



# **Northern Ireland Needle and Syringe Exchange Quarterly Report**

**1 October 2023 – December 2023**

Title	Northern Ireland Needle and Syringe Exchange Quarterly Report.  1 October 2023 - 31 December 2023
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Directorate	Public Health Directorate, Health and Social Wellbeing Improvement, Public Health Agency
Target Audience	Needle and syringe exchange providers, drug treatment services, pharmacy staff, health professionals working in substance use
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## Section 1: Background

The Needle and Syringe Exchange Scheme (NSES) is vital to the health and wellbeing of the entire community, helping to reduce the potential of drug-related litter, lowering the risk of HIV and Hepatitis B and C within the wider population, and putting those who use the service in direct contact with a health professional who can help them in engaging with treatment services to address their drug misuse. Thirty-three needle exchange services are commissioned across Northern Ireland based in areas where there is an existing pattern of people who inject, but help protect everyone in the community. Anyone who injects substances can use a needle exchange service, and this includes people who inject opioids, steroids, tanning agents or stimulants.

Throughout 2022 PHA fully implemented a new online database to record needle exchange activity alongside anonymous, non-identifiable client data. This database is called the Neo360 Harm Reduction Information System and became fully operational across all NSES sites on 1 December 2022. This database permits live data to be accessed which in turn will allow for a timely and effective public health response to any detected trends.

This report summarises data that has been collated by Neo360 within the three-month period between 1 October 2023 and 31 December 2023. Needle exchange activity was recorded in 32 active sites throughout this period. One additional NSES site did not record any transactions during this period. Thomas Street Pharmacy Plus in Portadown and Gordons in Banbridge opened new needle exchanges within this reporting period, both are situated within the Southern Trust area.

There have been 982 new clients registered on Neo360 within this reporting period. This number is understood to be inflated due to the number of clients re-registering on the system due to fears regarding their anonymity; providers continually work with clients to try to keep this figure as accurate as possible. The number of new registrations has steadily decreased throughout 2023 (2246 new clients recorded in January to March 2023) which implies that the number of clients re-registering is decreasing each quarter.

In terms of unique client usage for the reporting period, there was a total of 2737 unique clients across Northern Ireland. When this report is run per Trust area this totals 2899 unique service users which suggests that 162 clients are crossing Trust boundaries to access multiple needle exchange services.

This report includes the regional data across Northern Ireland, followed by a breakdown per trust, **correct as of 1 January 2024**. The following information is collated:

- Total number of transactions;
- Transaction by provider type;
- Transaction by Trust location;
- Age of client at registration;
- Gender of client at registration;
- Recorded substance/s used.

## Needle and Syringe Exchange Service providers

Between 1 October 2023 and 31 December 2023 the Public Health Agency had the following sites providing active NSES

**Table 1: Participating Service Provider by Trust Area in reporting period**

<b>Trust Area</b>	<b>Provider</b>	<b>Provider Type</b>
<b>Belfast</b>	Extern	Community-based
	The Welcome Organisation	Community-based
	Queen's Quarter Housing	Hostel Provider
	Belfast Drug Outreach team	Low Threshold Service
	Chemist Connect	Pharmacy
	Maguires	Pharmacy
	Belfast Health Inclusion Service	Statutory Provider
	Custody Health Care	Statutory Provider
<b>Northern</b>	Boots, Ballymena Health Centre	Pharmacy
	Boots, Antrim	Pharmacy
	Boots, Coleraine	Pharmacy
	Boots, Cookstown	Pharmacy
	Boots, Newtownabbey	Pharmacy
	Boots, Queen's Street Ballymena	Pharmacy
<b>Southern</b>	Extern	Low Threshold Service
	Boots, Armagh	Pharmacy
	McKeagneys, Newry	Pharmacy
	Northern Pharmacies, Craigavon	Pharmacy
	Partridges, Lurgan	Pharmacy
	Thomas Street Pharmacy Plus	Pharmacy
	Inclusion Health Service	Statutory Provider
<b>South Eastern</b>	The Simon Community	Low Threshold Service
	Clear Pharmacy, Bangor	Pharmacy
	Gordons, Downpatrick	Pharmacy
	Gordons, Lisburn	Pharmacy
	Gordons, Newtownards	Pharmacy
<b>Western</b>	Foyle Haven, DePaul Ireland	Low Threshold Service
	Bradleys, Derry/Londonderry	Pharmacy
	Bradleys, Enniskillen	Pharmacy
	Gordons, Limavady	Pharmacy
	Mournes, Strabane	Pharmacy
	Superdrug, Derry/Londonderry	Pharmacy

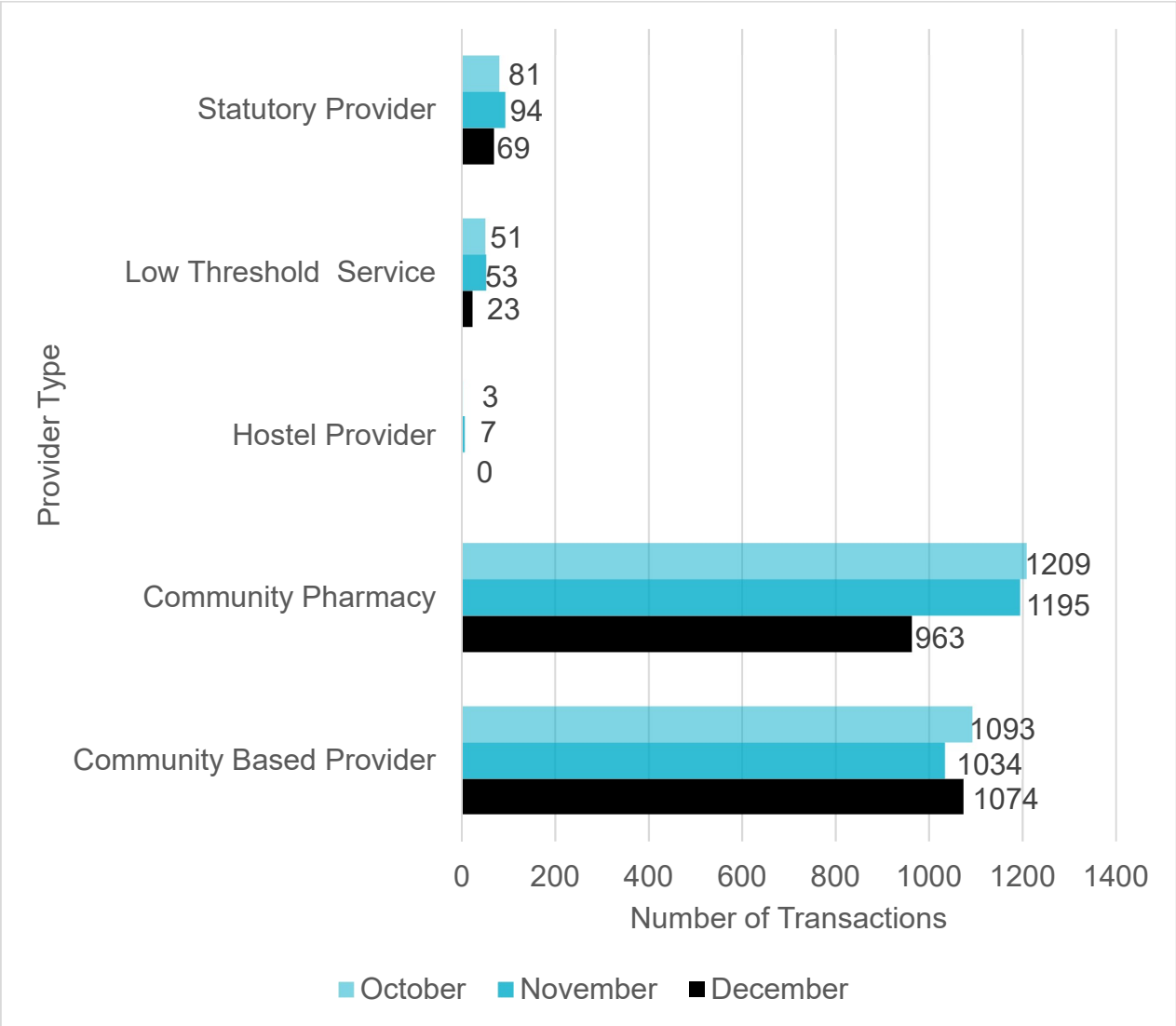
## Section 2: Regional NSES Data Review

### NSES Transactions

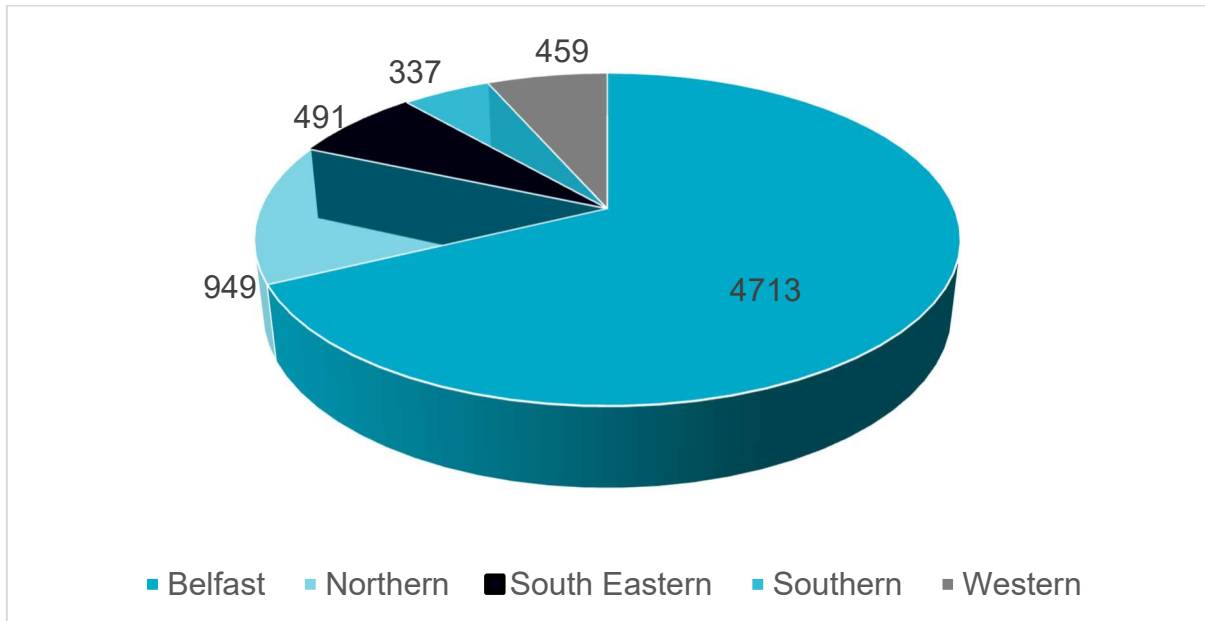
From October to December 2023 there were a total of **6,949 NSES transactions** carried out across Northern Ireland. This quarter completed the smallest number of transactions within 2023.

