



Annual Report **for Needle Exchange** **for 2023**

1 January 2023 – 31 December 2023

Title	Northern Ireland Needle and Syringe Exchange Quarterly Report. 1 January 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 Service (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 substance use. Thirty-five 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 between 1 January 2023 and 31 December 2023.

In 2023 there have been:

- 6,353 new clients registered on Neo360 to use the needle exchange service
- 7,320 unique clients accessing the needle exchange service. Please note that due to the number of clients re-registering on the system this number is inflated.
- 1,277 clients are crossing Trust boundaries to access needle exchange services
- 7 new exchanges have opened
- 98 needle exchange staff have completed the NSES mandatory practitioners training.

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 January 2023 and 31 December 2023, the Public Health Agency had the following sites providing NSES

Table 1: Service Provider by Trust Area

Trust Area	Provider	Provider Type
Belfast	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
Northern	Boots, Ballymena Health Centre	Pharmacy
	Boots, Antrim	Pharmacy
	Boots, Coleraine	Pharmacy
	Boots, Cookstown	Pharmacy
	Boots, Newtownabbey	Pharmacy
	Boots, Queen's Street Ballymena	Pharmacy
	NHSCT Community Addiction Service	Community Addiction Team
	Extern	Low Threshold Service
Southern	Extern	Low Threshold Service
	Boots, Armagh	Pharmacy
	Gordons, Banbridge	Pharmacy
	McKeagneys, Newry	Pharmacy
	Northern Pharmacies, Craigavon	Pharmacy
	Partridges, Lurgan	Pharmacy
	Thomas Street Pharmacy Plus	Pharmacy
	Inclusion Health Service	Statutory Provider
South Eastern	The Simon Community	Low Threshold Service
	Clear Pharmacy, Bangor	Pharmacy
	Gordons, Downpatrick	Pharmacy
	Gordons, Lisburn	Pharmacy
	Gordons, Newtownards	Pharmacy
Western	Foyle Haven, DePaul Ireland	Low Threshold Service
	Bradleys, Derry/Londonderry	Pharmacy
	Bradleys, Enniskillen	Pharmacy
	Gordons, Limavady	Pharmacy
	Mourne Pharmacy, Strabane	Pharmacy
	Superdrug, Derry/Londonderry	Pharmacy

Section 2: Regional NSES Data Review

NSES Transactions

From 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023 there were a total of **31,851 NSES transactions** carried out across Northern Ireland.

Table 2 reflects the total number of transactions completed per year. Please note that previously the report was completed by financial year (1 April to 31 March), however, since the implementation of the digital recording system reports are now completed by calendar year. Please also see that we have two years where data was not analysed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 2: Number of transactions per year

Year	No of visits/Transactions
2017-2018	30,065
2018-2019	33,992
2019-2020	34,464
2020-2021	No data available
2021-2022	No data available
2022-2023	34,989
1 Jan 2023 to 31 Dec 2023	31,851

This table reflects that the quantity of exchanges has decreased over the last number of years, however, the quantity of equipment being dispensed continues to increase suggesting that clients obtain more equipment per transaction.

Overleaf, Figure 1 reflects that the community pharmacies completed 50.4% of the overall transactions for the reporting period, followed closely by the community-based providers completing 46% of the total transactions.

Figure 1: Number of NSES transactions by Provider Type

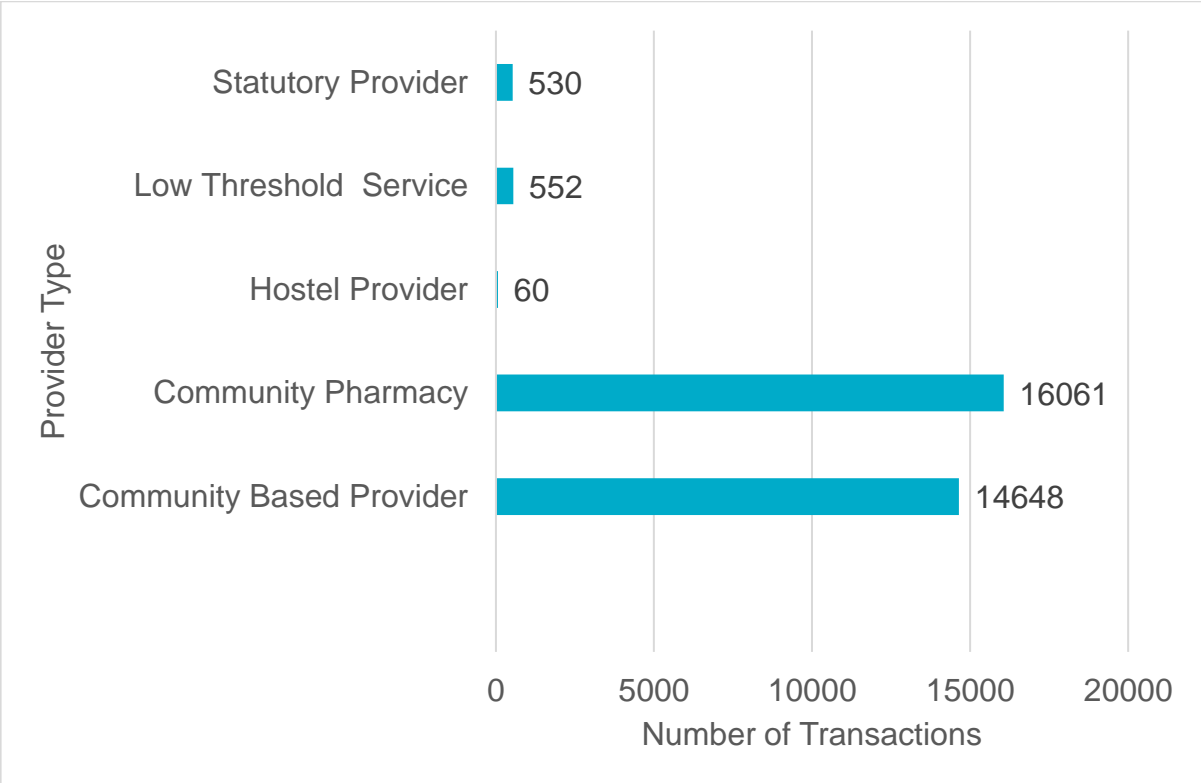
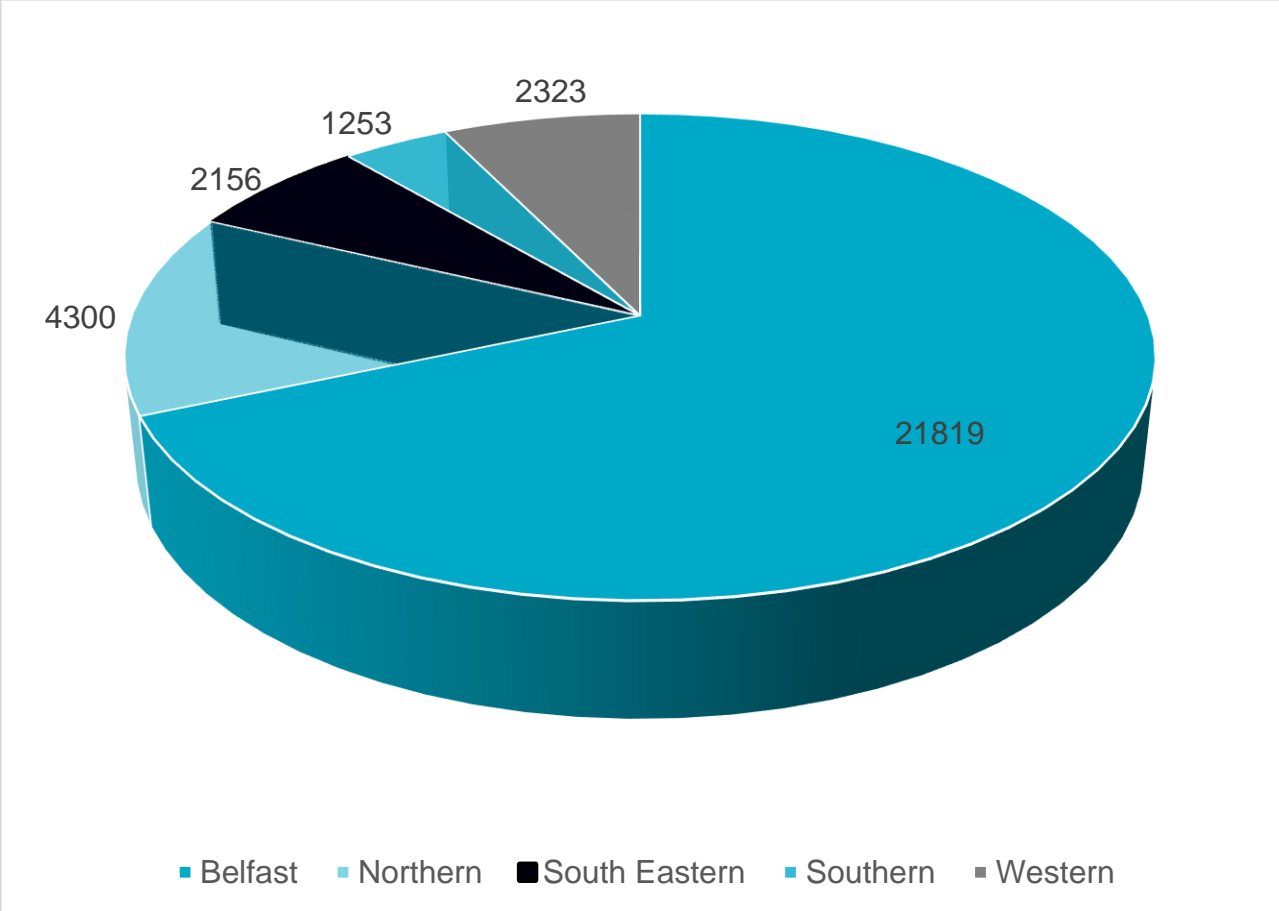


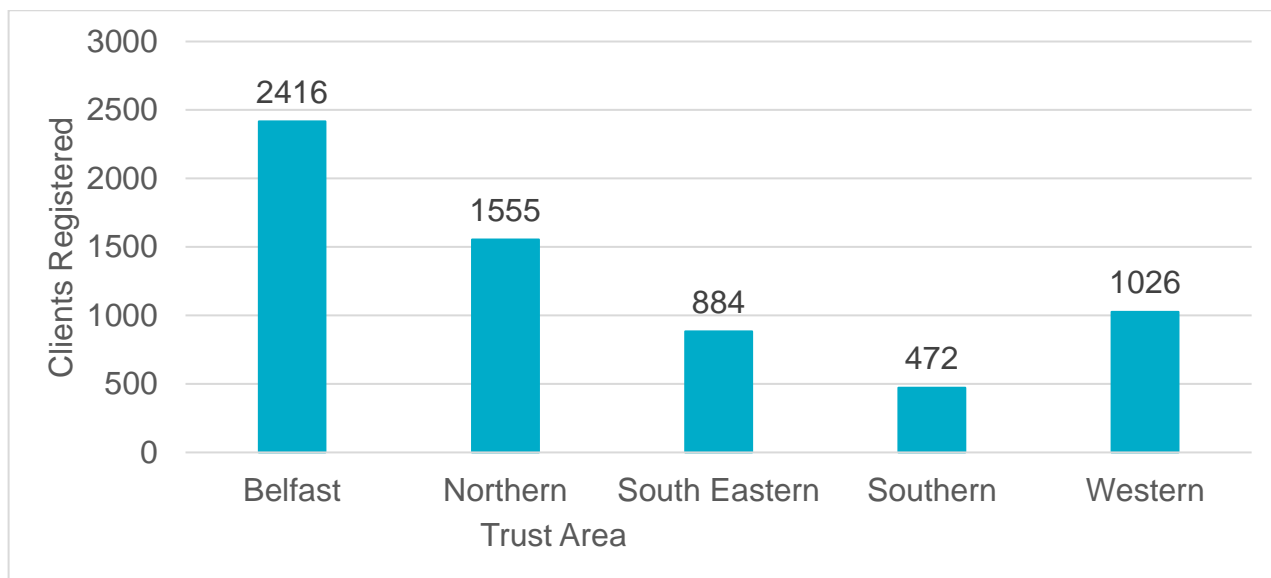
Figure 2: Number of transactions by each Health and Social Care Trust area



The highest number of overall transactions continue to take place in the BHSCT area (68.5%) and the lowest percentage of transactions continue to take place in the SHSCT area (3.9%). This year we have targeted the SHSCT area and opened a total of 4 new exchanges to improve coverage in this Trust area.

