



Report to the Environment, Transport and Locality Services Select Committee

Title:	'Legal Highs' Overview Information
Committee date:	14 th April 2015
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Electoral divisions affected:	All

Purpose of Agenda Item

To provide the committee with background information to support the committee discussion on the 'Legal Highs' item. This information has been collated from information provided by the service area. The officers will expand on the information during the member's examination and question within the committee item itself.

Purpose of the Item: This is an overview information item, the purpose of which is to build members knowledge and understanding of the issues and prevalence locally, with a view to inform whether or not there is value in the committee carrying out any further more detailed inquiry work, and possible areas of such work.

What is a 'Legal High'

Synthetic substances that are designed to mimic the effect of illegal drugs, they are also referred to as Novel Psychoactive Substances (NPS). Legal highs are being sold openly, mostly on the internet, but also in some shops. Legal highs are often labelled as 'bath salts', 'reagents', 'plant food' and 'research chemicals' which gets them past the Medicines

Act and the misuse of drugs act by way of stating that ‘they are not for human consumption’.

Background

In the spring/summer of 2013 the DAAT began to receive anecdotal reports of an increase in the use of so-called “legal highs”.

- Drug use trends - cocaine / heroin remains very dangerous but reducing in terms of numbers of users and numbers in treatment both nationally and locally.
- Growth in numbers of ‘legal high’ users showing up in treatment and evidence that larger numbers exist outside of the formal treatment economy e.g. among professionals / students / clubbers / the LGBT community. Strong evidence that recidivist drug using offenders known to drug treatment and CJS services, are switching to legal high use.
- When there is a media article (interest in a particular substance) there is also a linked Google internet search spike looking for the product.
- Loop-holes in legislation mean enforcement is difficult and/or patchy and yet ‘legal highs’ can cause immense harm and can underpin associated criminal activity e.g. burglary.
- Legal highs are cheap relative to other drugs and widely available online - 73 new synthetic drugs were detected in 2012, compared to 43 in 2011. There were 4 substances banned in 2012/13.
- Rise in internet retailers; up from 170 in 2010 to 693 in 2012, smaller amounts sold in “head shops”.
- Online transactions for legal highs difficult to track, provide better profits and less risk than illegal drugs with secure delivery virtually guaranteed by Royal Mail / Parcel Force etc
- Legal highs pose challenges in terms of treatment & enforcement which are based on their illicit counterparts.

Impact & Local Concerns

- Legal Highs are undetectable using the current testing regimes therefore as existing illegal drug users migrate to 'legal' alternatives the current testing regimes will not be effective e.g.
 - The Integrated Offender Management cohort (IOM) – legal high drug use would still negatively impact on their risk of re-offending and harm to self and others
 - Those requiring testing linked to a Safeguarding issue whether as a vulnerable adult or in relation to the wellbeing of a child in the care of an adult
 - Drug testing in a custody setting – Tests are based on illicit substances. If someone is arrested on a trigger offence, burglary for example they could test negative for illicit substances when their criminality is based on acquiring funds for their legal high drug use.
- Serious Acquisitive Crime including burglary and other underpinning related criminal activity would still be a concern as all the negative traits and chaotic lifestyle of the problem drug user would be present in those migrating from illegal drug use to 'legal high' use including poly-drug use.
- Risk profile of treatment naïve 'legal high' users mean risk of greater harm e.g. Blood Borne Virus's, Sexually Transmitted Infections
- Adding 'legal highs' into an existing cohort of complex need poly drug users has already seen risk profiles and actual risky behaviours get worse e.g. sex work, anti-social & violent behaviour including sexual assault. The already complex needs group are that much harder to engage.

Planned Local Action

- We are working with existing treatment services to identify 'legal high' users within the existing treatment population
- Training delivered to substance misuse treatment providers and other professionals such as Probation staff, PCSO's, Trading Standards, Community Safety Teams, Youth Services and New Leaf.

- We are consulting with users, service providers, carers, other professionals and stakeholders to draft a 'legal highs' specification
- We have commissioned a comprehensive needs assessment to determine prevalence of use, which groups of people use legal highs and what are the best communication methods for engaging with these groups (results will be discussed in committee).

Legal Highs in Buckinghamshire – Needs Assessment

As part of a series of measures and with resources from the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner the Bucks DAAT commissioned a "legal highs" Needs Assessment in January 2014. The Needs Assessment included field research, a national online survey (of users and non-users) and a data capture exercise. The full report is now complete and available on request from the DAAT by email to arepenning@buckscc.gov.uk. This has been circulated to Members.

Major Findings & Impact

There is confirmation that existing Problem Drug Users (PDUs) and high frequency users were switching to 'legal highs' use with few, or no sanctions. A core group of injectors have moved from injecting Heroin 2-3 times a day to injecting Mephedrone between 20-50 times daily. Mephedrone injectors are sharing needles with increased Blood Borne Virus (BBV) and associated risks

Legal highs use is resulting in ongoing or escalating patterns of crime and debt particularly amongst the minority of extreme Mephedrone users. Users described house and car breaking, shoplifting, bag snatching and prostitution which they directly related to periods of intense use of Mephedrone. Acts of violence, including sexual assault, were also associated with periods of intense use.

Testing, for those on the Integrated Offender Management scheme (IOM), Drug Rehabilitation Requirements (DRR's), and subject to a Safeguarding process, is **not**

detecting Legal Highs use so many users/offenders are slipping through the net of sanction or support

There is a Mephedrone hot spot in Aylesbury but increasingly prevalent in High Wycombe (and now in Buckingham too). Use of Mephedrone is leading to more extreme and risk related behaviour

Police responses to Legal Highs use are shaped by supposed legality & limited resources to test for illegal substances (however there is evidence that this is changing). The presence of a shop that sells 'legal-highs' known as a 'Headshop' in High Wycombe is having a significant effect on the locality, particularly at the Hostel for young adults at the Old Tea Warehouse, including increased mental health issues and rising debt with the shop owner and with rent arrears.

Moving Forward

The report has increased our understanding of this significant change in drug using patterns in Buckinghamshire and across the substance misuse field and the Bucks DAAT is now working to apply this understanding locally. We are also able to contribute to the discourse/evidence base in this important area of work by disseminating the report and findings as widely as possible

Next Steps:

- Communicate report and findings
- Create a task & finish project group to review report and translate findings into appropriate action
- Schedule NPS training & development for professionals, including treatment staff
- Review of drug testing procedures – IOM & Safeguarding
- Practitioner forum
- Service re-configuration / development in line with updated evidence base in this area

Presentation:

Attached is a member presentation, officers will talk through the key points as they introduce the item within committee.

Our view and understanding of 'legal highs' has grown in clarity since our first look at this subject in 2013. Having detected a change in the pattern of drug use among some of our existing drug using, homeless and vulnerable communities in Buckinghamshire we embarked on a course of action to understand and respond to this changing pattern of drug use.

Today we have a clearer evidence base to work from and as a result we have filled in some of the gaps in our knowledge and understanding. We are still faced with the challenge of how to respond effectively to what we now know and our presentation is an honest description of that journey so far, our findings and our proposed next steps which we are happy to expand on during our meeting with council members both in our presentation and through questioning by members.