**Figure 1: Number of NSES transactions by Provider Type**

Figure 1 reflects that the community pharmacies completed 48.5% of the transactions for the reporting period. The community-based providers have completed 46% of the total transactions.



**Figure 2: Number of transactions by each Health and Social Care Trust area**

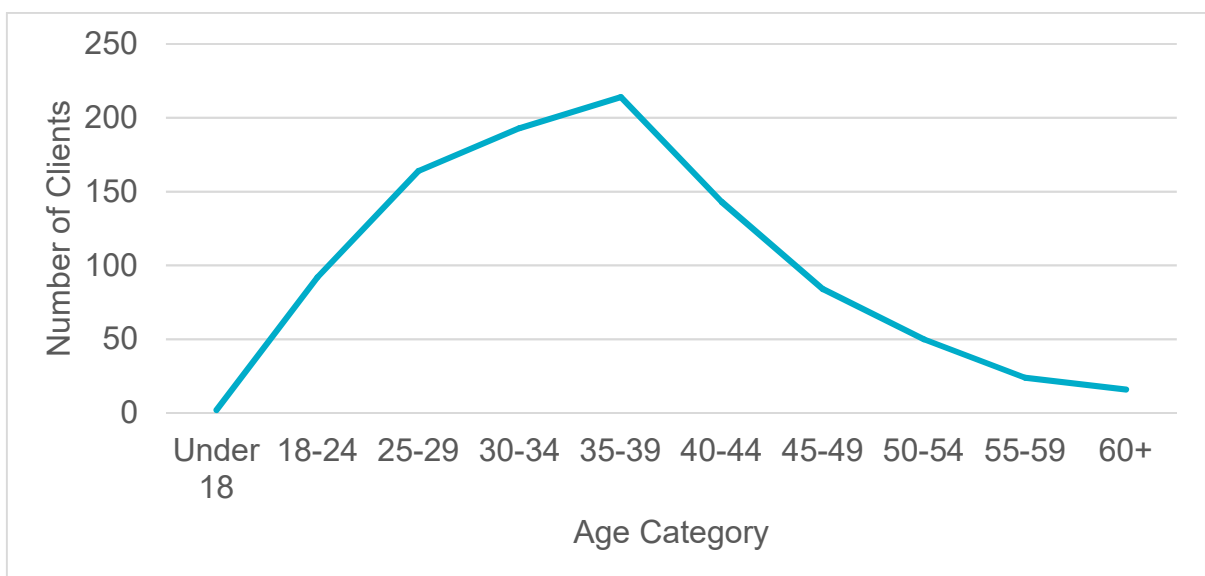


The highest number of overall transactions continue to take place in BHSCT area (67.8%) and the lowest percentage of transactions continue to take place in the SHSCT area (4.9%). The SHSCT area has been an area of focus for needle exchange within 2023 and we have opened 4 new sites in the area. These have seen a slow but steady increase of exchanges from 3% in January to March 2023 to 4.9% in the final quarter of the year.

**NSES User Profile**

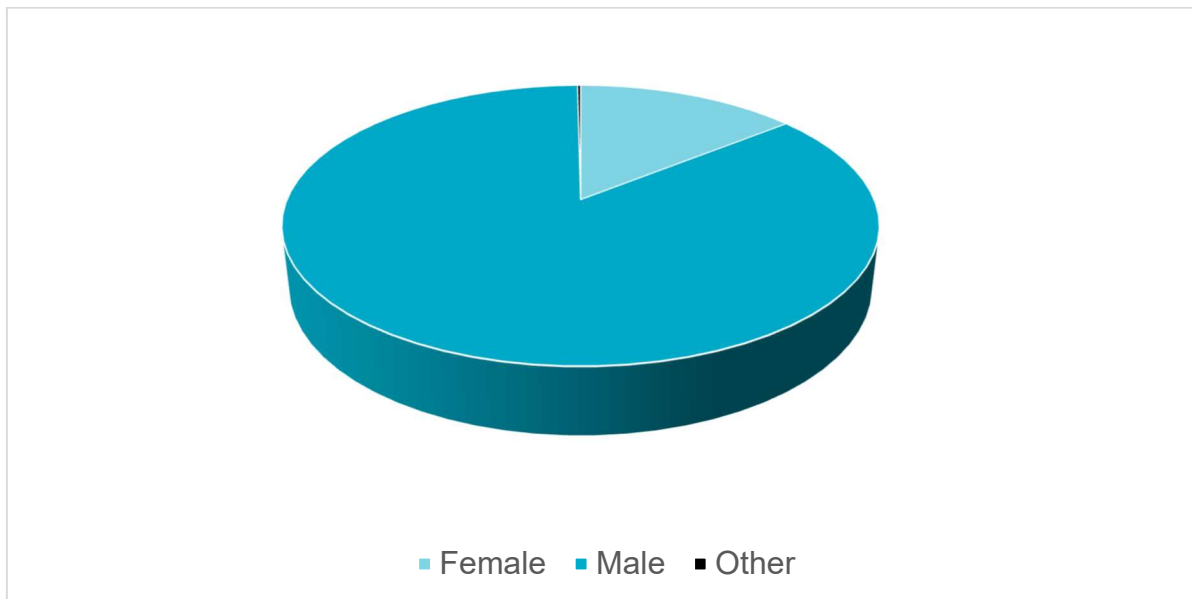
The age and gender profile of the 982 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 3 and 4.

**Figure 3: Current Age of new Clients registered in reporting period**



The most common age category for new clients remains the same as previous the quarter at 35-39 years, followed by those aged 30-34.

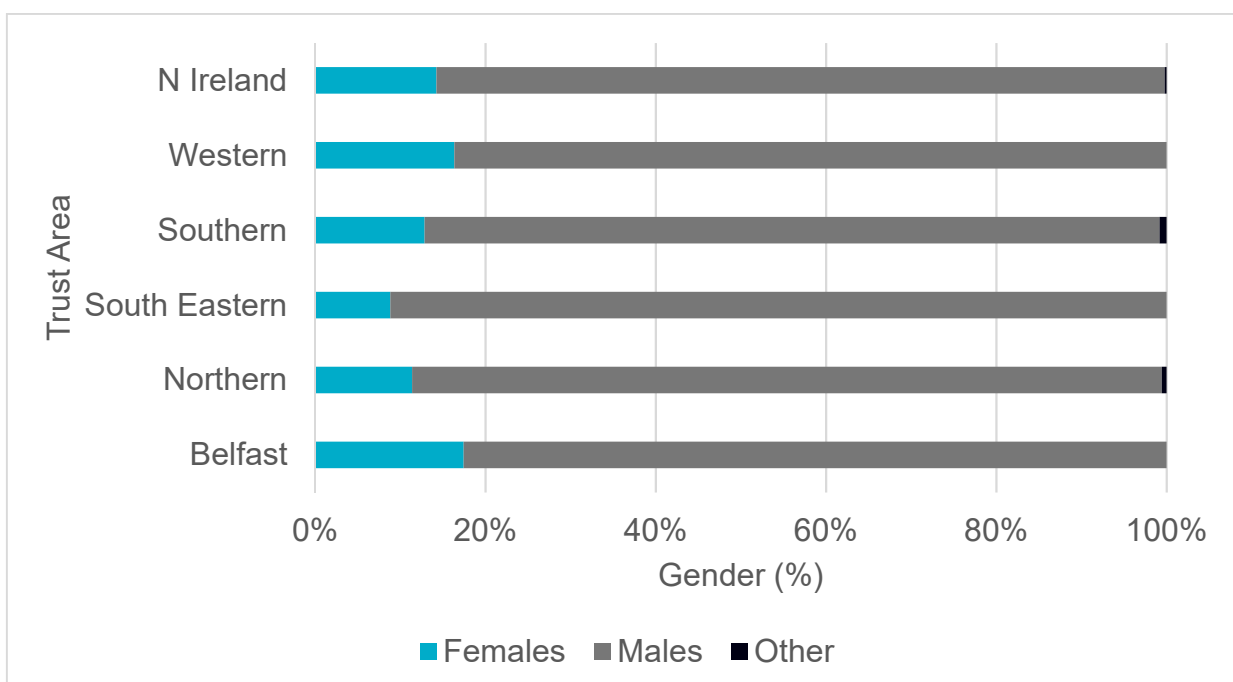
**Figure 4: Gender of Clients at registration**



This pie chart reflects that the NSES is used primarily by males (85.5%).

**Figure 5: Gender (%) of clients by Trust area**

Figure 5 shows the gender breakdown by Trust of clients registering for needle exchange this quarter. We now see an increase in female clients within the Belfast Trust area, in the previous quarter this was 12% and this has increased to 17%. Also, within the Southern Trust area, in the previous quarter the proportion of females was 9% and this has increased to 13%. Overall though the number of female clients remains low.