There is substantial variation among how many clients are registered by Trust area.

Figure 3: Number of Clients Registered by Trust in reporting period

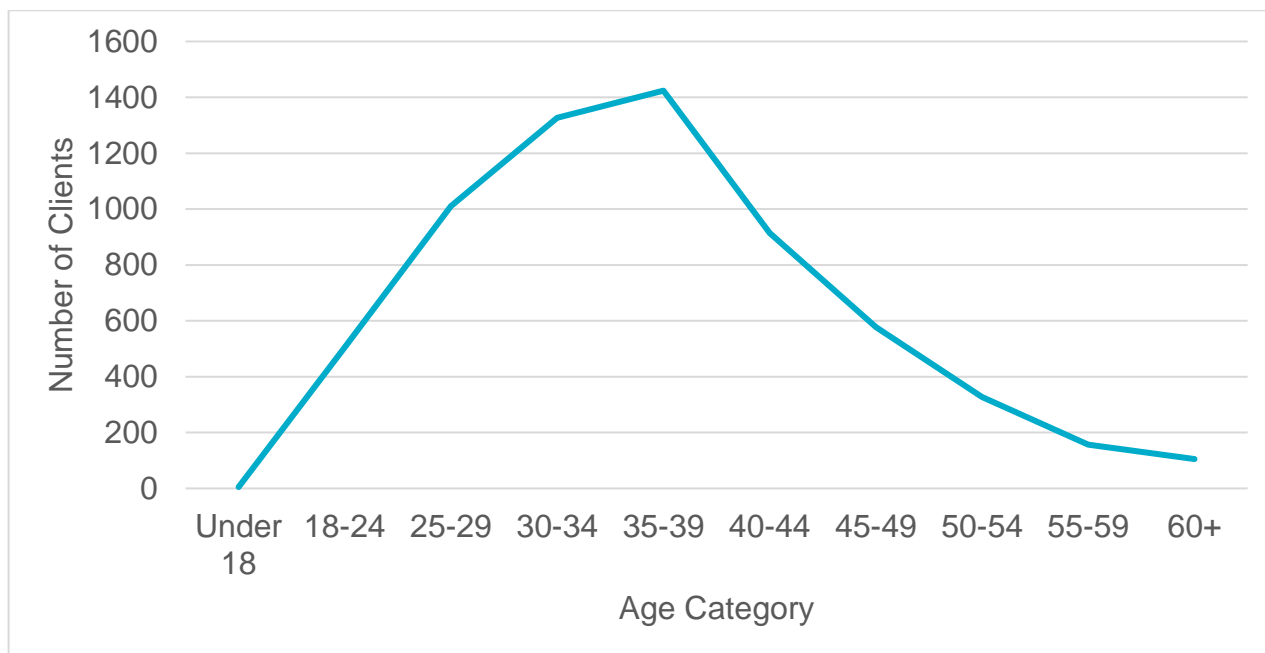


The Belfast Trust has 2,416 clients registered which is 38% of the total new clients registered. The lowest number of clients registered was within the Southern Trust which has 472 clients registered (7.4% of total new clients registered).

NSES User Profile

The age and gender profile of the 6,353 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 4 and 5.

Figure 4: Current Age of new Clients registered in reporting period



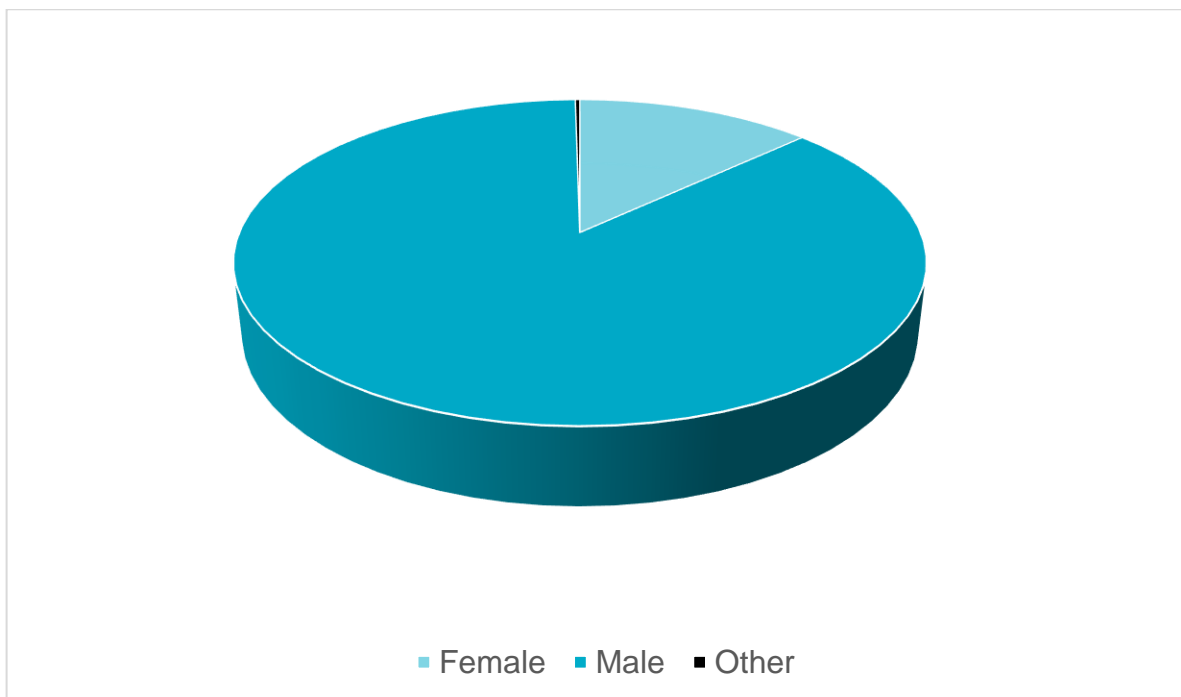
The most common age category for new clients is 35-39 years, followed by those aged 30-34 years.

Table 3 below reflects that in previous years 31-40 years was also the most common age group also. Age categories are collated slightly differently within the new system and therefore are not included in this table.

Table 3: Number of transactions by age category from 2016 to 2020

Year	Under 18	18-25	26-30	31 and Over	41-50	51+	Not Recorded
2016/17	7	5,289	6,809	17,018	Age Category not included in report	Age Category not included in report	160
2017/2018	6	5,244	7,028	11,790	4,881	927	189
2018/2019	0	5,079	7,833	13,821	5,767	1,295	197
2019/2020	0	4,774	7,044	15,046	6,312	1,134	154

Figure 5: Gender of Clients at registration



Registration numbers suggest that the NSES is used primarily by males (86.6%).

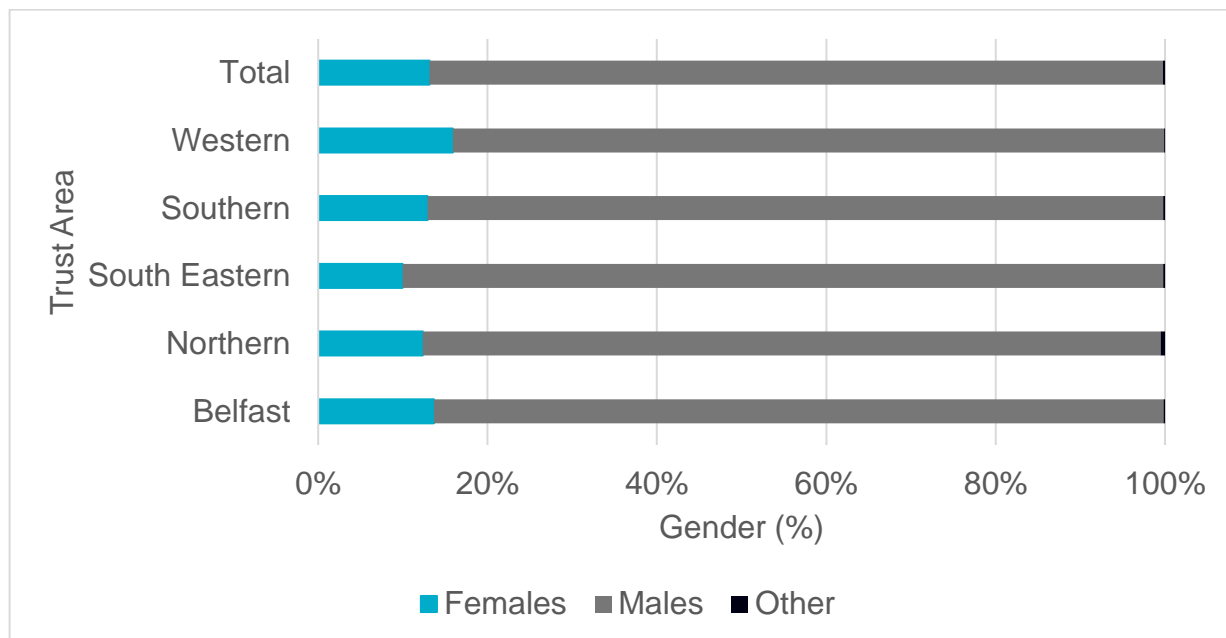
Table 4 reflects that NSES has remained a male dominated service for the last number of years. However, there has been a gradual increase in the number of females accessing the service. In 2016/2017 females completed 14.2% of the transactions and in 2023 females completed 20.1% of the transactions.

Table 4: Number of transactions per year by gender

Gender	2016/2017	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020	2023
Female	4,183 (14.2%)	4,650 (15.4%)	5,209 (15.3%)	5,710 (16.5%)	6,411 (20.1%)
Male	24,903	25,222	28,457	28,205	25,377
Other	197	193	326	549	63
Total	29,283	30,065	33,992	34,464	31,851

Figure 6: Gender (%) of clients by Trust area

Figure 6 shows the gender breakdown by Trust of clients registering for needle exchange. Western Trust area reflects the largest number of female clients and the South Eastern Trust area reflects the largest number of male clients. Within the final quarter of the year the number of females accessing needle exchange in the Belfast area increased by 5 percentage points from 12% to 17%.



Recorded Substance Used

Overleaf, Figure 7 shows the reported substances used by clients for each transaction. Clients may have reported more than one substance in response to this question.

