

REPORT TO: Safer Policy & Performance Board
DATE: 20th January 2015
REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, Communities
PORTFOLIO: Health and Wellbeing
SUBJECT: Novel/New Psychoactive Substances (NPS)-‘Legal Highs’
WARD(S): Borough Wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF REPORT

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide the Safer Policy and Performance Board with an overview of Novel/New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) also known as ‘Legal Highs’.

2.0 RECOMMENDATION:

- (i) The report be noted; and**
- (ii) Note the Novel/New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) overview (Appendix A)**

3.0 BACKGROUND

3.1 NOVEL PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES (NPS)

3.2 Overall drug use has reduced in the UK. However, a significant recent development has been an increase in the range of new and easily available novel psychoactive substances (NPS), also known as “legal highs”. These chemical substances are newly created, and hence, are not automatically controlled under legislation.

3.3 These drugs have been designed to evade drug laws, are widely available and have the potential to pose serious risks to public health and safety and can even be fatal. The emergence of NPS and the pace at which they have developed is a concern to policymakers, law enforcement personnel and healthcare professionals locally, nationally and across Europe and beyond.

3.4 In the UK NPS can be purchased on the internet, via dealers on the streets and in clubs and pubs, and in shops. Test purchasing has found that NPS can contain legal substances, illegal substances, or a mixture of both.

3.5 Evidence of potential harms is emerging, with indications that the health implications of NPS can be just as serious as illicit drugs and can cause a range of physical and psychological symptoms.

- 3.6 The number of NPS available is constantly changing and growing. A record number of 81 substances were identified for the first time in Europe in 2013 - an increase on previous years. This means the number of identified NPS now exceeds the total number of psychoactive substances currently controlled by the international drug conventions. Whilst there has been a general increase in the number of novel NPS detected, it is important to note that the vast majority are permutations of groups of similar substances and many have not yet been identified in the UK.

4.0 AVAILABILITY OF NOVEL/NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCE

- 4.1 The marketing and sale of NPS is often designed specifically to avoid legislation under the Medicines Act 1968. They are often sold in brightly coloured packaging under a variety of brand names with “not for human consumption” clearly stated. They may variously be described as “plant food”, “fish food”, “room odouriser” or other terms with labelling commonly stating that they are “research chemicals”. Generally safety data is not provided.
- 4.2 In the UK, our most robust estimates of use in the general population come from our national crime surveys. This survey suggests that NPS use among the general population tends to be low compared to the use of other illicit drugs. Cannabis is still the most commonly used illicit drug in England and Wales, taken by 6.6% of adults in the last year. However, surveys suggest use among younger age groups and some sub-sections of the population e.g. regular clubbers may be higher (53%).

A question about legal high use has been included in a schools survey as part of the R U Different social norms campaign running in all Halton secondary schools during the 2014/15 school year.

- 4.3 There is a common, but mistaken perception that because such drugs are not legally controlled or banned they are safe. However, there is a growing body of evidence to demonstrate the potential harms (both physical and social) associated with NPS.
- 4.4 Most legally available NPS are sold with no data regarding their chemistry, pharmacology or toxicology, no safety assessments and no administration instructions. The paucity of information on the pharmacology and toxicology of most NPS makes it hard to understand their possible dangers, or even to know what substances are contained in products branded.

5.0 TREATMENT

- 5.1 Across the UK, the number of people seeking treatment for NPS use has increased significantly. For example, mephedrone rose from 900 new cases in the UK last year to 1,630 this year, while methamphetamine has gone from 116 to 208.
- 5.2 In Halton local treatment data suggests that the reported use of NPS is low, although these figures only reflect those who have presented for treatment or

support not actual community prevalence. Within CRI, the local Community Specialist Substance Misuse Service, six service users reported to have used NPS as a secondary substance, and Young Addaction report no young people presenting for treatment as a result of using NPS.

5.3 Young People and Adults have commented that NPS is used in other areas of the region, whilst other comments from service users indicate that NPS use is common in prisons, (although at present there is no supporting evidence to support these comments).

6.0 DEATHS

6.1 Nationally the number of deaths involving NPS is low compared with the number of deaths from heroin/morphine, methadone and cocaine poisoning. However, over the past few years there has been an increasing trend in the number of deaths linked to NPS use. Such deaths across the UK increased from 29 in 2011 to 52 in 2012, to 60 in 2013.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL RESPONSE TO NPS

- 7.1
1. Continue to gather intelligence on the prevalence of use and harms related to NPS use within Halton.
 2. Work in partnership to identify and ensure local sellers of legal highs are complying with the current legal framework (as per Home Office guidelines for local authorities in tackling NPS)
 3. Ensure local prevention work with both young people and adults includes education around NPS and the potential risks of their usage.
 4. Ensure local treatment services follow emerging best practice guidelines on the identification and treatment of those who misuse NPS
 5. Lobby Government for changes in national legislation to stop "legal highs" being sold in shops.

8.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

8.1 None identified at present.

9.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None identified.

10.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

10.1 Children & Young People in Halton

The Novel/New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) impacts on children, young people and their families and partners are working to provide education and

advice to schools and other services.

10.2 Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton

None identified.

10.3 A Healthy Halton

The prevalence and impact of NPS on the health of Halton residents will continue to be monitored. Reducing the harm caused by substance misuse will continue to be a priority for all partners and will form a component of children and young people and adult services, as well as wider education and awareness activities.

10.4 A Safer Halton

Novel/New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) may have an impact on levels of crime and anti-social behaviour in Halton. As well as providing appropriate legal enforcement, partners are working to provide education and advice to reduce the impact of harm and anti-social behaviour.

10.5 Environment and Regeneration

None identified

11.0 RISK ANALYSIS

11.1 Risk of harm due to The Novel/New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) continues to be monitored by agencies (Local and National).

12.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

12.1 There are no Equality and Diversity issues associated with this report

13.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None under the meaning of the Act.