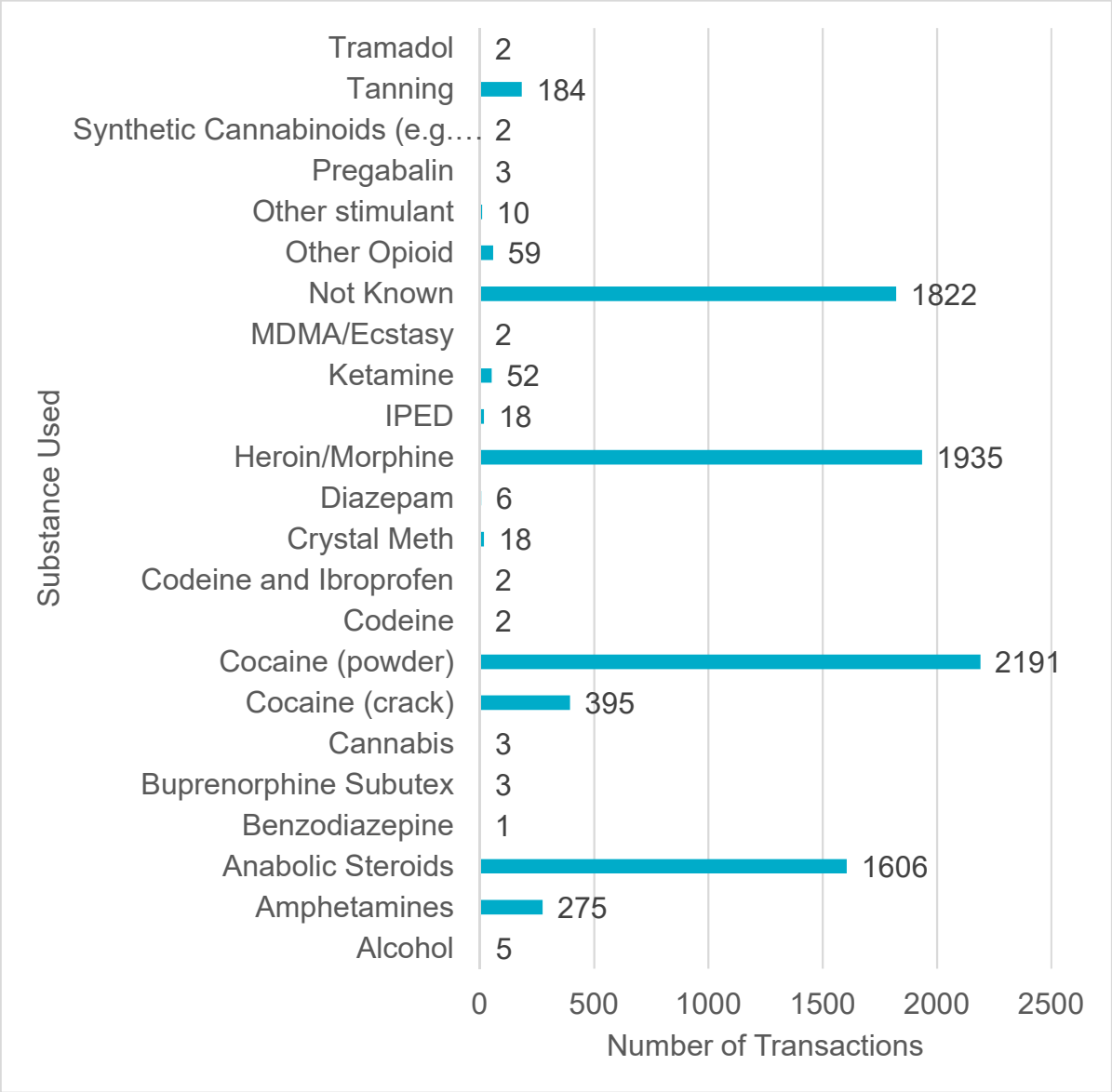


**Recorded Substance Used**

The graph below reflects the reported substances used by clients for each transaction. Clients may report more than one substance in response to this.

Figure 6 reflects that of the 6,949 transactions in this reporting period, 8,596 reports of substance used were recorded across 22 substances. This includes those selecting the 'unknown' category which remain high at 1,822 (21.1%) however, this has decreased by 240 transactions this quarter.

**Figure 6: Reported Substances Used by Transaction**



For the first time, since PHA commenced this reporting system Cocaine powder (2,191) is now the largest reported usage within needle exchange clients. Heroin/morphine (1,935) and anabolic steroids (1,606) are the second and third most reported substances respectively, across the region.

**Table 2: Number of clients using most reported substances, Number of transactions per substance and average transaction rate per substance from 1 October 2023 to 30<sup>th</sup> December 2023.**

<b>Substance</b>	<b>Number of NSES unique clients using</b>	<b>Number of transactions for this substance</b>	<b>Average transaction per client</b>
Anabolic Steroids	1,078	1606	1.48
Heroin/Morphine	393	1935	4.9
Cocaine (powder)	387	2191	5.66

Although cocaine powder was reported most frequently during transactions, the number of unique clients using anabolic steroids by far exceeded those using heroin/morphine or cocaine powder. The table reflects that clients reporting use of cocaine will attend the needle exchange more frequently than anabolic steroid users.

**Table 3: Quantity of Needles Dispensed**

Please see below a breakdown of the needles dispensed across all needle exchange sites for the reporting period. A total of 149,840 needles and syringes combined were dispensed across needle exchange in Northern Ireland.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Item</b>	<b>Total</b>
Needles	16mm [ 5/8 inch ] orange	3,319
Needles	25mm [ 1 inch ] blue	2,277
Needles	25mm [ 1 inch ] orange	3,224
Needles	30mm [ 1 1/4 inch ] blue	30,179
Needles	38mm [ 1 1/2 inch ] black	1,092
Needles	40mm [ 1 1/2 inch ] green	30,026
Syringes	0.5ml Fixed Syringe	43,822
Syringes	1 ml 30G Unisharp fixed	35,901
<b>Total Needles Dispensed</b>		<b>149,840</b>

Basic principles are that the shorter needles are used for surface vein injecting (arms, hand, feet etc), and the longer ones for deeper veins (legs and groin) and steroids which are intramuscular injections.

The 0.5ml and the 1ml Unisharp are the mainstay of all injecting equipment, they are the shortest and thinnest needles and also the lowest dead space syringes. It is positive from a harm reduction perspective these continue to be used frequently within needle exchange with 79,723 (53%) in total dispensed in the reporting period.

NSES dispenses a 2ml starter pack and 2ml standard pack, 1,299 were dispensed in the reporting period, however, these do not contain needles. Clients then select needles separately, accounting for the high number of single coloured needles

dispensed. The highest dispensed single needles are blue (30mm) with 30,179 dispensed and green (40mm) with 30,026 dispensed giving a total of 60,205 (40.2%) dispensed in the reporting period. These are the largest needles and are used for both groin injecting and steroid injecting.

From January to March 2023 158,296 needles were dispensed, April to June 2023 161,024 were dispensed and from July to September 2023 179,161. This reporting quarter 149,840 needles were dispensed, the lowest number of needles per quarter of the 2023 year. The total number of needles dispensed in this calendar year is 648,321.

### Use of Foils

In promoting harm reduction, staff within needle exchange sites are encouraged to dispense foils which will support smoking, thus, reducing the harm caused through injecting. Fifteen sites dispensed 1,640 packets (20 per pack).

### Returns

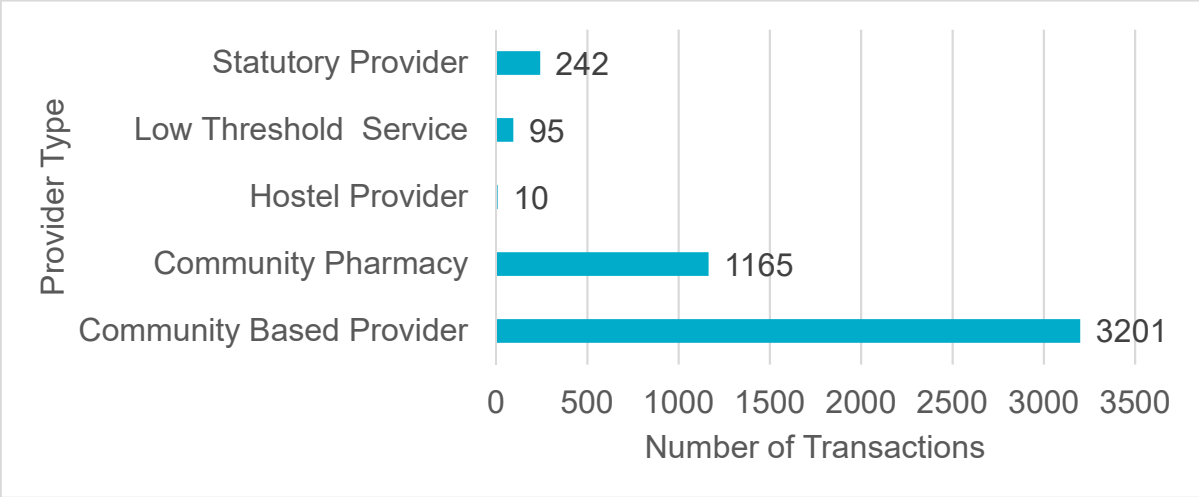
This quarter 22,048 estimated needles were returned within exchanges. This is a return rate of 14.7%, showing a slight decrease from last quarter but overall fitting with a sustained increase in returns.

### Section 3: Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Area NSES Data

In the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Area (BHSCT) within the reporting period there were:

- 4,713 NSES transactions completed;
- 1,397 unique clients using NSES;
- 369 new clients registered for NSES;
- 95 anonymous transactions completed.

**Figure 7: Number of Transactions per Provider Type in BHSCT**

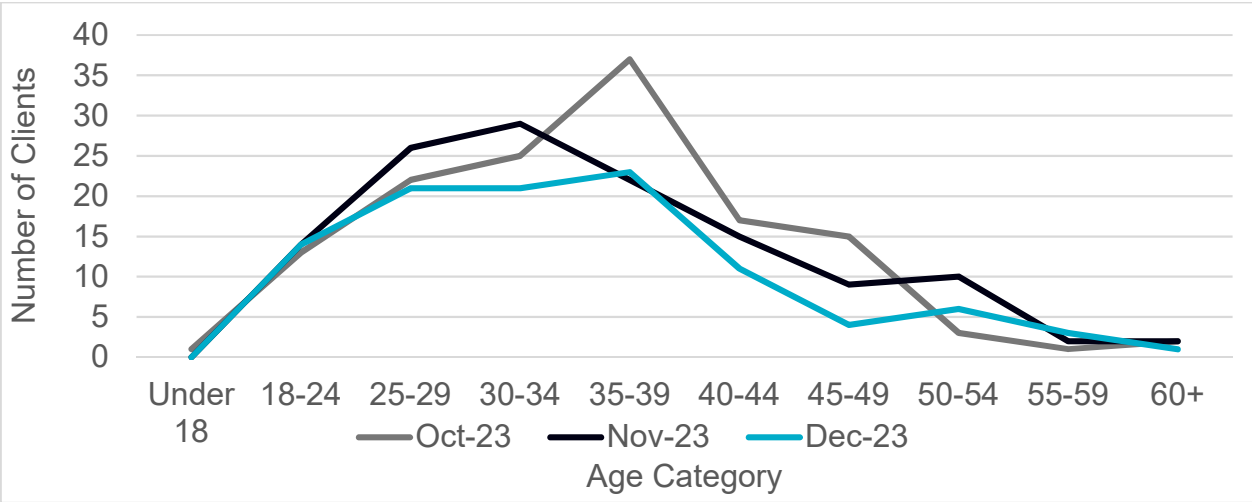


Community based providers remain to be completing the highest volume of transactions (67.9%) for the BHSCT.