Figure 7: Reported Substances Used by Transaction

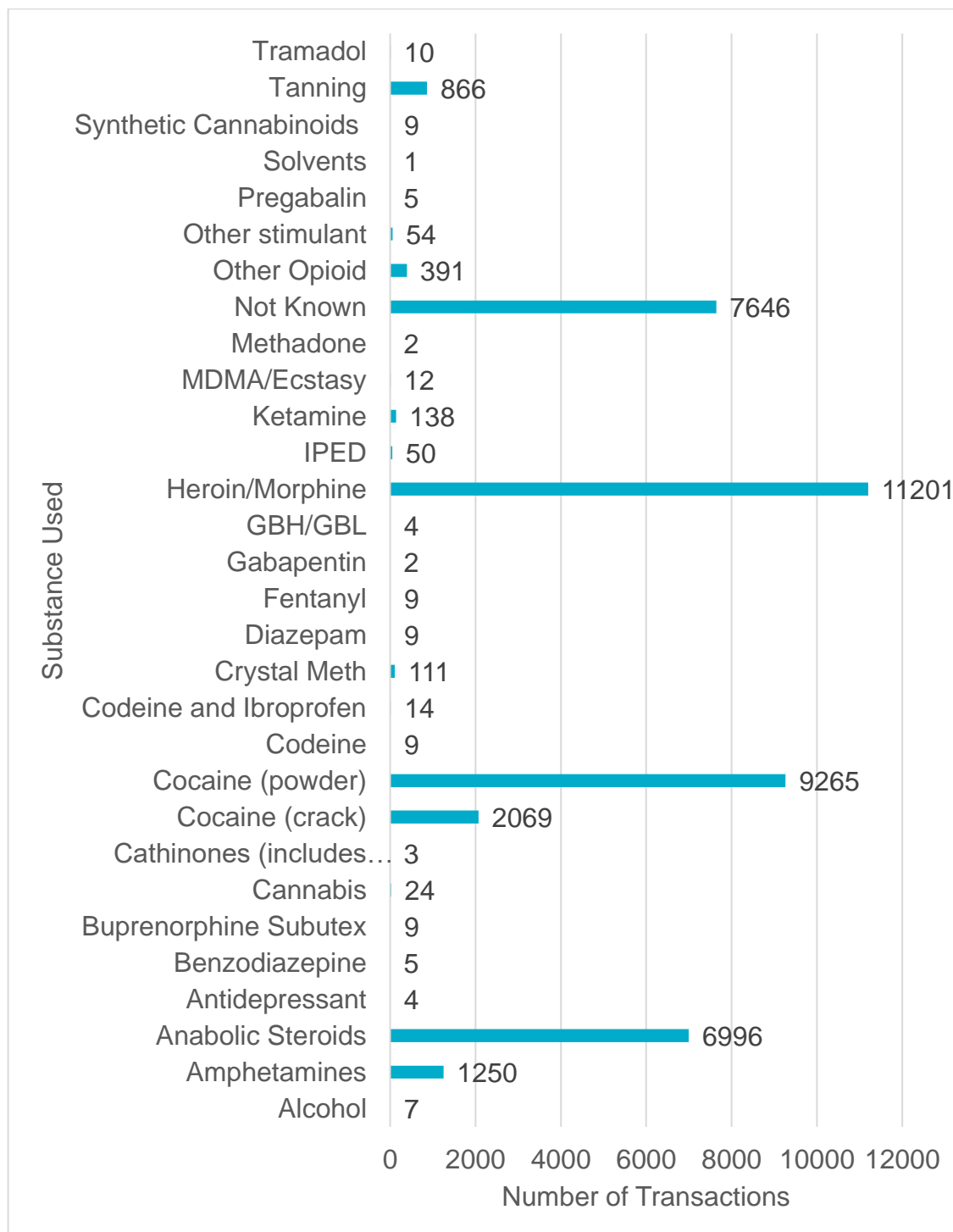


Figure 7 reflects that of the 31,851 transactions in this reporting period, 40,175 reports of substance used were recorded across 29 substances. This includes those selecting the ‘unknown’ category which was 7,646 (19%).

Heroin/morphine (11,201) was reported most frequently needle exchange clients. Cocaine powder (9,265) and anabolic steroids (6,996) are the second and third most frequently reported substances, respectively, across the region. The reported usage of cocaine powder has continued to increase throughout the year. In the final quarter

(October to December 2023) cocaine powder was the most reported substance in the Belfast Trust area for the first time within needle exchange.

Table 5: Number of clients using most reported substances from 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023.

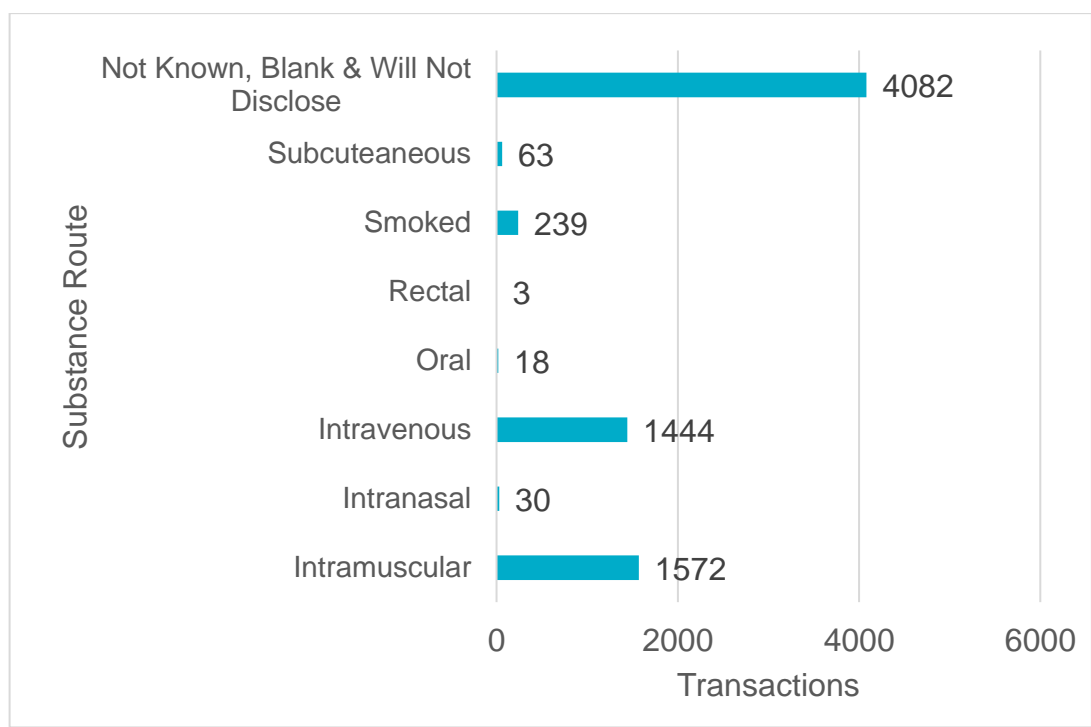
Substance	Number of NSES unique clients using
Anabolic Steroids	2,850
Heroin/Morphine	961
Cocaine (powder)	764

Although heroin/morphine were reported most frequently during transactions, the number of unique clients using anabolic steroids by far exceeded those using heroin/morphine or cocaine powder.

Reported Route of Administration of Substance

Neo360 gives the client the opportunity to report how they administer the substance used. In over half of the transactions this information was not disclosed (54.7%). Intramuscular injecting was the most reported route of administration (21.1%) followed by intravenous injecting (19.3%). Smoking was reported at 239 transactions, foils continue to be dispensed at exchanges to reducing the harm from injecting.

Figure 8: Reported Route of Administration per Transaction



Frequency of Substance Used

In the following section, information is presented to show how frequently clients used the various substances. Heroin/morphine as well as cocaine powder were most frequently used daily and more than once per day. Anabolic steroids were reported to be used most 3-4 times per week, weekly or occasionally.

Table 6: Frequency of use within most reported substances used.

Substance	More than once a day	Daily	3-4 times a week	Weekly	Monthly	Occasionally
Amphetamines	12	12	11	6	1	1
Anabolic Steroids	47	119	290	416	35	231
Cocaine (crack)	16	23	13	5	0	12
Cocaine (powder)	181	176	45	40	10	36
Crystal Meth	0	3	4	0	2	1
Heroin/Morphine	213	242	59	24	6	37
IPED	1	2	2	1	0	0
Other opioid	3	13	4	7	0	6
Other stimulant	0	1	0	4	0	1
Tanning	1	6	21	46	6	21

Please see below a breakdown of the needles dispensed across all needle exchange sites for the reporting period. A total of 648,321 needles and syringes combined were dispensed.

Table 7: Quantity of Needles Dispensed

Category	Item	Total
Needles	16mm [5/8 inch] orange	13,727
Needles	25mm [1 inch] blue	9,791
Needles	25mm [1 inch] orange	16,141
Needles	30mm [1 1/4 inch] blue	144,957
Needles	38mm [1 1/2 inch] black	5,004
Needles	40mm [1 1/2 inch] green	138,437
Syringes	0.5ml Fixed Syringe	152,751
Syringes	1 ml 30G Unisharp fixed	167,513
Total Needles Dispensed		648,321

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 320,264 (49.4%) in total dispensed in the reporting period.

NSES dispenses a 2ml starter pack and 2ml standard pack, 5,834 were dispensed in 2023, 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) 144,957 dispensed and green (40mm) 138,437 dispensed with a total of 283,394 (43.7%) dispensed in the reporting period. These are the largest needles and are used for both groin injecting and also for steroid injecting.

Table 8: Number of Packs issued by community pharmacies

Year	Total Packs
2016/2017	35,573
2017/2018	36,994
2018/2019	41,304
2019/2020	36,944
2020-2021	No data available
2021-2022	No data available
Jan 2023 to Dec 2023	34,143 across all site types including 25,198 within community pharmacy

Table 8 reflects the number of packs dispensed. Previously only community pharmacy pack dispensing was collated and, comparatively, there has been a reduction in the amount of packs dispensed. This could be explained by the introduction of the self-select model which allows clients the opportunity to select from loose equipment, tailoring this to exactly what they need as opposed to pre-made packs.

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. Twenty-three sites dispensed 6,505 packets (20 per pack).

Returns

During the reporting period, 67,483 estimated needles were returned within exchanges.

The table below shows previous data collated on returns. The count was previously done by number of sharps bins returned.

Table 9: Number of sharps bins returned from 2016- 2020

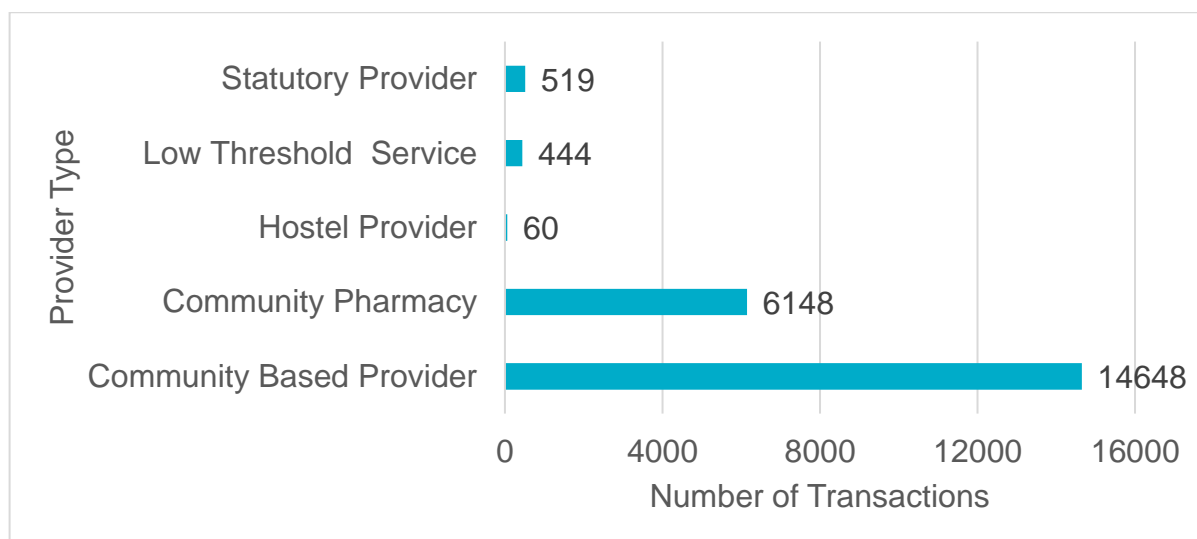
Year	Quantity of bins returned
2016-2017	13,738
2017-2018	14,127
2018-2019	14,620
2019-2020	11,416

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:

- 21,819 NSES transactions completed;
- 3,746 unique clients using NSES;
- 2,416 new clients registered for NSES;
- 520 anonymous transactions completed.

