

# Developing national research infrastructure and activity: the role of a new drugs research network.

## INTRODUCTION

The Drugs Research Network Scotland (DRNS) is funded by Scottish Government from 2017-20 to support a strategic programme of research activities across Scotland. We aim to generate and disseminate evidence to inform national policy and practice responses to problem drug use. Our work is informed by the national problem drugs use research framework<sup>1</sup> and national drug and alcohol strategy<sup>2</sup>.

## METHODS

Activity data were collated from years 1 & 2 to inform annual reports to the funder.

## RESULTS

### 1. NETWORK DEVELOPMENT

Our Steering Committee provides governance and strategic leadership and comprises: academics from several universities and disciplines; NHS research & development, pharmacy, and public health; the voluntary sector; and people with lived/living experience of drug use. DRNS membership is free and open to anyone with an interest in Scottish drugs research. We currently have 106 members.

### 2. COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

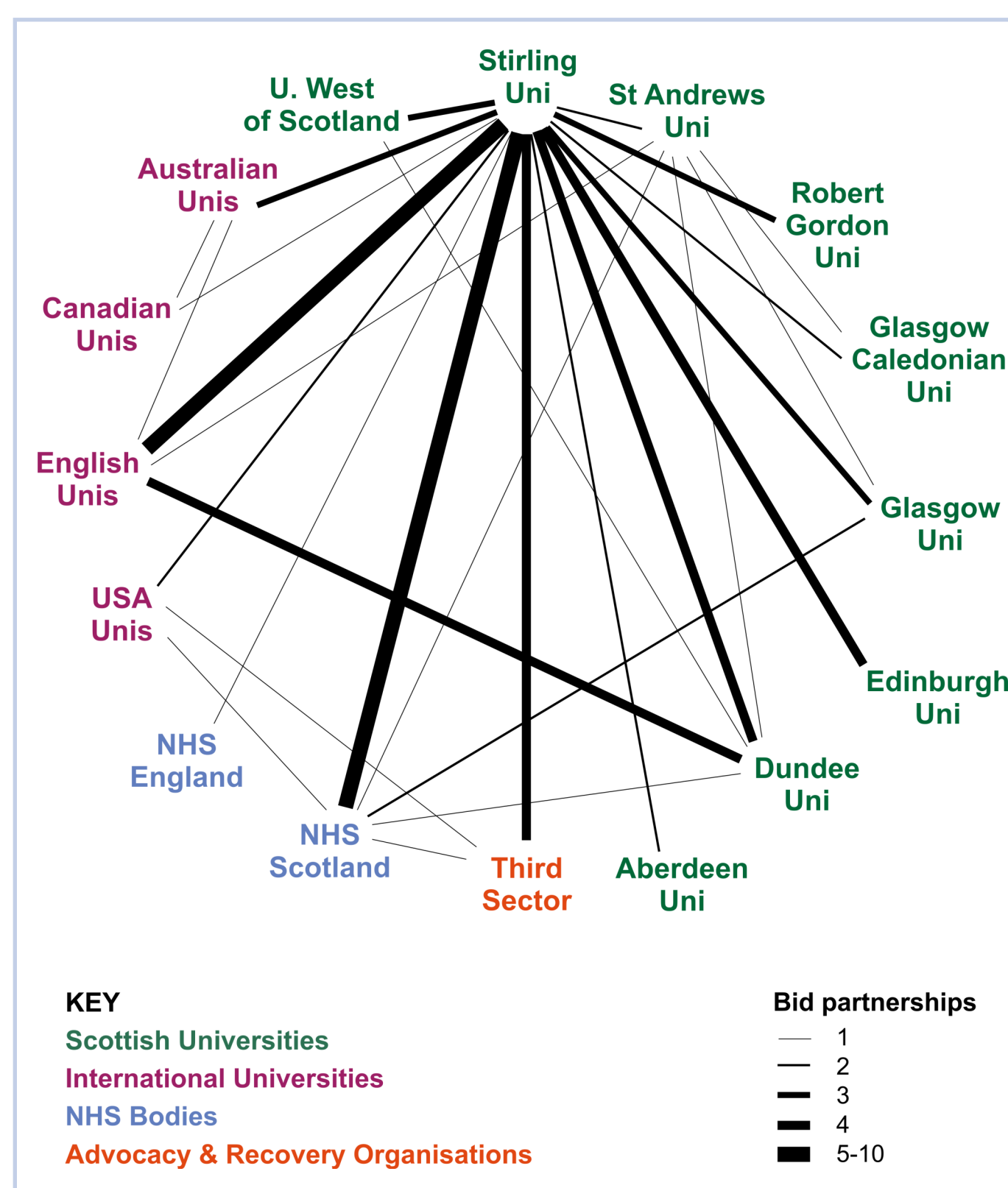
DRNS has supported the development of 22 collaborative funding bids with a total value of £9.02 million. Partnerships cross disciplinary, organisational, sectoral and international boundaries (**fig. 1**). Of these bids: 8 were unsuccessful, 1 is in development, 7 are awaiting funder decision, and 6 were successful.

