london.gov.uk/priorities/policing-crime/our-work/sobriety-pilot

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