Figure 9: Number of Transactions per Provider Type in BHSCT

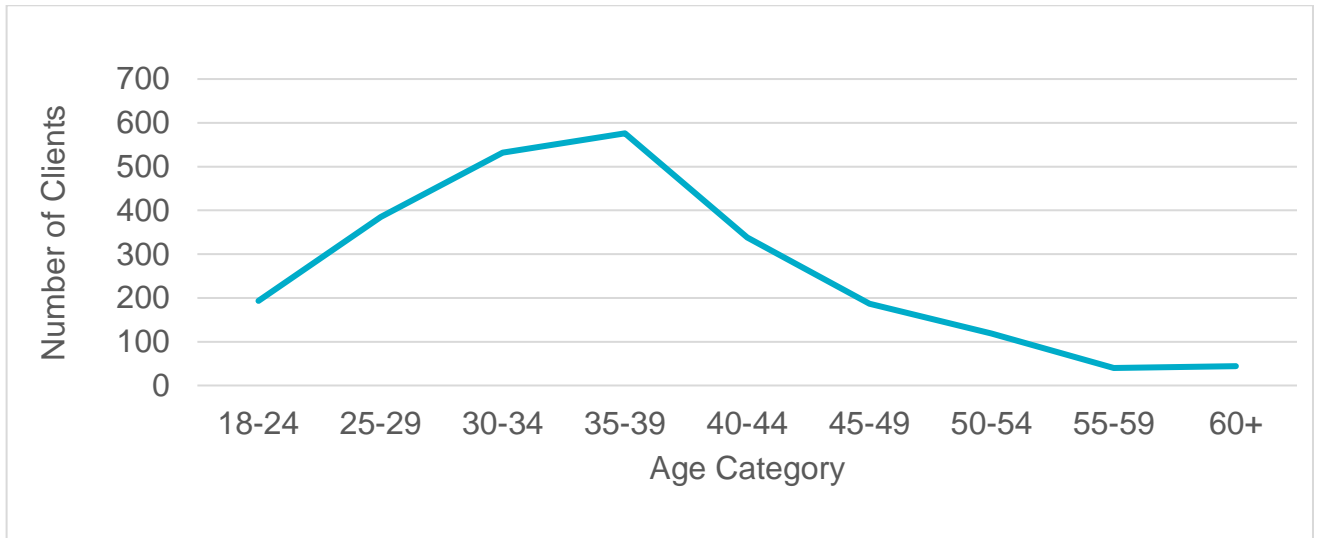


Community based providers completed the highest volume of transactions (67.1%) for the BHSCT.

NSES User Profile

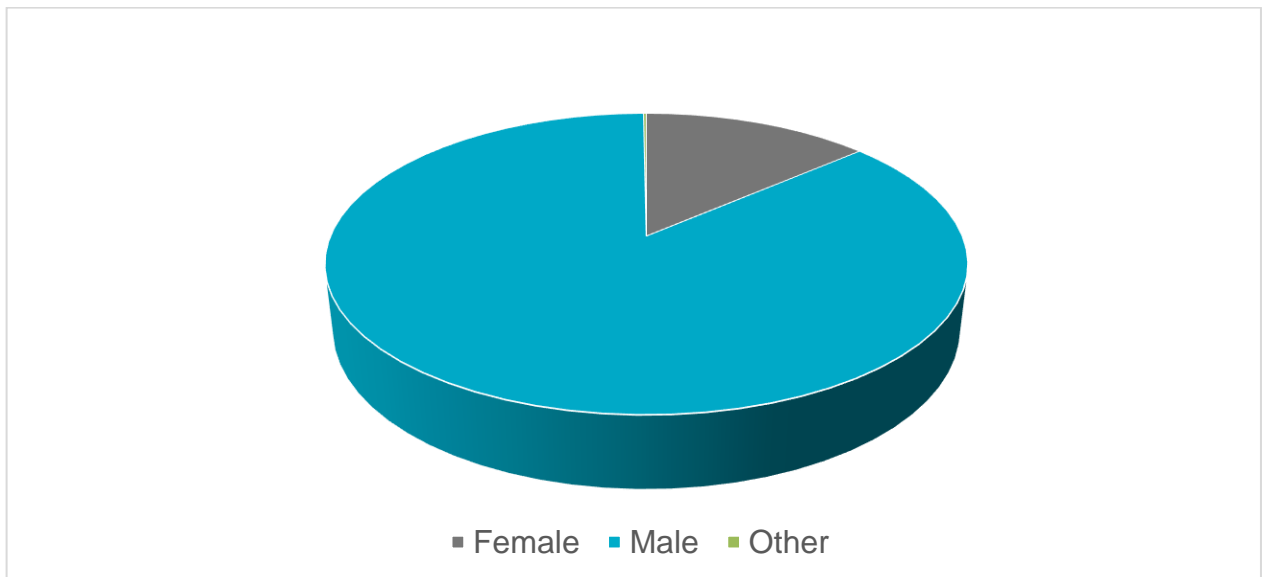
The age and gender profile of the 2,416 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 10 and 11.

Figure 10: Age of Clients at registration in BHSCT



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

Figure 11: Gender of Clients at registration in BHSCT



The majority of new clients registered were male (86.2%).

Figure 12: Recorded Substance Used by transaction in BHSCT

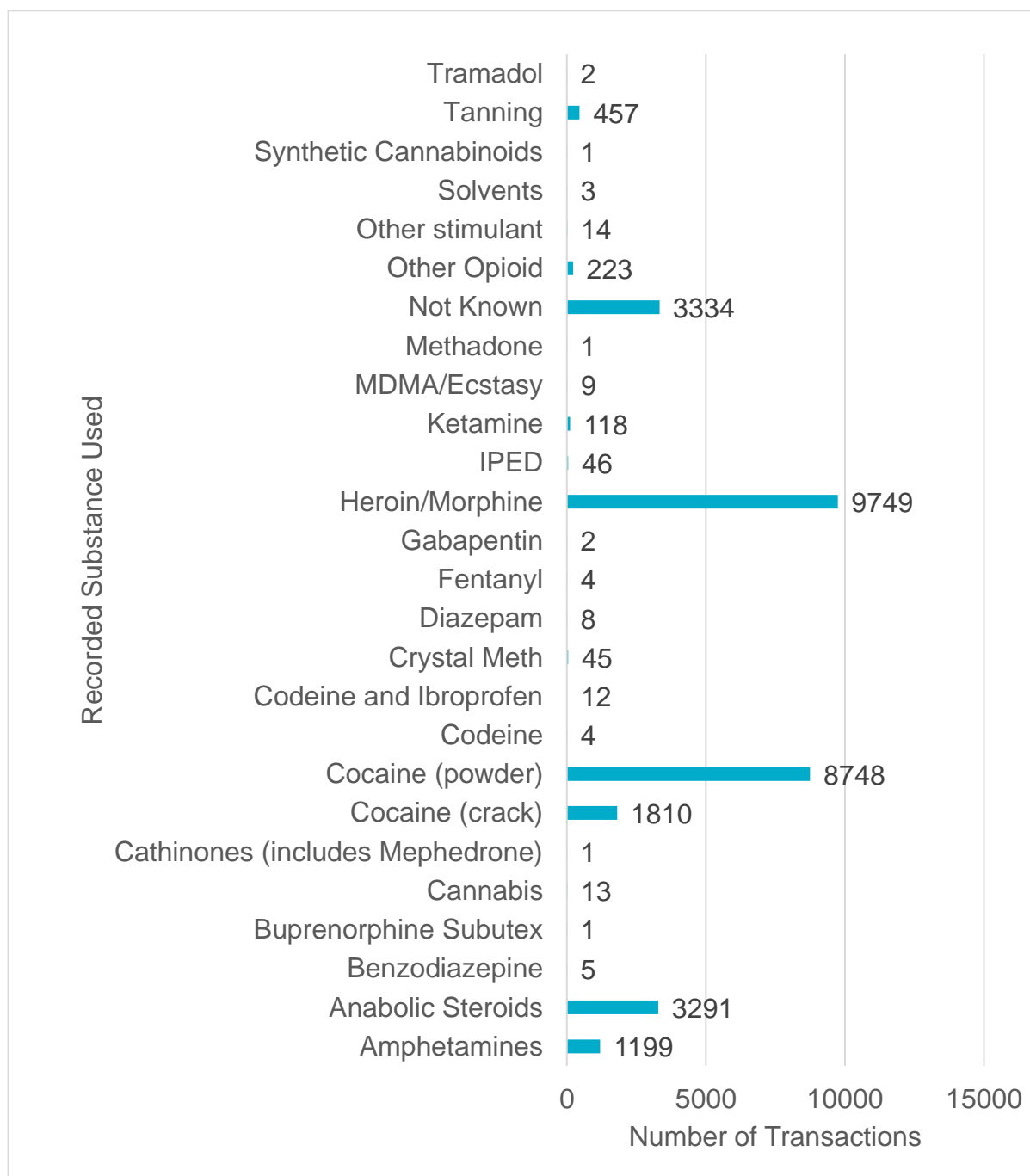


Figure 12 reflects that of the 21,819 transactions in this reporting period, 29,100 reports of substance used were recorded across 25 substances. This includes those selecting the 'unknown' category which was 3,334 (11.5%).

The largest recorded substance used in needle exchange was heroin/morphine (9,749), followed by cocaine powder (8,745) and anabolic steroids (3,291).

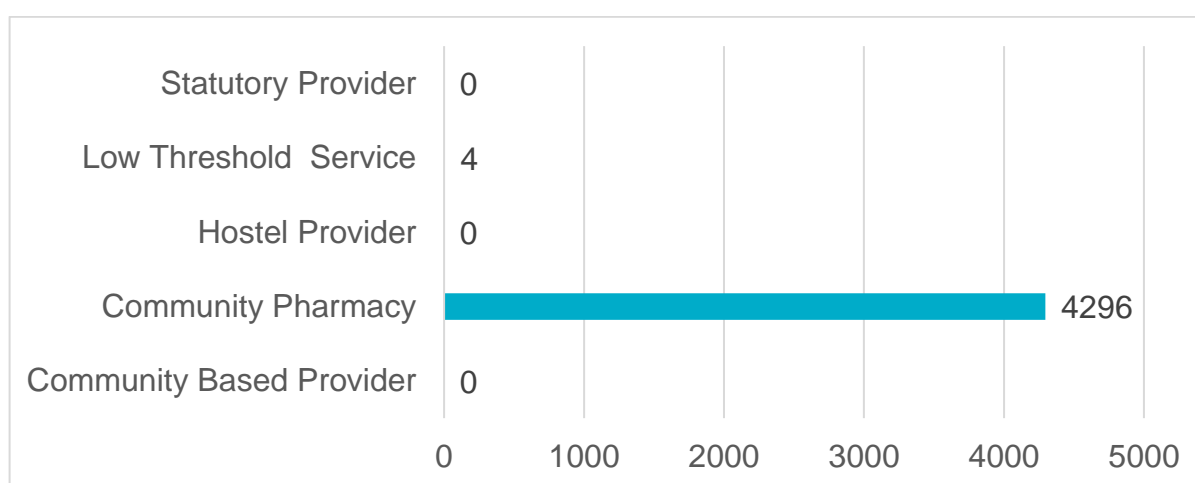
Section 4: Northern Health and Social Care Trust Area NSES Data

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

- 4,300 NSES transactions completed;
- 1,898 unique clients using NSES;
- 1,555 new clients registered for NSES;
- 57 anonymous transactions completed.