#### NSES User Profile

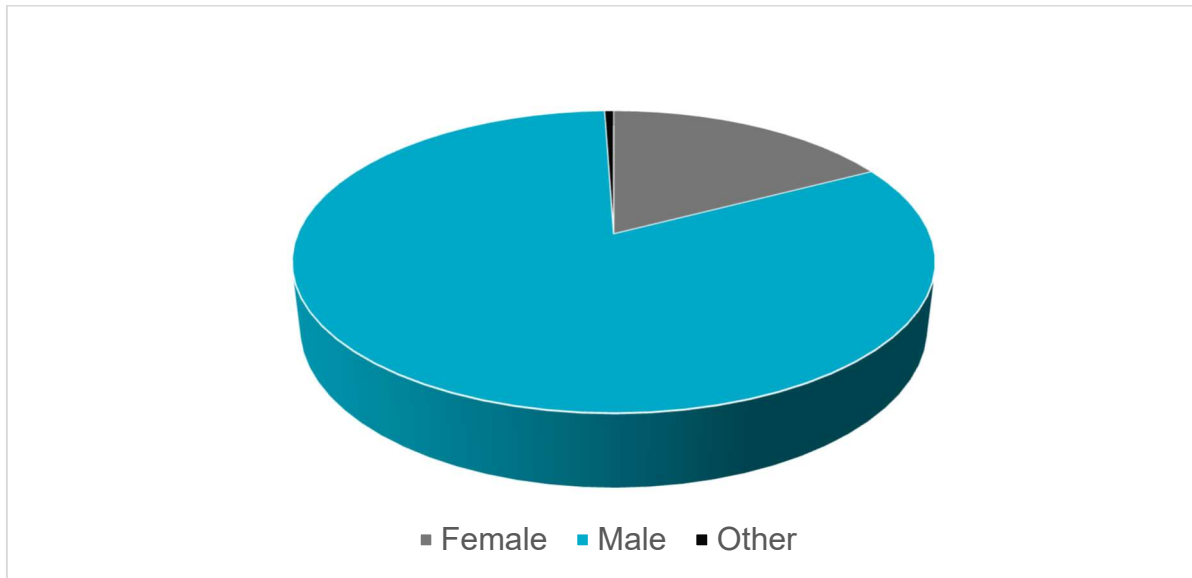
The age and gender profile of the 369 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 8 and 9

**Figure 8: Age of Clients at registration in BHSCT**



The most common overall age group of new client in BHSCT was age 35-39 years.

**Figure 9: Gender of Clients at registration in BHSCT**



The majority of new clients registered were male (82.1%).

**Figure 10: Recorded Substance Used by transaction in BHSCT**

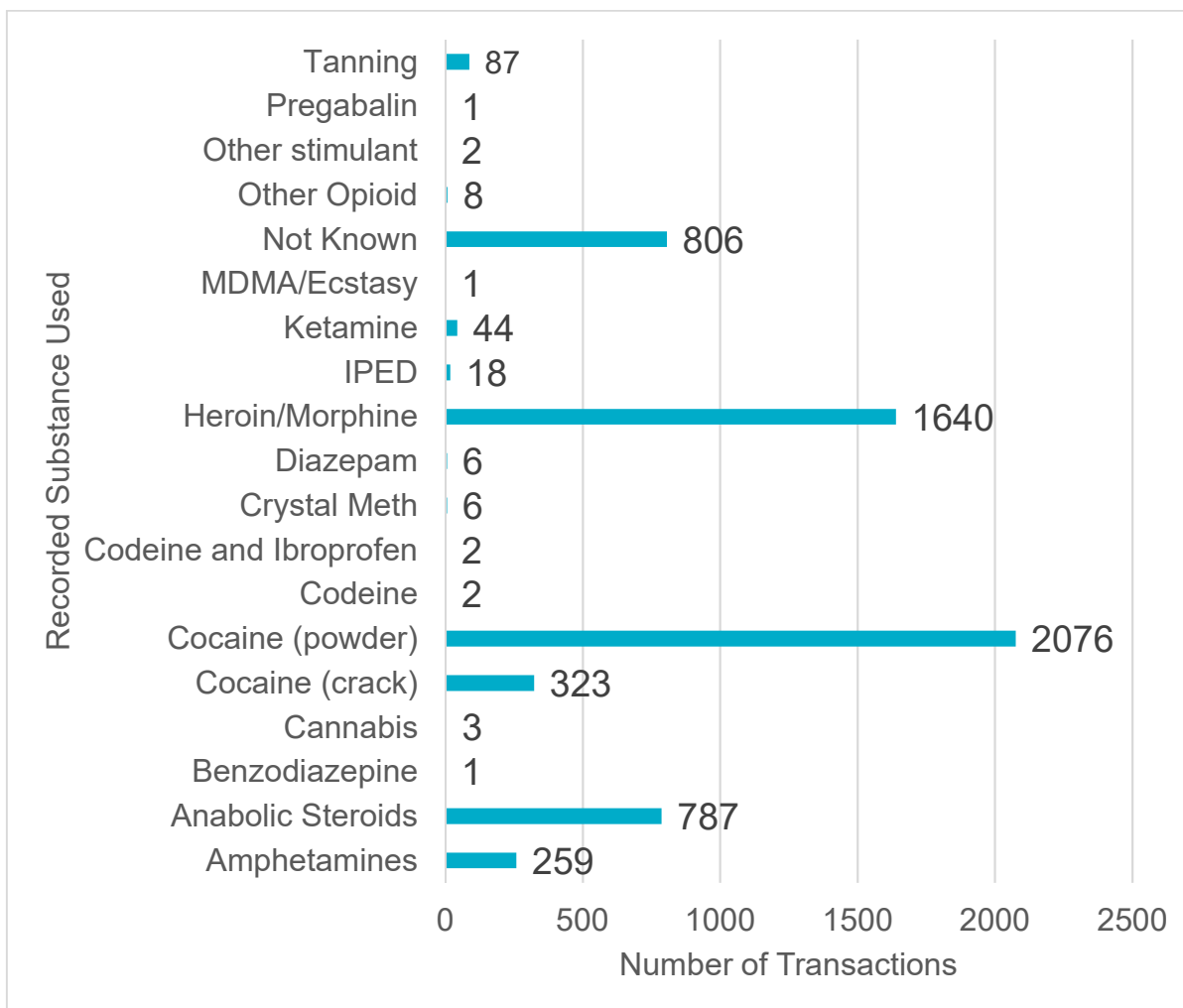


Figure 10 reflects that of the 4,713 transactions in this reporting period, 6,072 reports of substance used were recorded across 18 substances. This includes those selecting the 'unknown' category which was 806 (13.3%).

The largest recorded substance used in needle exchange was cocaine powder (2,076) followed by heroin/morphine (1,640) and anabolic steroids (787).

## Section 4: Northern Health and Social Care Trust Area NSES Data

In the Northern Health and Social Care Trust Area (NHSCT) within the reporting period there were:

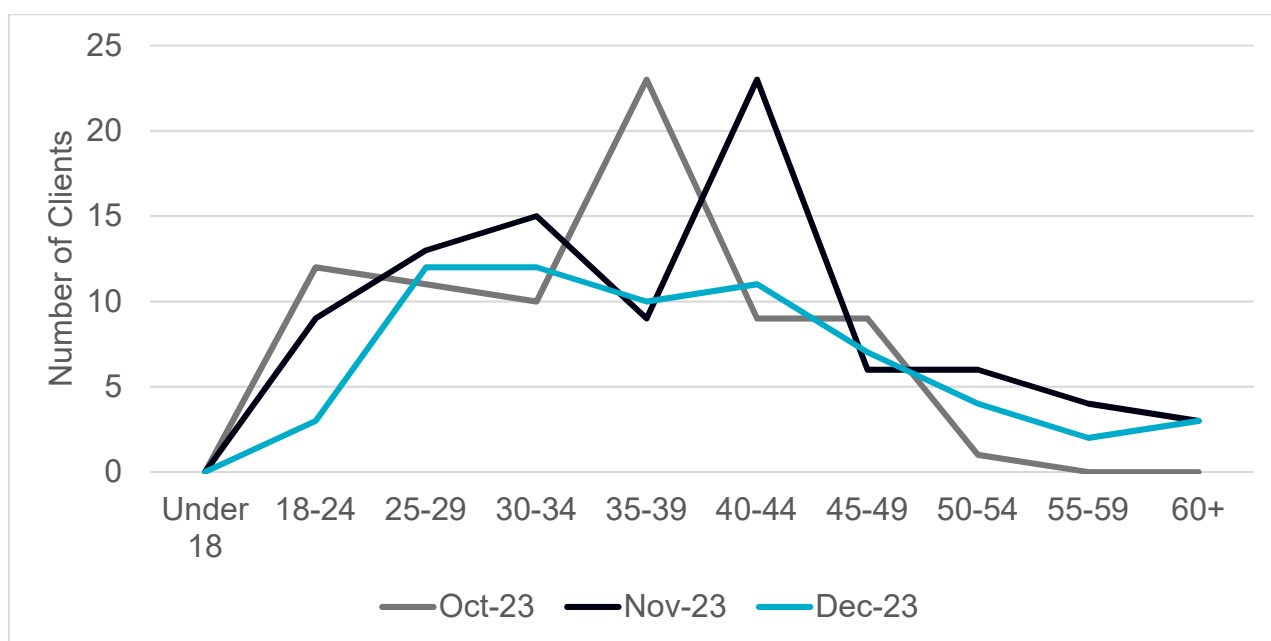
- 949 NSES transactions completed;
- 583 Unique clients using NSES;
- 227 new clients registered for NSES;
- 22 anonymous transactions completed.

All 949 transactions within the NHSCT area were carried out by Community Pharmacy.

