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Neil McKeganey: Drugs advisory body may be too linked to government to work

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THE formation of a new quango is hardly ever likely to garner much in the way of newspaper headlines, and so it was with the announcement last Thursday from community safety minister Fergus Ewing of the first meeting of the Drugs Strategy Delivery Commission.

The commission is responsible for advising on the implementation of Scotland's "Road to Recovery" drug strategy and, in the words of the minister, criticising the delivery of the strategy where criticism is necessary.

The newly appointed chair o

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f the commission, Dr Brian Kidd, has underlined the independent spirit of the commission and assured those who were at the launch that it will "ask the difficult questions".

In the midst of the turmoil that ministers now find themselves in with regard to education it is a moot point just how many more difficult questions they would like to have asked to do with another problematic area of public policy.

Independence, of course, means many things to many people. However, it is not a characteristic one would immediately associate with a commission whose members have been handpicked by the minister, whose secretariat is provided by the minister, whose existence has been announced by the minister and who will presumably be reporting to the minister.

The commission is made up of 19 people, five of whom are doctors, with most of those being strong supporters of Scotland's methadone programme. Whatever difficult questions the commission may go on to ask, top of the list is unlikely to be how to reduce the estimated 22,000 addicts in Scotland who are now on the methadone programme.

Costing somewhere between £40 million to £50m a year, it is questionable whether any small country can weather that level of public expenditure.

There is nobody on the commission representing the residential drug treatment sector, so do not expect any significant increase in the 2 per cent of addicts who are currently being offered residential rehab, despite the fact research has shown this to be the most effective treatment for getting addicts off drugs.

In contrast to the clutch of doctors on the commission, its membership includes just a single senior policeman.

Drugs pose a massive threat to Scotland and while there is clearly an important role for drug abuse treatment there is also a crucial role for tough enforcement if we are to tackle the problem.

Perhaps most shocking though, is the fact that there is nobody on the commission from children's services or representing the voice of children. Scotland has about 40,000 children living with addict parents.

The list of children who have been harmed as a result of living within addict households is a roll call of shame and neglect that brings tears to one's eyes.

In creating a commission that fails to offer a voice to vulnerable children, politicians and their civil servants are turning away from a group that needs their help more than any other.

The commission is roughly the equivalent of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs in England. Following criticism for a lack of transparency, the ACMD now holds its meetings in public.

The Drugs Strategy Delivery Commission would do well to do the same, though whether it will may have more to do with the minister than the commission members.

In the current political climate independence may be a principle that is easier to announce than to deliver.

- Neil McKeganey is Professor of Drug Misuse Research at the University of Glasgow

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