Most of the transactions (4,296) within the NHSCT area were carried out by Community Pharmacy.

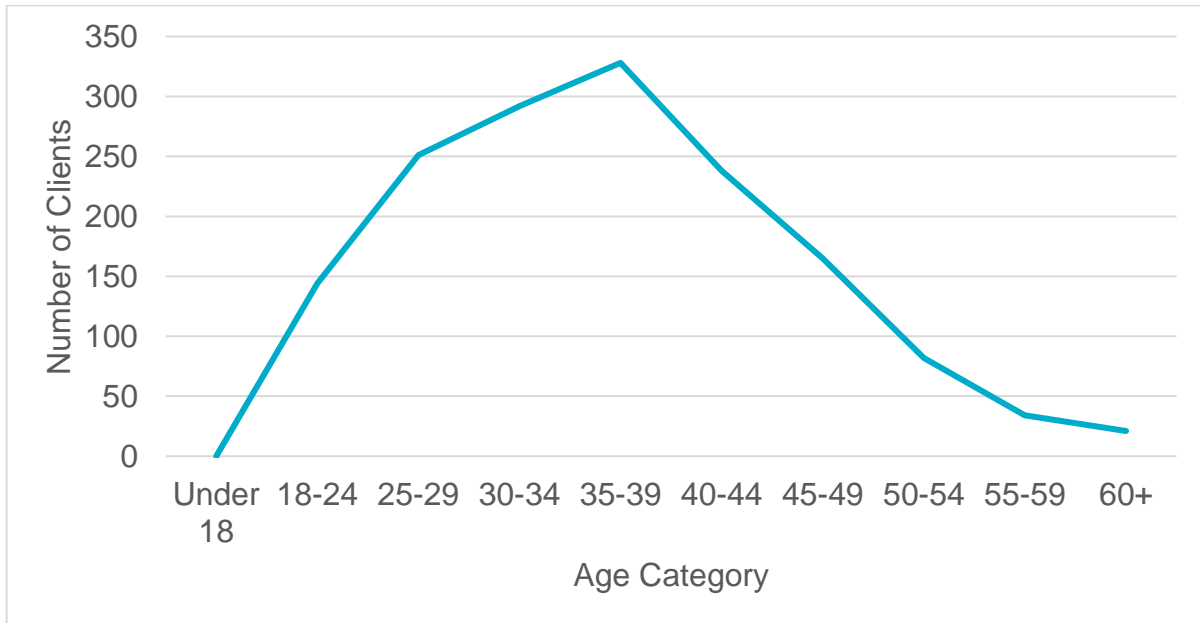
Figure 13: Number of Transactions per Provider Type in NHSCT



NSES User Profile

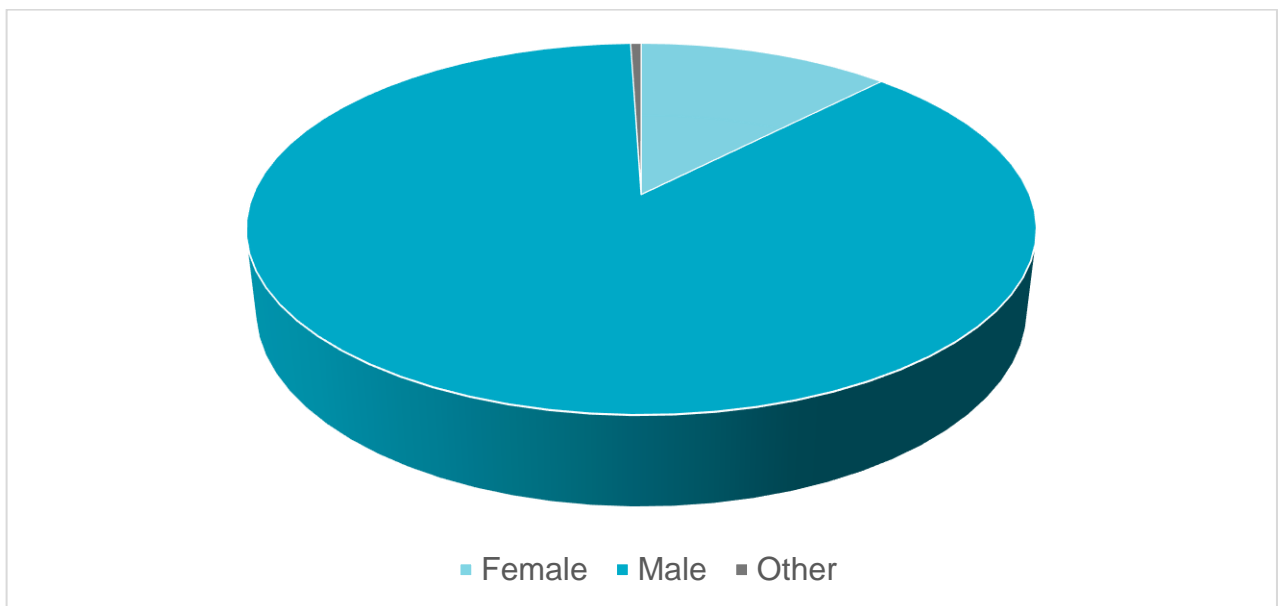
The age and gender profile of the 1,555 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 14 and 15.

Figure 14: Current Age of Clients in NHSCT registered in reporting period



The most common overall age group of clients in NHSCT was age 35-39 years.

Figure 15: Gender of Clients at registration in NHSCT



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

Figure 16: Recorded Substance Used by transaction in NHSCT

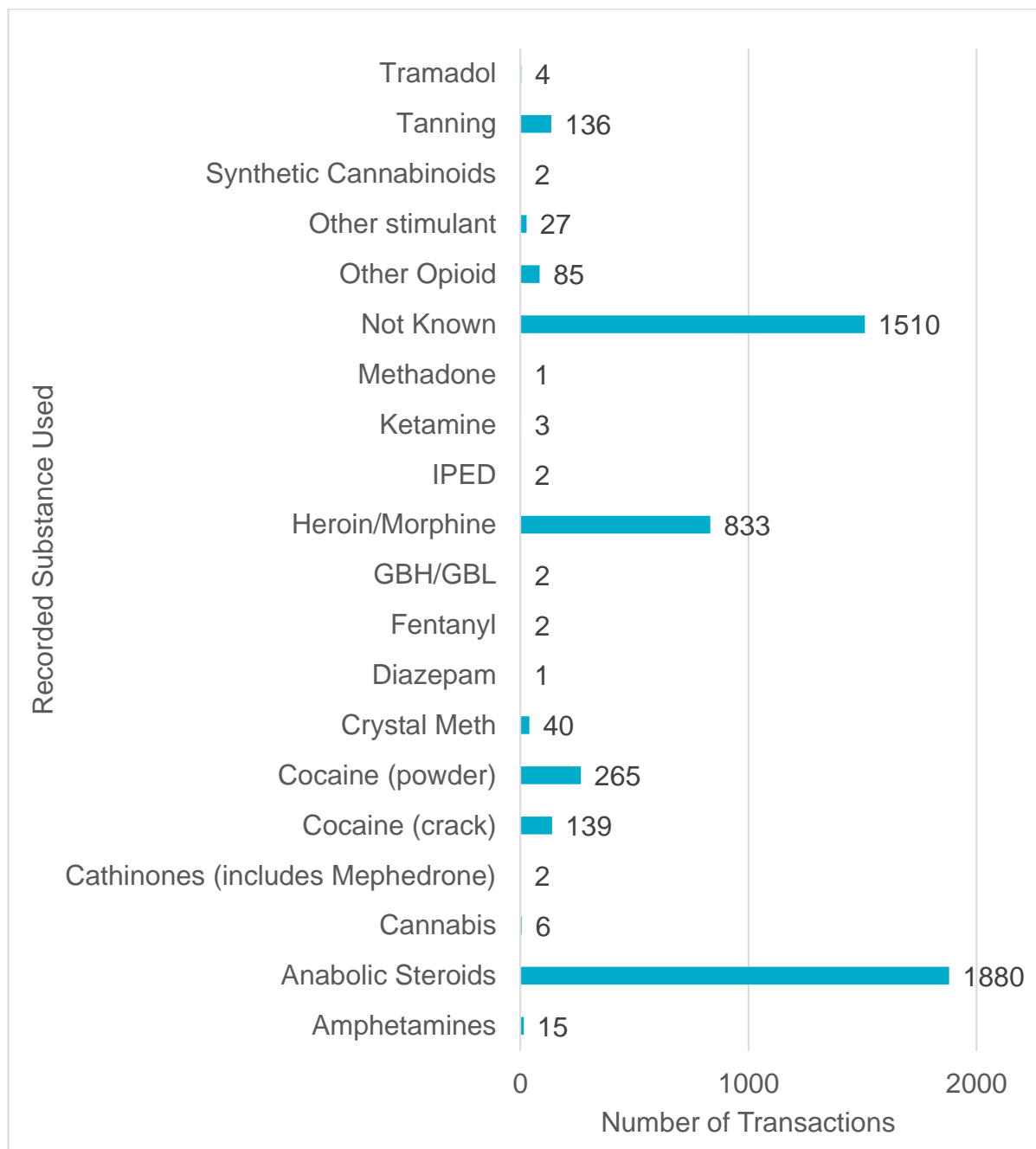


Figure 16 reflects that of the 4,300 transactions in this reporting period, 4,955 reports of substance used were recorded across 19 substances. This includes those selecting the 'unknown' category at 1,510 (30.5%) of reports.