### NSES User Profile

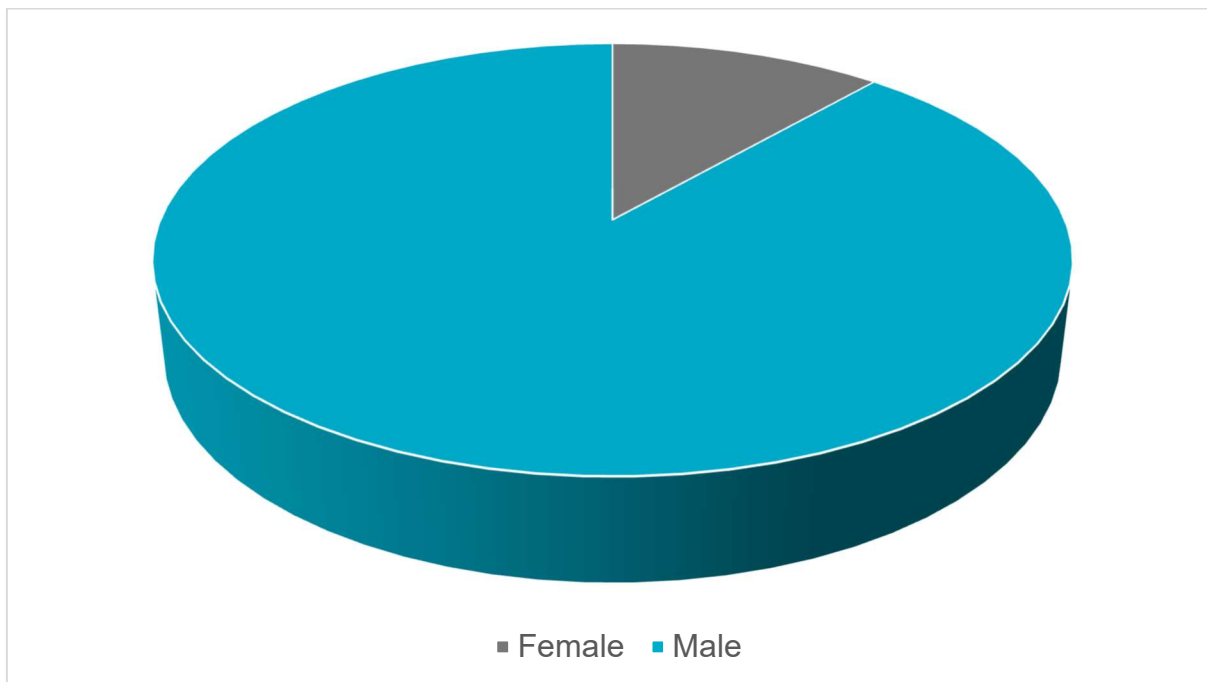
The age and gender profile of the 227 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 11 and 12.

**Figure 11: Current Age of Clients in NHSCT registered in reporting period**



The most common overall age group of client in NHSCT was age 40-44 years. This reflects a slightly older age group of new clients as previous quarters have shown 35-39 years at the most popular age group in NHSCT.

**Figure 12: Gender of Clients at registration in NHSCT**



The majority of new clients registered were male (88.5%).

**Figure 13: Recorded Substance Used by transaction in NHSCT**

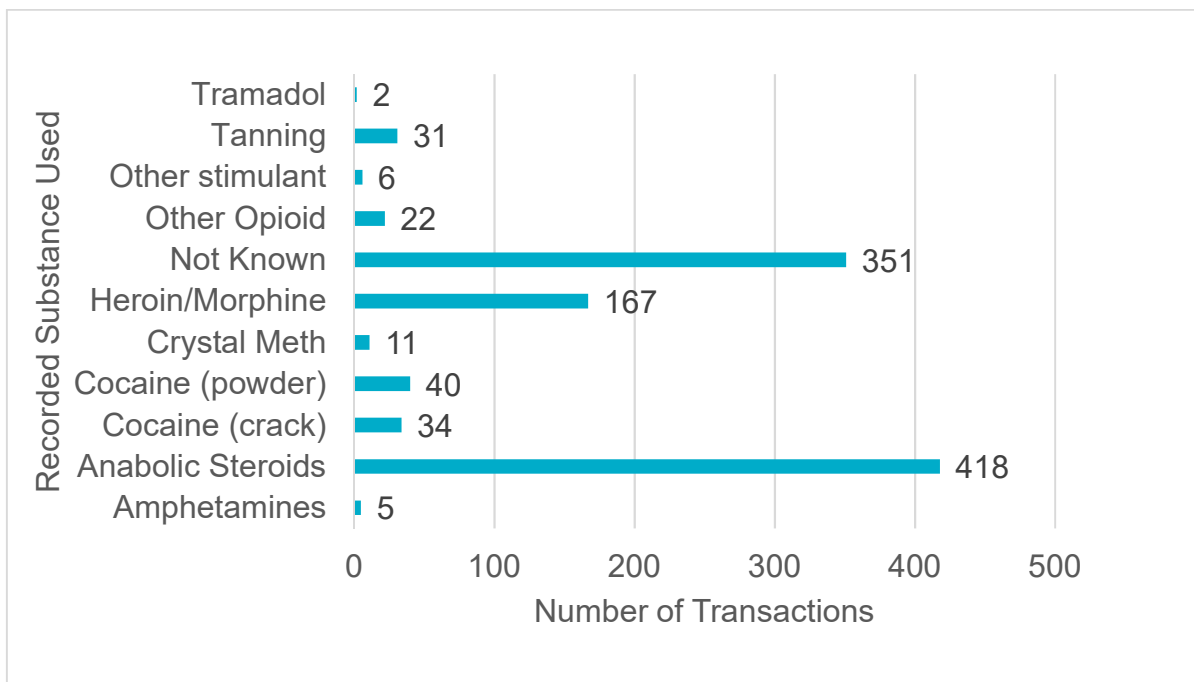


Figure 13 reflects that of the 949 transactions in this reporting period, 1,087 reports of substance used were recorded across 10 substances. This includes those selecting the ‘unknown’ category which remains very high at 351 (32.3%) of reports.

The largest recorded substance used in needle exchange was anabolic steroids (418), followed by heroin/morphine (167), followed by cocaine powder (40). This remains the same from previous quarters.

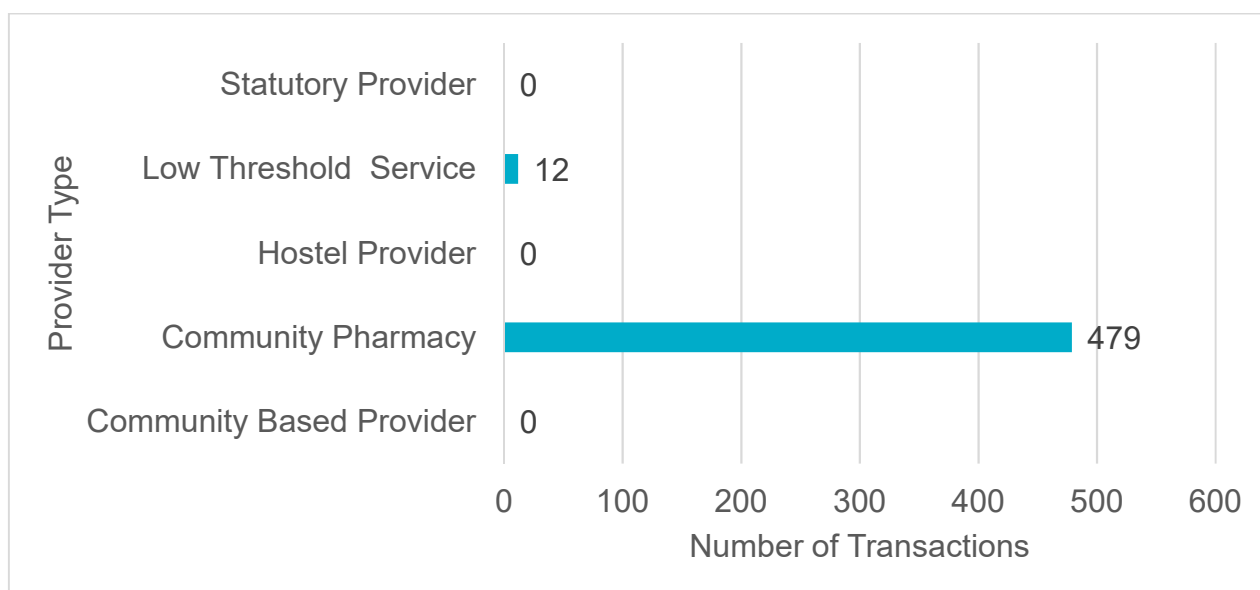


## Section 5: South-Eastern Health and Social Care Trust Area NSES Data

In the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust Area (SEHSCT) within the reporting period there were:

- 491 NSES transactions completed;
- 356 unique clients using NSES;
- 136 new clients registered for NSES;
- 4 anonymous transactions completed.

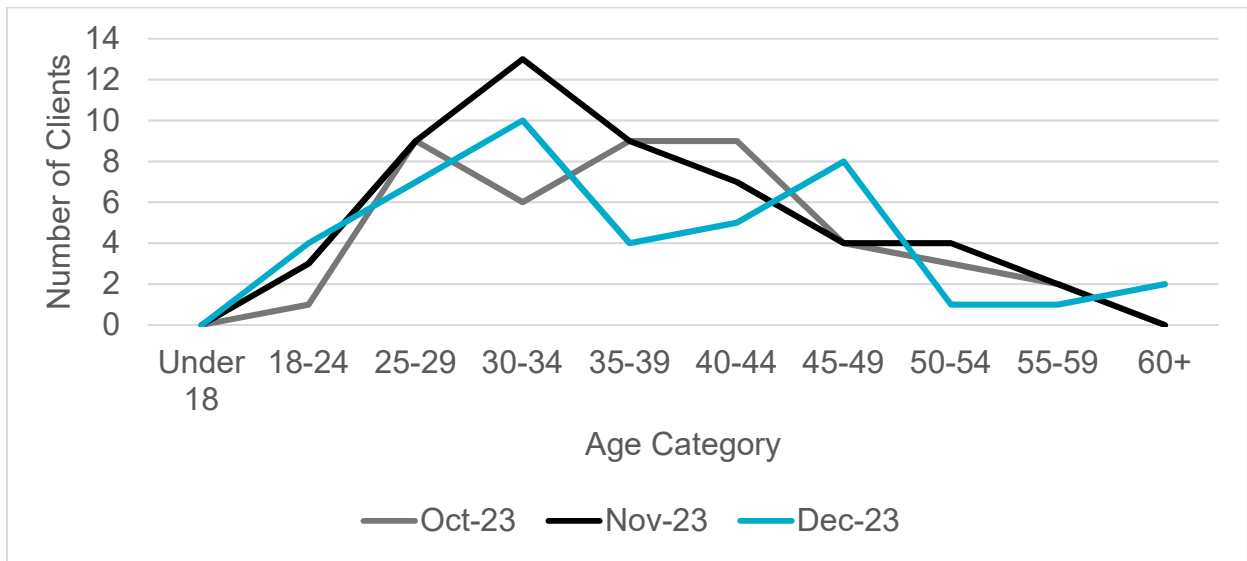
**Figure 14: Number of Transactions per provider type for SEHSCT**