The 6 successful bids generated £2.52 million research funding for projects addressing:

- The experiences of families affected by parental opioid use.
- The role of peer navigators in service provision for people with a drug problem who are homeless.
- Addressing prescription opioid overdose risk via community pharmacy.
- Health and social condition clustering among people who have a drug-related death.
- Community pharmacies as psychologically informed environments for people who use drugs.

Project leads can cost DRNS staff time in to contribute to bid delivery and support network sustainability. £23,271 network income has been secured so far.

DRNS encourages all principal investigators to include meaningful public & patient involvement (PPI) throughout projects, aligned to NIHR INVOLVE guidance.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 1** Network diagram of cross-institutional and international partnerships in development of 22 research funding bids.

### 3. KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE (KE)

As well as our annual conferences we delivered KE events to share evidence and international learning, develop partnerships and inform development of new research projects.

Reflecting the ongoing public health emergency, we have delivered a series of seminars addressing drug-related deaths.

- Reducing drug-related deaths in Scotland: Learning from the Canadian experience.
- Drug-related deaths among women.
- Overdose Prevention in Scotland: what can we learn from British Columbia?
- Opioids, pain, dependence and harms: International perspectives on risk assessment and mitigation.

Other KE events focussed on developing a programme of prevention work, engaging with drugs researchers in the north of Scotland, and sharing international learning to support whole families affected by parental drug use.

We publish a monthly e-newsletter to 264 subscribers and maintain an active Twitter account with 798 followers.

### 4. PATHWAYS TO IMPACT

DRNS is actively engaged with the creators and users of research. We address their information needs through KE and communications work designed to inform policy and practice developments. DRNS academics are involved in: the Scottish Government's Drug Deaths Taskforce; local area drug commissions; the Chief Scientist Office; World Health Organisation; and several strategic public health and research development bodies. We regularly comment on drug issues in regional and national media.

These relationships provide opportunities for our emerging research findings and recommendations to influence policy and practice.

## CONCLUSION

With appropriate funding and governance, a new research network can support the development of new and effective inter-agency partnerships generating research and related activities to address identified national priorities.

These collaborations strengthen relationships and activity across Scotland and internationally, and develop the skills and capacity of the research workforce.

With network support, the meaningful involvement of people with lived/living experience of drug use can be delivered.

Challenges include:

- The fit between research delivery timelines and the commissioning cycle.
- The limited number of established academics able to lead on projects and bids.
- Achieving financial sustainability.

## REFERENCES

1. Scottish Government (2015) *Scottish National Research Framework for Problem Drug Use and Recovery* Scottish Government: Edinburgh.
2. Scottish Government (2018) *Rights, Respect and Recovery* Scottish Government: Edinburgh.
3. National Institute for Health Research (2019) *National Standards for Public Involvement* NIHR: London