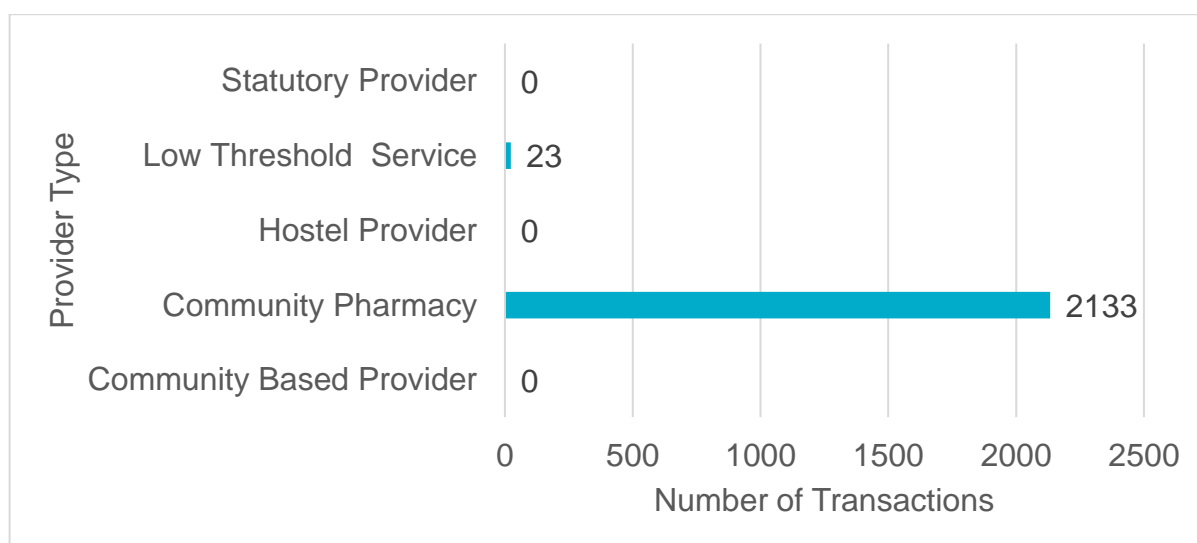
The largest recorded substance used in needle exchange was anabolic steroids (1,880), followed by heroin/morphine (833), followed by cocaine powder (265).

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:

- 2,156 NSES transactions completed;
- 1,050 unique clients using NSES;
- 884 new clients registered for NSES;
- 17 anonymous transactions completed.

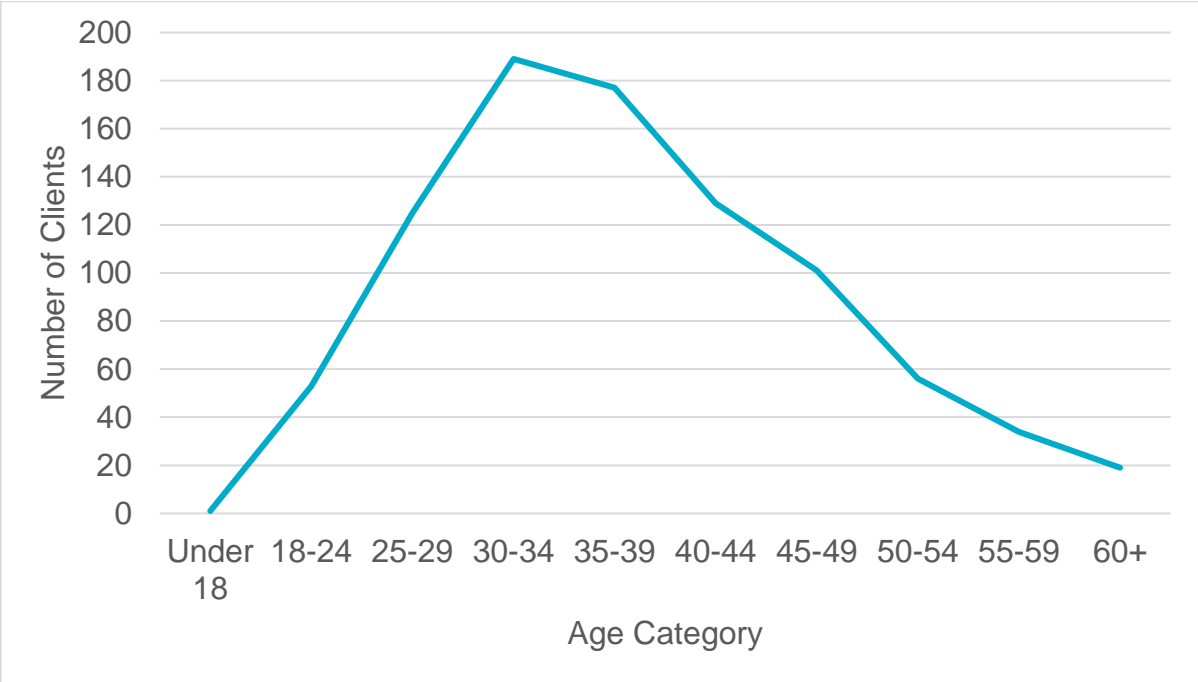
Figure 17: Number of Transactions per provider type for SEHSCT



NSES User Profile

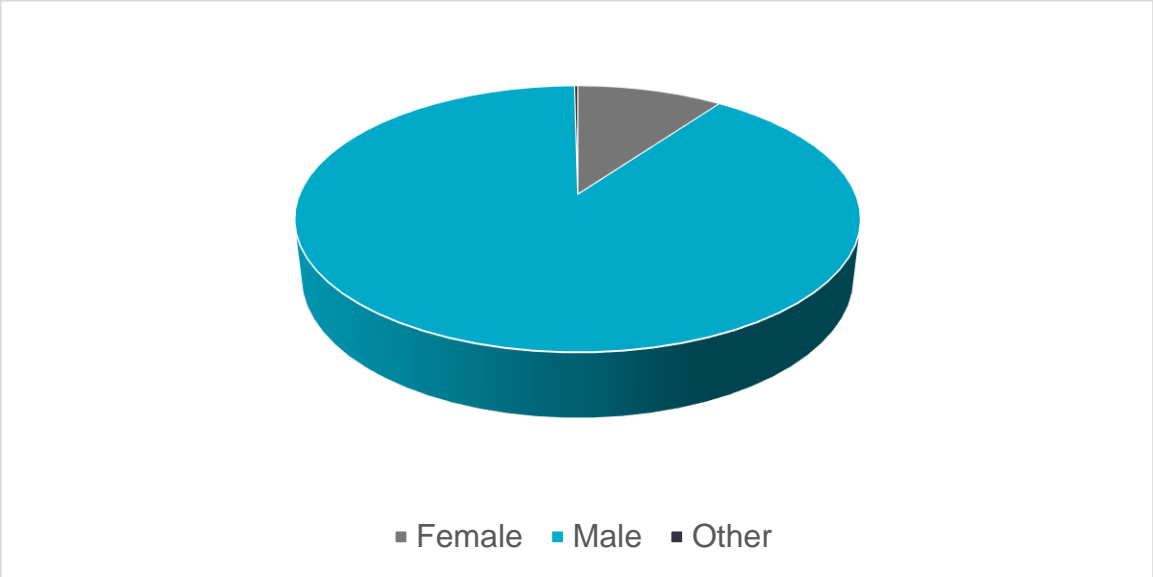
The age and gender profile of the 884 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 18 and 19.

Figure 18: 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 19: Gender of Clients at registration in SEHSCT



The majority of new clients registered were male (89.8%).

Figure 20: Recorded Substance Used by transaction in SEHSCT

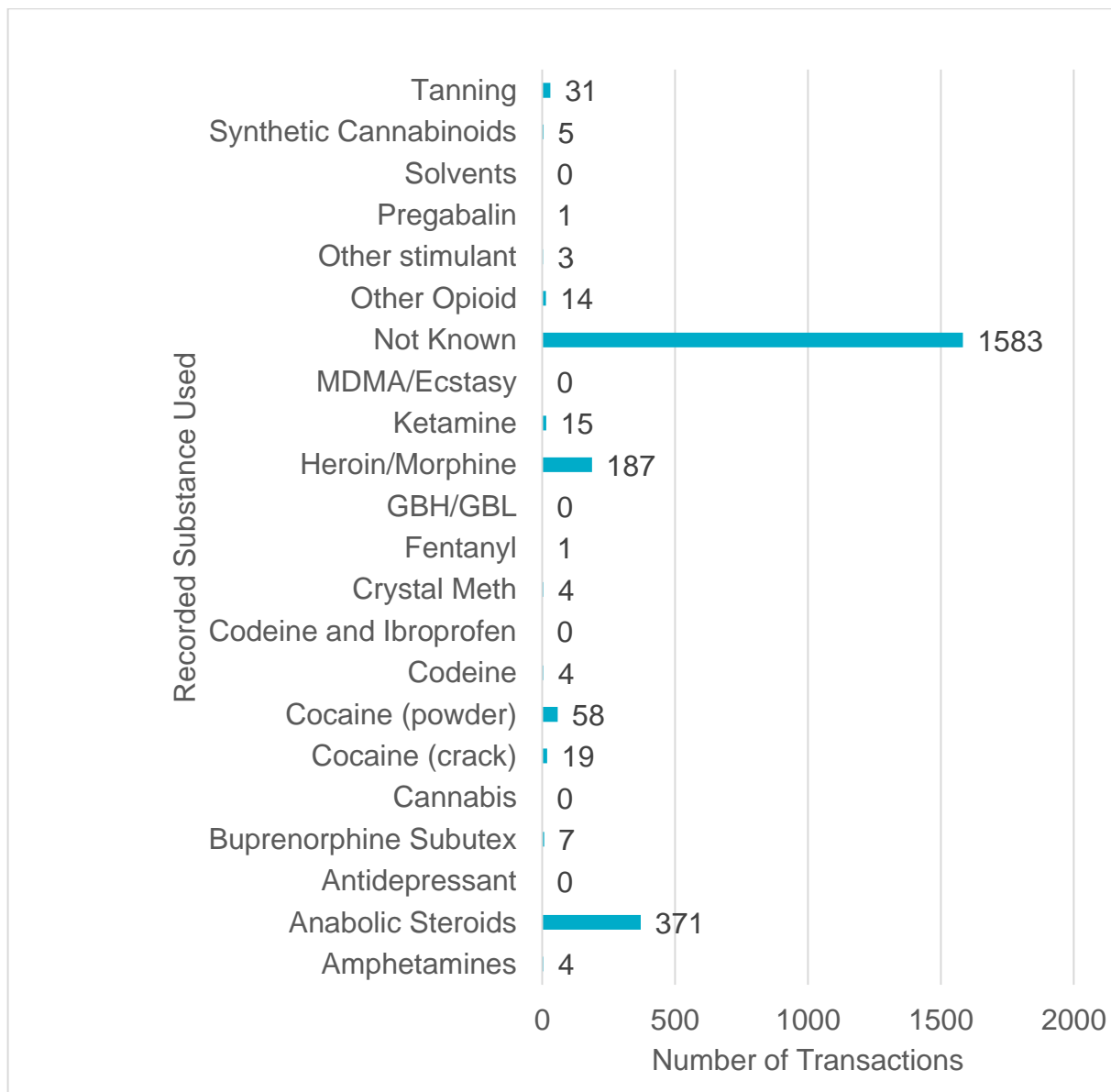


Figure 20 reflects that of the 2,156 transactions in this reporting period, 2,316 reports of substance used were recorded across 17 substances. This includes those selecting the 'unknown' category which was 1,583 times (68.4%).