### NSES User Profile

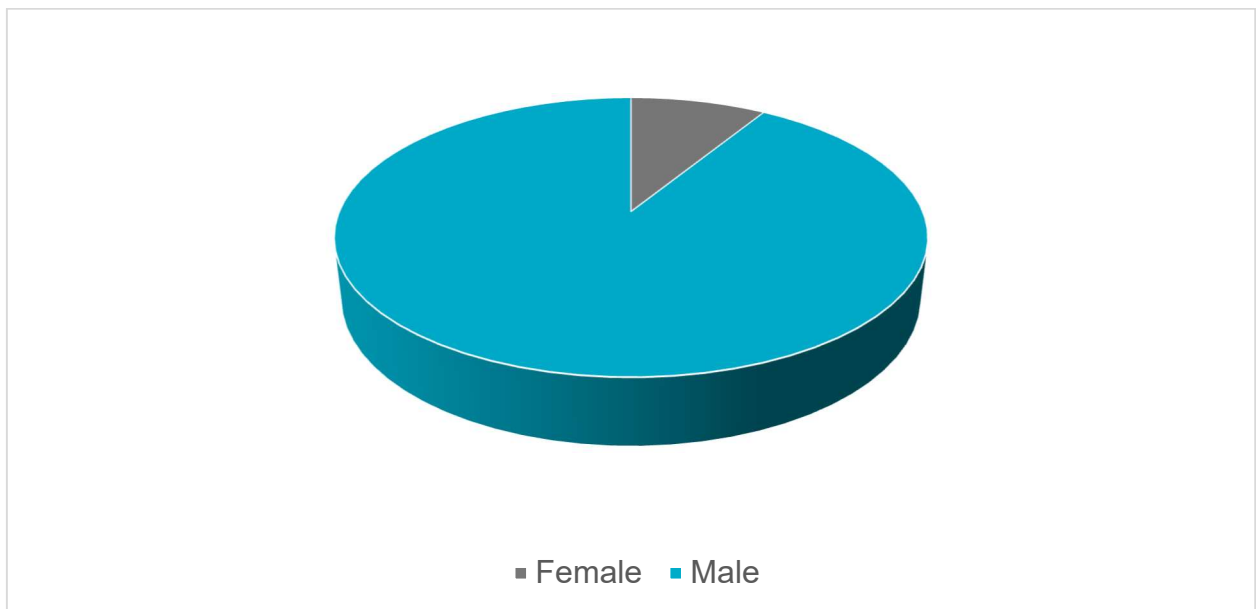
The age and gender profile of the 136 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 15 and 16.

**Figure 15: Current Age of Clients in SEHSCT registered in reporting period**



The most common overall age group of clients in SEHSCT was age 30-34 years.

**Figure 16: Gender of Clients at registration in SEHSCT**



The majority of new clients registered were male (91.1%).

**Figure 17: Recorded Substance Used by transaction in SEHSCT**

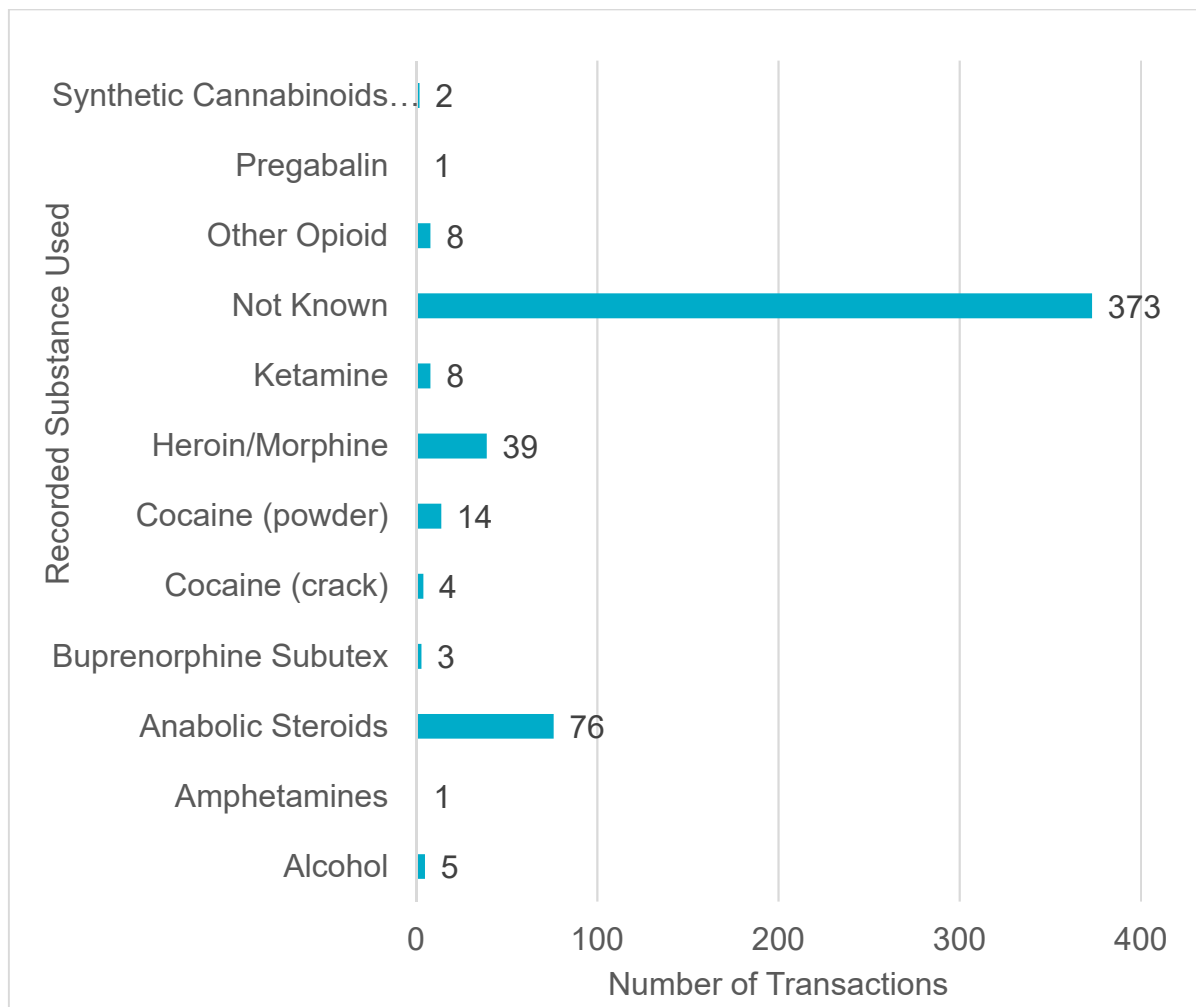


Figure 17 reflects that of the 491 transactions in this reporting period, 534 reports of substance used were recorded across 11 substances. This includes those selecting the 'unknown' category which was 373 times (70%).

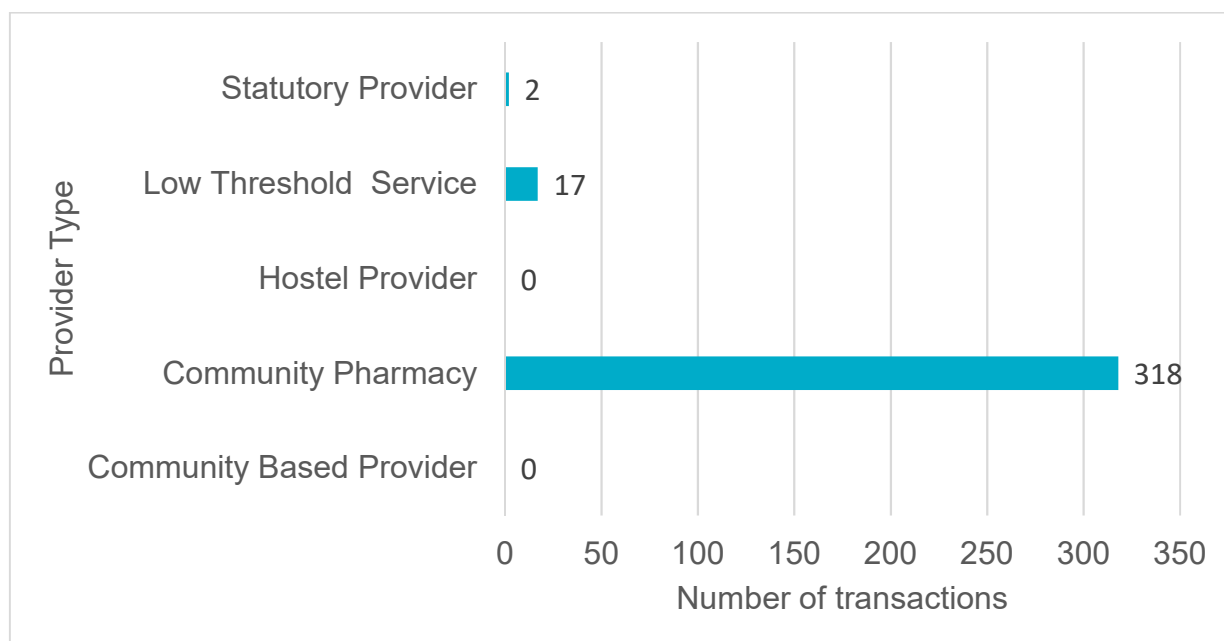
Of those who did report, anabolic steroids (76) was the most reported substance followed by morphine/heroin (39) and cocaine powder (14). The report indicates that the use of Ketamine and other opioid (8) have doubled from the previous quarter, though the numbers remain small and due to the high proportion of unknown entries it is difficult to analyse this in depth.

## Section 6: Southern Health and Social Care Trust Area NSES Data

In the Southern Health and Social Care Trust Area (SHSCT) within the reporting period there were:

- 337 NSES transactions completed;
- 226 unique clients using NSES;
- 85 new clients registered for NSES;
- 7 anonymous transactions completed.

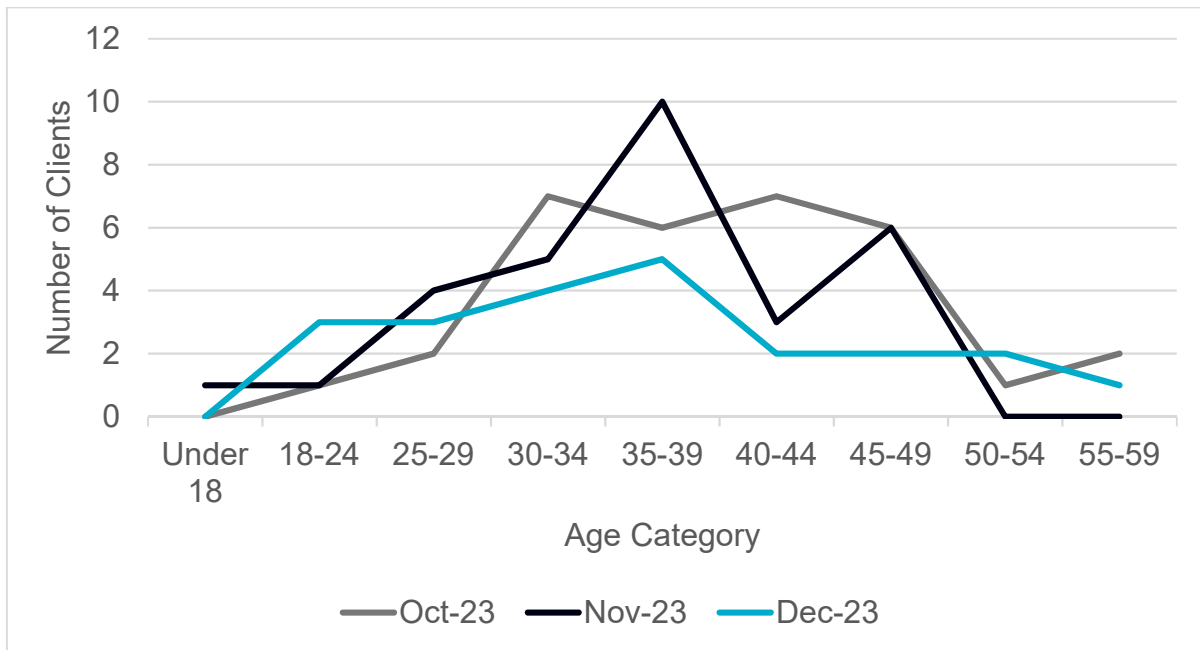
**Figure 18: Number of Transactions per Provider type in NSES for SHSCT area**



### NSES User Profile

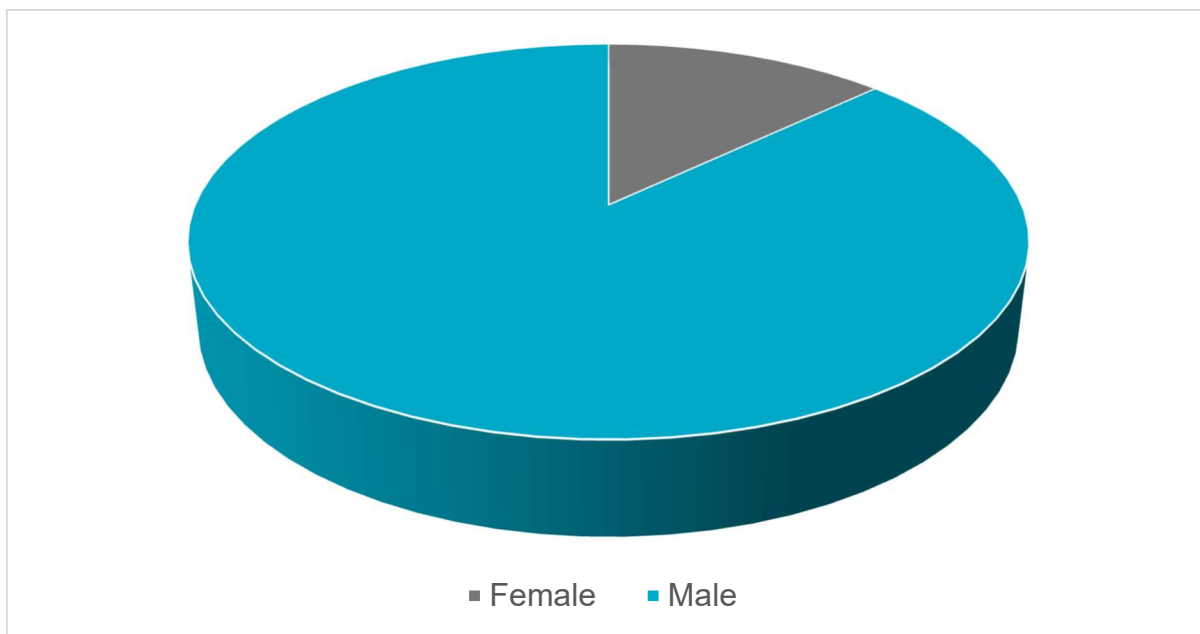
The age and gender profile of the 85 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 19 and 20.

**Figure 19: Current Age of Clients in SHSCT registered in reporting period**



The most common overall age group of client in SHSCT was age 35-39 years.

**Figure 20: Gender of Clients at registration in SHSCT**



The majority of new clients registered were male (87.1%).

**Figure 21: Recorded Substance Used by transaction in SHSCT**

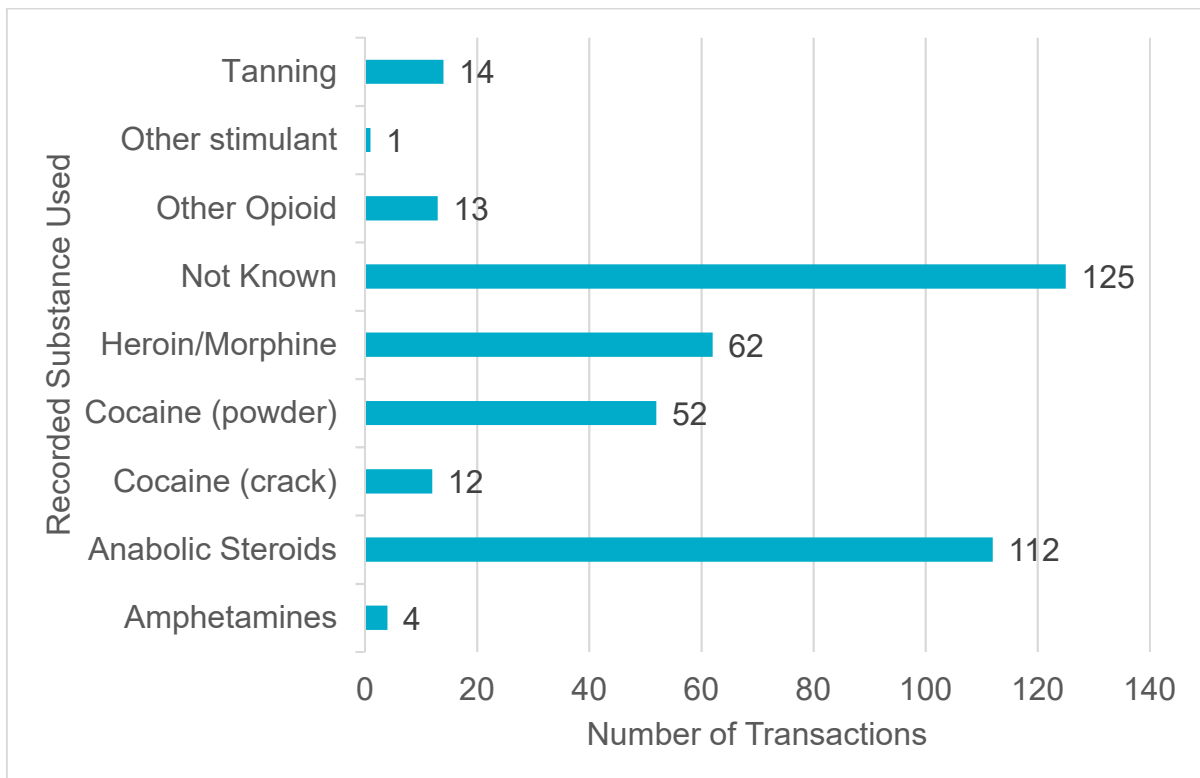


Figure 21 reflects that of the 337 transactions in this reporting period, 395 reports of substance used were recorded across 8 substances. This includes those selecting the 'unknown' category which was selected 125 times (32%).

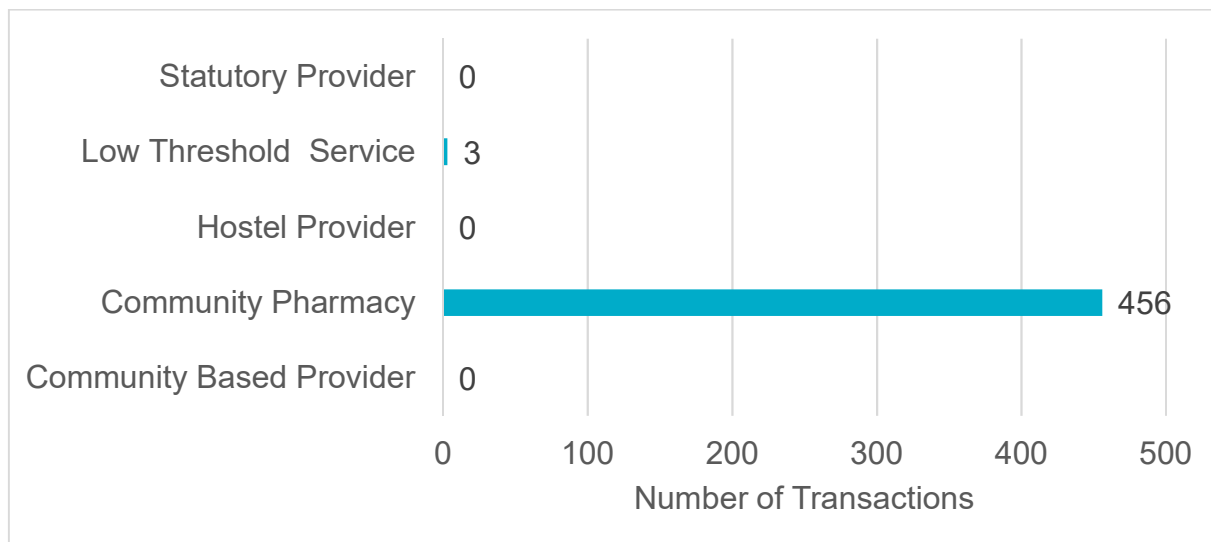
The largest substance recorded was anabolic steroids (112) followed by heroin/morphine (62) and cocaine powder (52).

## Section 7: Western Health and Social Care Trust Area NSES Data

In the Western Health and Social Care Trust Area (WHSCT) within the reporting period there were:

- 459 NSES transactions completed;
- 337 unique clients using NSES;
- 165 new clients registered for NSES;
- 4 anonymous transactions completed.