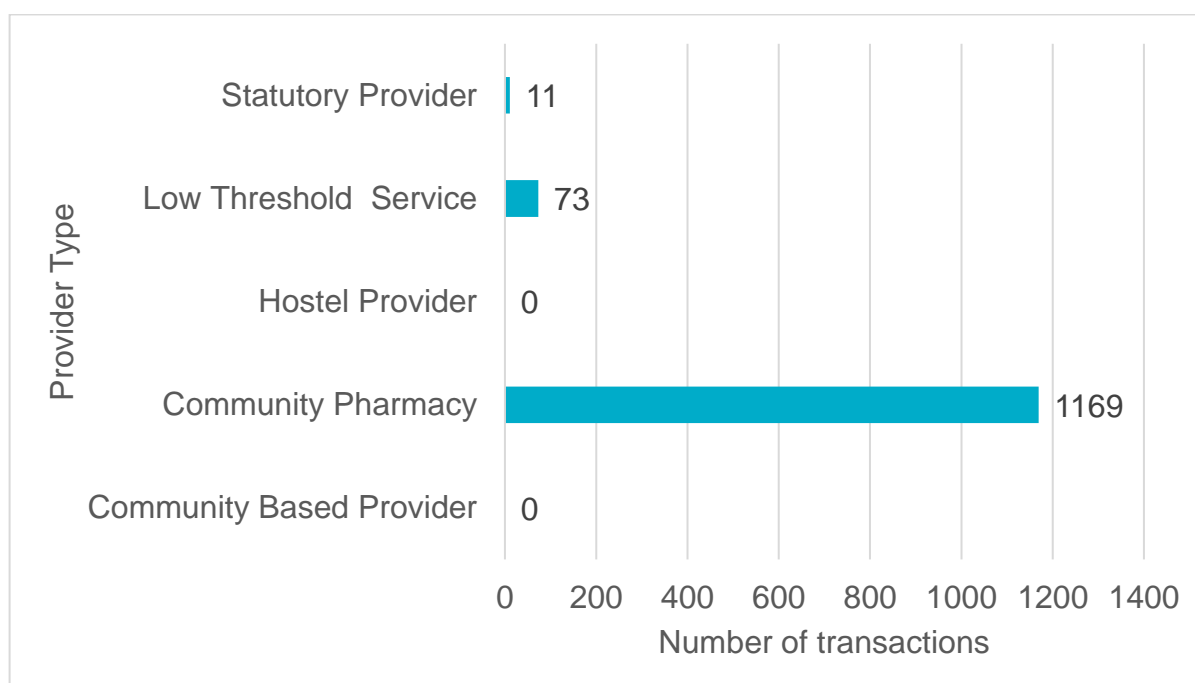
Of those who did report, anabolic steroids (371) was the most reported substance followed by heroin/morphine (187), followed by cocaine (58).

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:

- 1,253 NSES transactions completed;
- 639 unique clients using NSES;
- 472 new clients registered for NSES;
- 45 anonymous transactions completed.

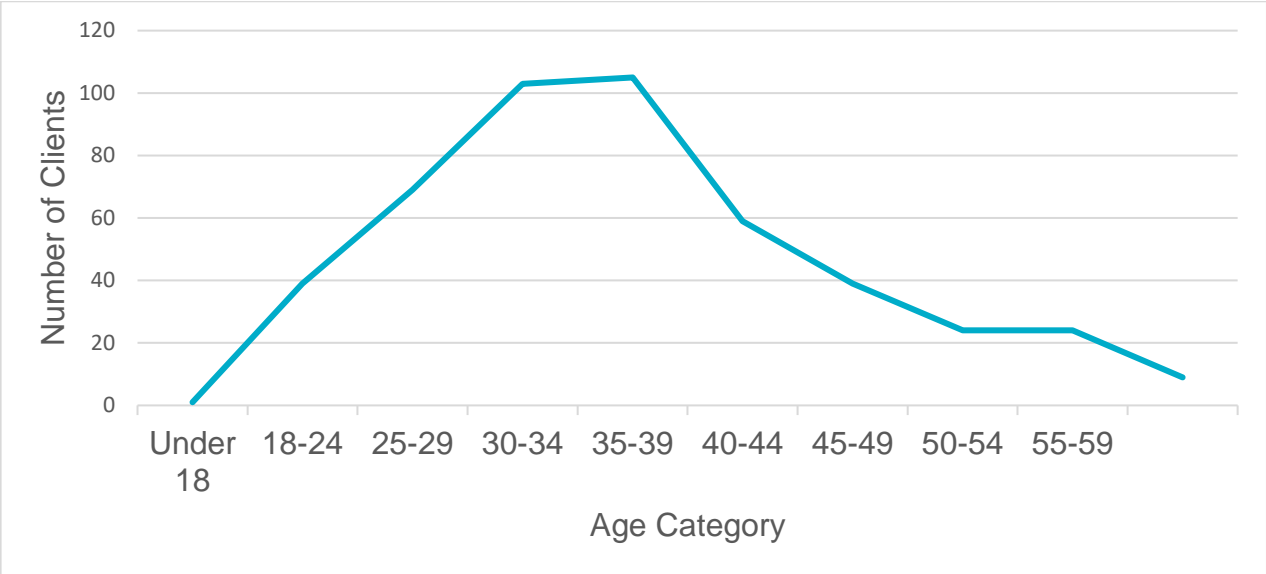
Figure 21: Number of Transactions per Provider type in NSES for SHSCT area



NSES User Profile

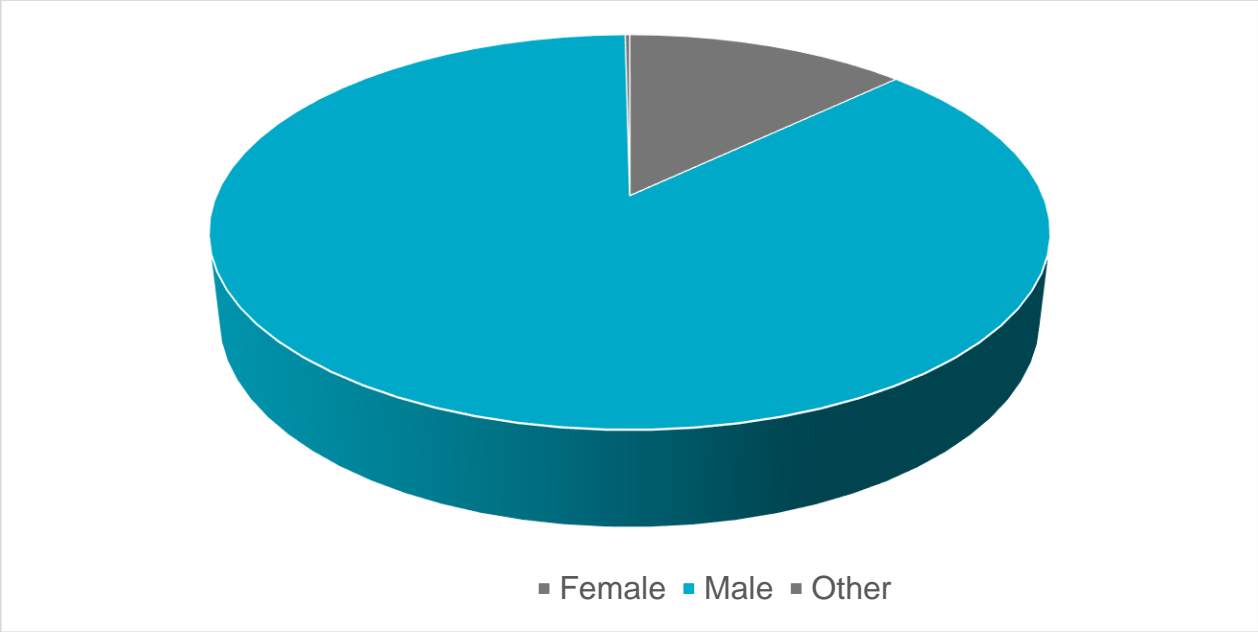
The age and gender profile of the 472 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 22 and 23.

Figure 22: Current Age of Clients in SHSCT registered in reporting period



The most common overall age group of clients in SHSCT was age 35-39 years, closely follows by ages 30-34 years.

Figure 23: Gender of Clients at registration in SHSCT



The majority of new clients registered were male (86.9%).

Figure 24: Recorded Substance Used by transaction in SHSCT

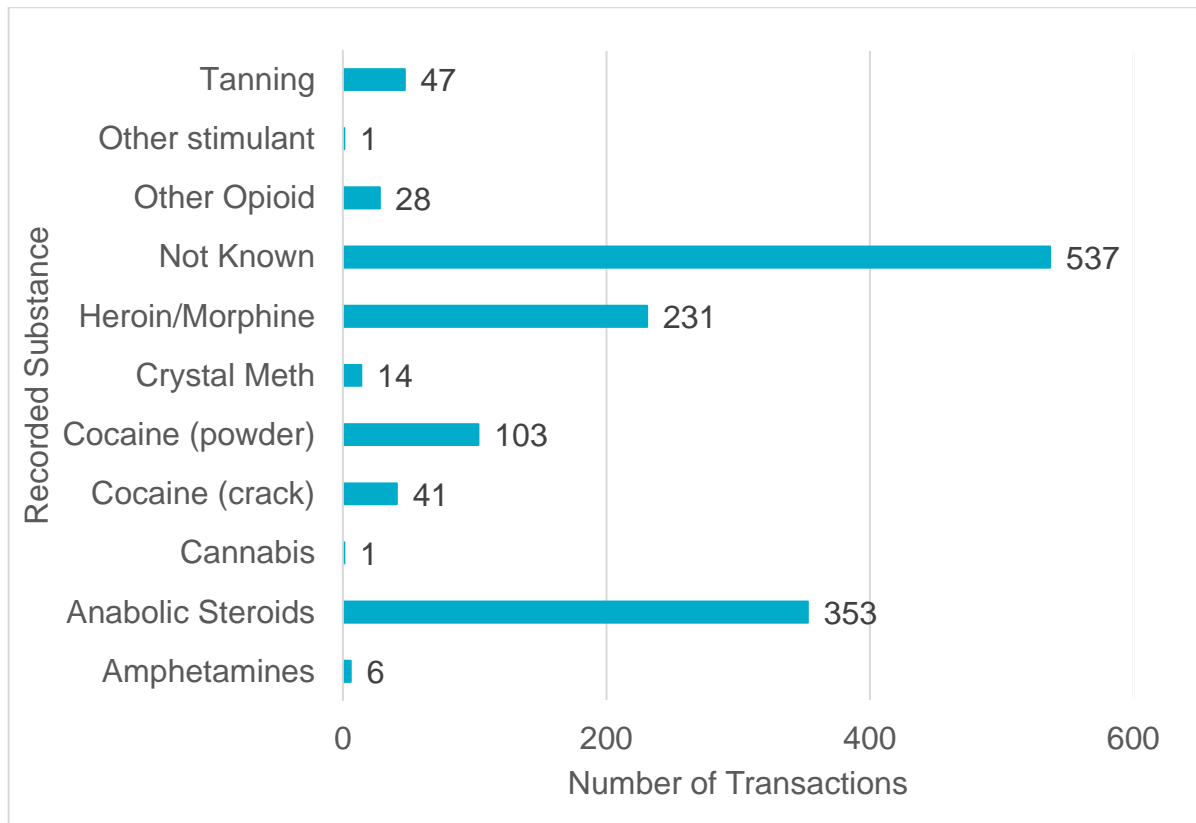


Figure 24 reflects that of the 1,243 transactions in this reporting period, 1,362 reports of substance used were recorded across 10 substances. This includes those selecting the 'unknown' category which was selected 537 times (39.4%).