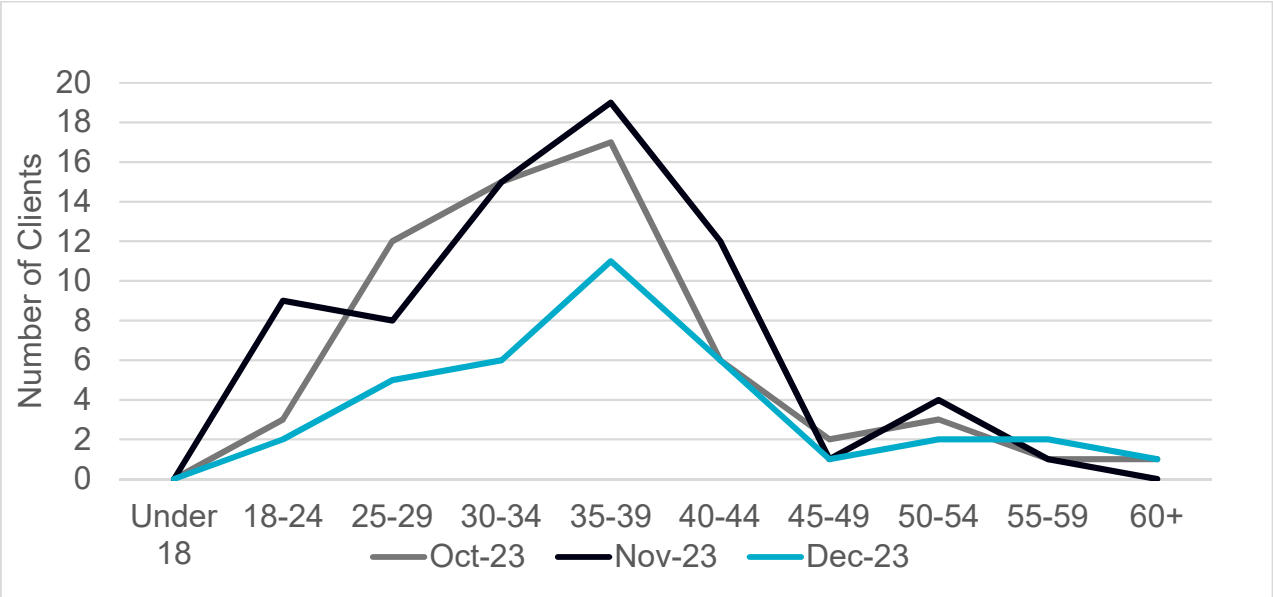
**Figure 22: Number of Transactions per provider type for WHSCT**



### NSES User Profile

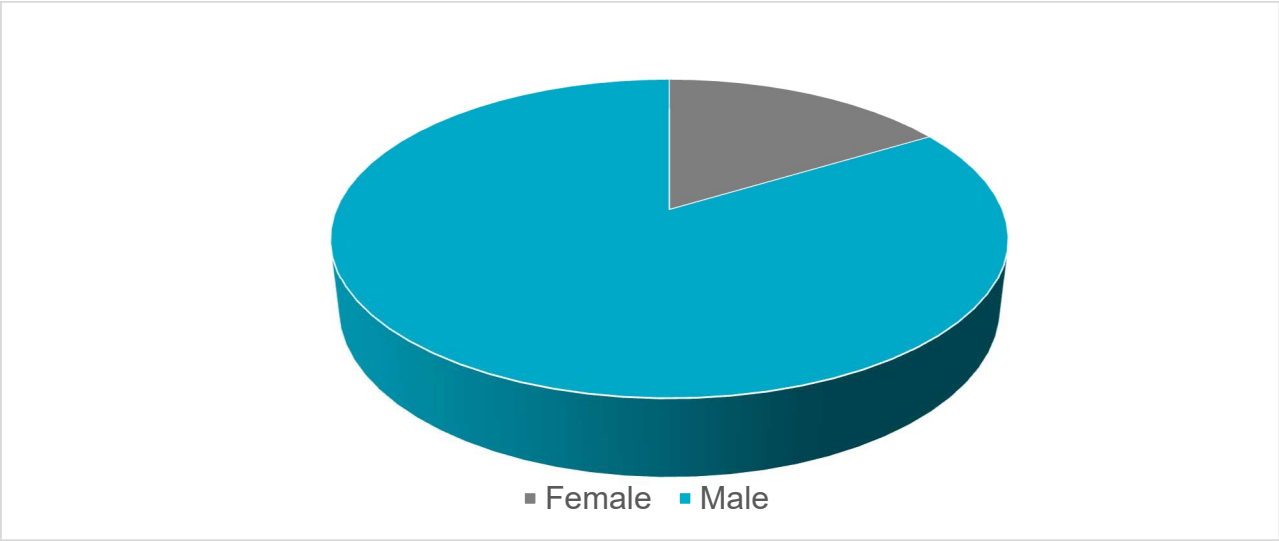
The age and gender profile of the 165 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 23 and 24.

**Figure 23: Current Age of Clients in WHSCT registered in reporting period**



Overall the most common age category in the WHSCT area was 35-39 years.

**Figure 24: Gender of new Clients at registration in WHSCT**



The majority of clients were male (84%) within the WHSCT area.



**Figure 25: Recorded Substance Used by transaction in WHSCT area**

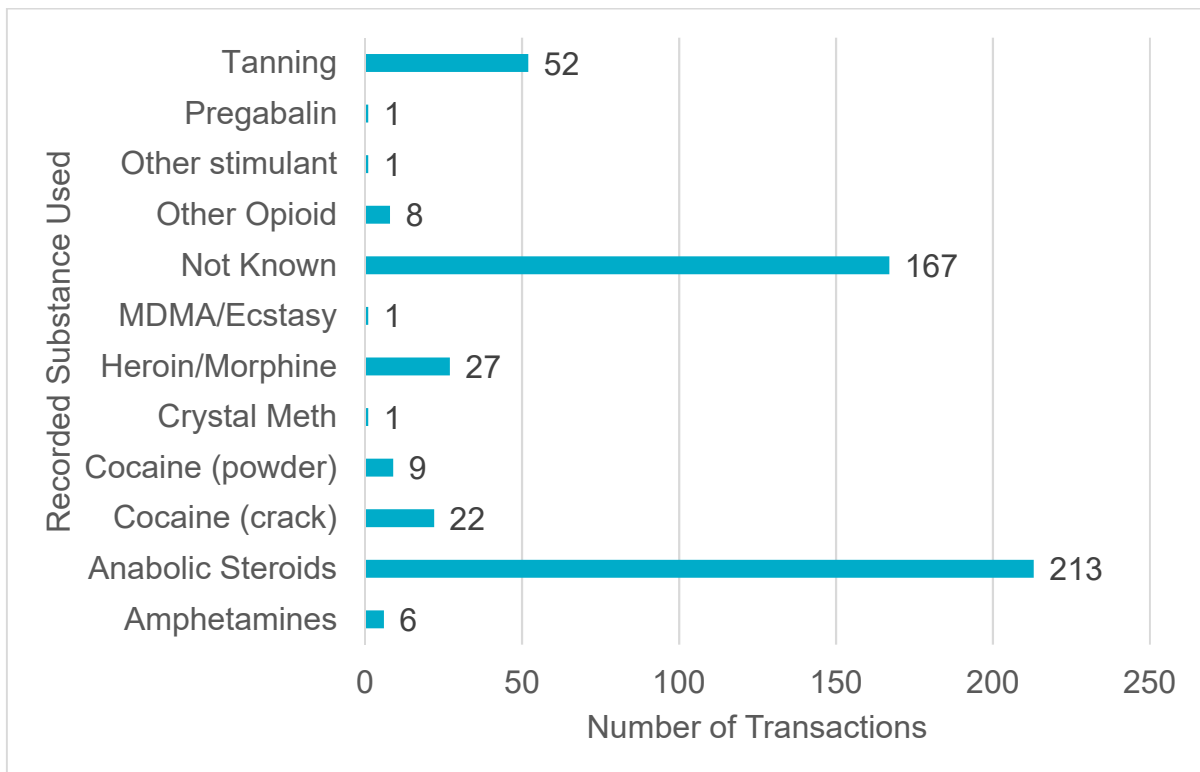


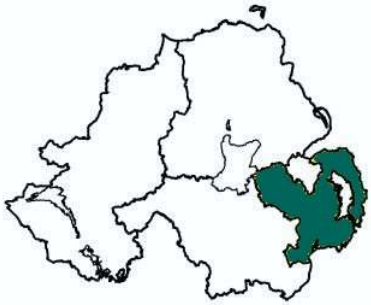


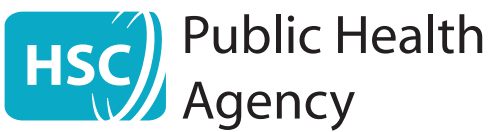


Figure 25 reflects that of the 459 transactions in this reporting period, 508 reports of substance used were recorded across 11 substances. This includes those selecting the 'unknown' category which accounted for 167 reports (32.9%).

The largest recorded substance usage in needle exchange was anabolic steroids (213) followed by tanning (52) and heroin/morphine (51).

## Section 8: Summary of NSES activity by Trust Area

<p><b>Belfast HSC Trust</b></p>  <p>Number of unique clients: 1397 Percentage male: 82%</p> <p>Most commonly reported Drugs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Cocaine Powder</li> <li>2. Heroin/Morphine</li> <li>3. Anabolic Steroids</li> </ol> <p>Lead Sector: Community Based Providers</p>	<p><b>Northern HSC Trust</b></p>  <p>Number of unique clients: 583 Percentage male: 89%</p> <p>Most commonly reported Drugs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Anabolic Steroids</li> <li>2. Heroin/Morphine</li> <li>3. Cocaine Powder</li> </ol> <p>Lead Sector: Community Pharmacy</p>	<p><b>South Eastern HSC Trust</b></p>  <p>Number of unique clients: 356 Percentage male: 91%</p> <p>Most commonly reported Drugs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Anabolic Steroids</li> <li>2. Heroin/Morphine</li> <li>3. Cocaine Powder</li> </ol> <p>Lead Sector: Community Pharmacy</p>
<p><b>Southern HSC Trust</b></p>  <p>Number of unique clients: 226 Percentage male: 87%</p> <p>Most commonly reported Drugs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Anabolic Steroids</li> <li>2. Heroin/Morphine</li> <li>3. Cocaine Powder</li> </ol> <p>Lead Sector: Community Pharmacy</p>	<p><b>Western HSC Trust</b></p>  <p>Number of unique clients: 337 Percentage male: 84%</p> <p>Most commonly reported Drugs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Anabolic Steroids</li> <li>2. Tanning Solution</li> <li>3. Heroin/Morphine</li> </ol> <p>Lead Sector: Community Pharmacy</p>	



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