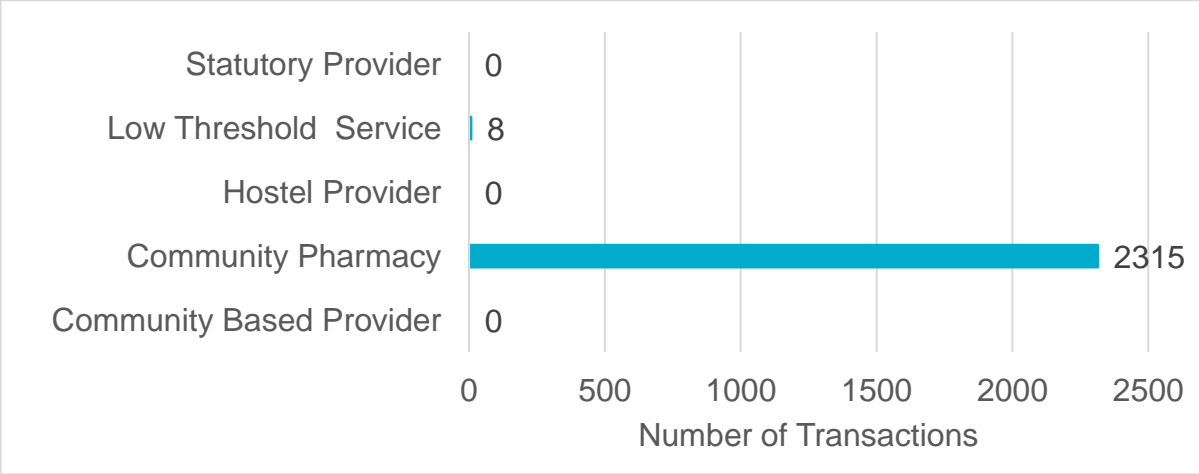
The largest substance recorded was anabolic steroids (353) followed by heroin/morphine (231) and cocaine powder (103).

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:

- 2,323 NSES transactions completed;
- 1,264 unique clients using NSES;
- 1,026 new clients registered for NSES;
- 88 anonymous transactions completed.

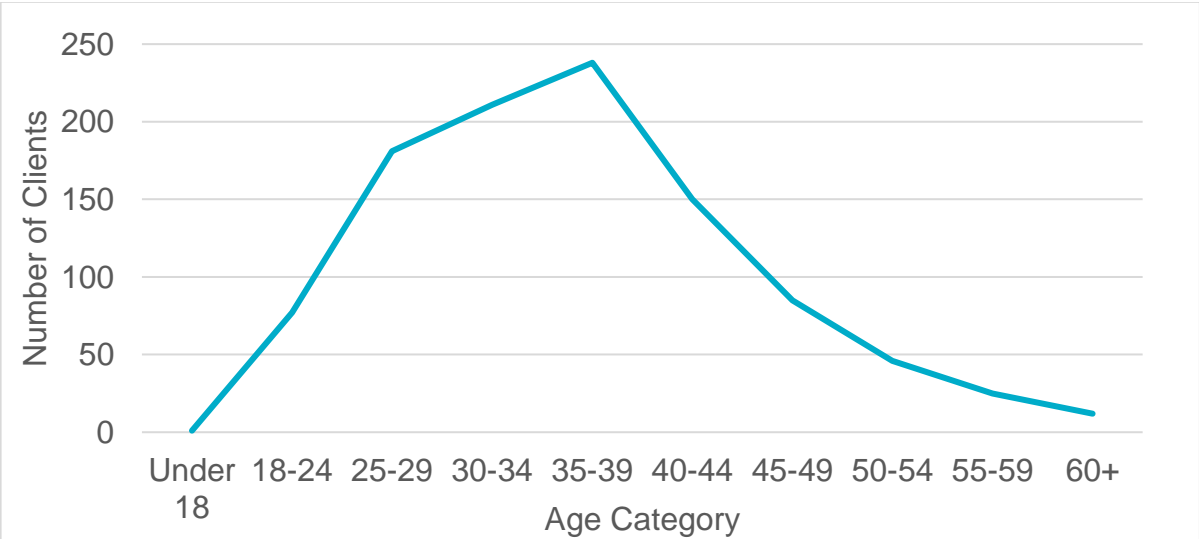
Figure 25: Number of Transactions per provider type for WHSCT



NSES User Profile

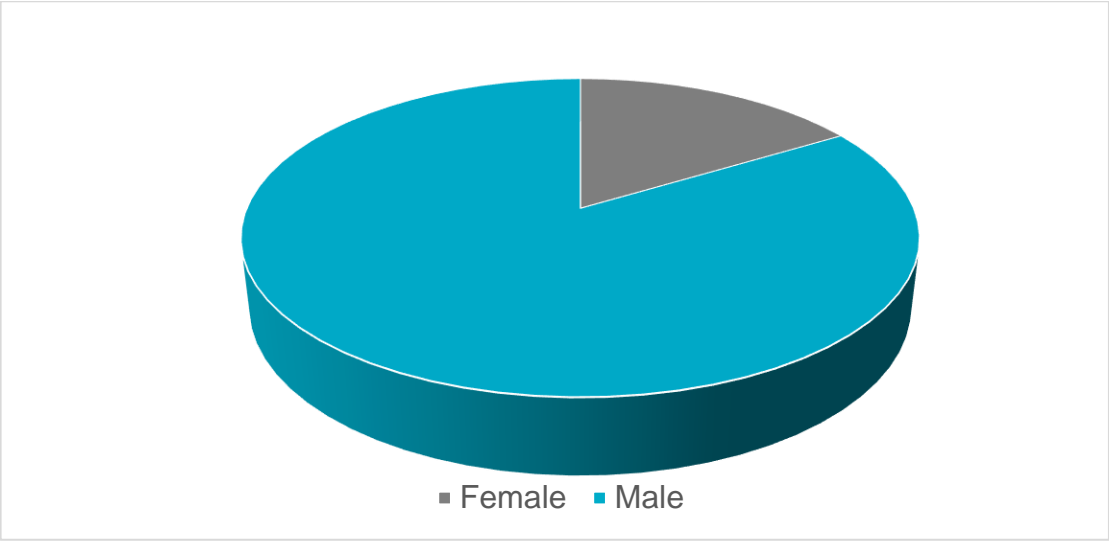
The age and gender profile of the 1,026 users registered within the reporting period is shown in Figures 26 and 27.

Figure 26: 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 27: Gender of new Clients at registration in WHSCT



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

Figure 28: Recorded Substance Used by transaction in WHSCT area

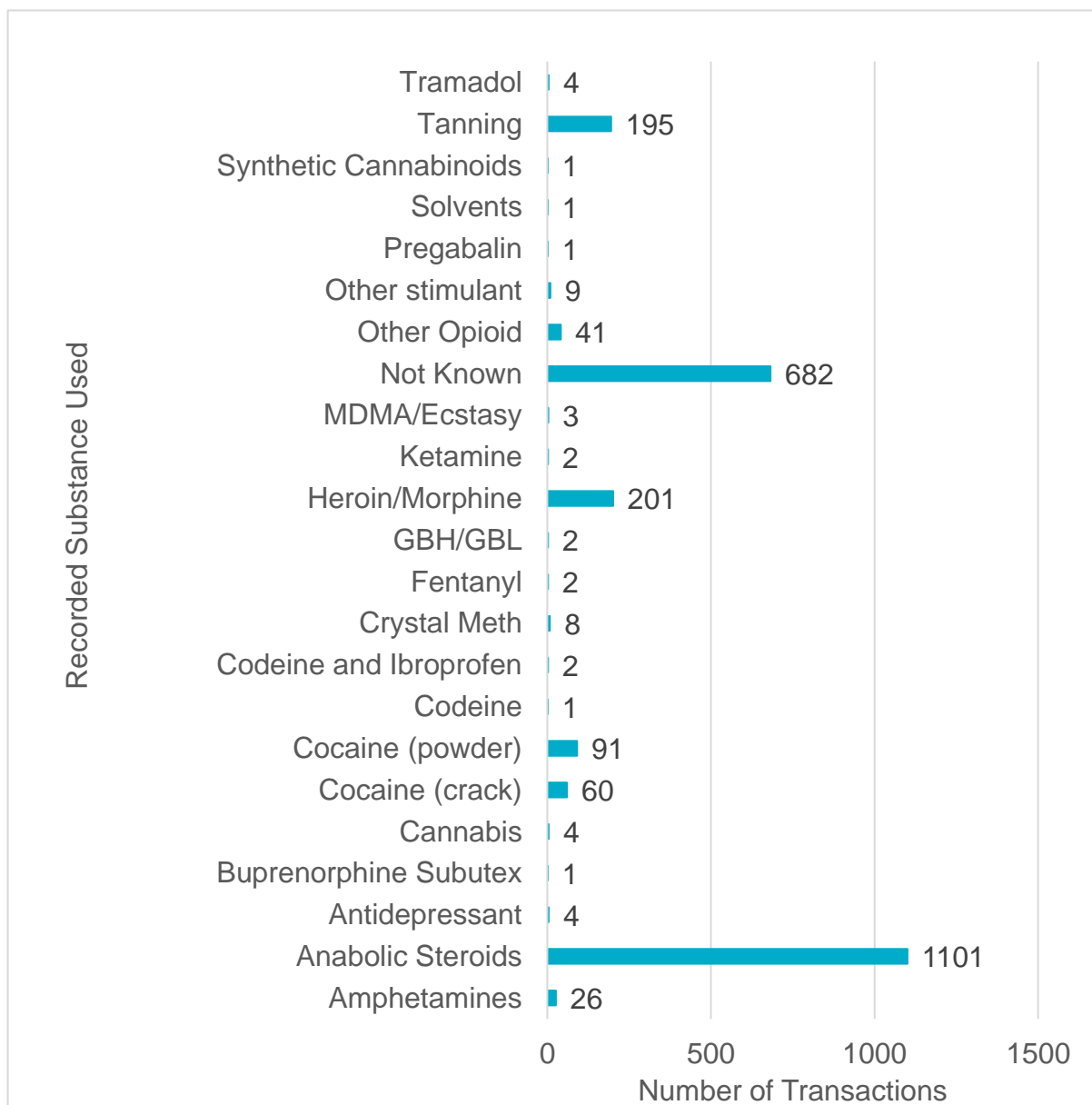





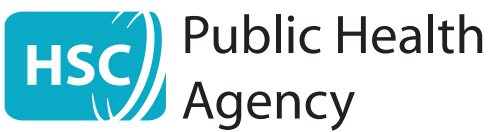


Figure 28 reflects that of the 2323, transactions in this reporting period, 1,760 reports of substance used were recorded across 22 substances. This includes those selecting the 'unknown' category which accounted for 682 reports (29.4%).

The largest recorded substance usage in needle exchange was anabolic steroids (1,101) followed by heroin/morphine (201) and tanning (195).

Section 8: Summary of NSES activity by Trust Area

<p>Belfast HSC Trust</p>  <p>Number of unique clients: 3,746 Percentage male: 86%</p> <p>Most commonly reported Drugs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Heroin/Morphine 2. Cocaine Powder 3. Anabolic Steroids <p>Lead Sector: Community Based Providers</p>	<p>Northern HSC Trust</p>  <p>Number of unique clients: 1,898 Percentage male: 87%</p> <p>Most commonly reported Drugs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anabolic Steroids 2. Heroin/Morphine 3. Cocaine Powder <p>Lead Sector: Community Pharmacy</p>	<p>South Eastern HSC Trust</p>  <p>Number of unique clients: 1,050 Percentage male: 90%</p> <p>Most commonly reported Drugs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anabolic Steroids 2. Heroin/Morphine 3. Cocaine Powder <p>Lead Sector: Community Pharmacy</p>
<p>Southern HSC Trust</p>  <p>Number of unique clients: 639 Percentage male: 87%</p> <p>Most commonly reported Drugs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anabolic Steroids 2. Heroin/Morphine 3. Cocaine Powder <p>Lead Sector: Community Pharmacy</p>	<p>Western HSC Trust</p>  <p>Number of unique clients: 1,264 Percentage male: 84%</p> <p>Most commonly reported Drugs</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Anabolic Steroids 2. Heroin/Morphine 3. Tanning <p>Lead Sector: Community Pharmacy</p>	



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