

# The Big Ban Theory

An insight into legal highs usage among young people in England and Wales

# YMCA



May 2016



YMCA was established in 1844 and is the largest and oldest youth charity in the world, helping more than 58 million people in 119 countries. Here in England and Wales where it all began, 130 YMCAs work to transform more than 660 different communities, impacting on the lives of nearly 600,000 people every year.

YMCA enables people to develop to their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

# Methodology

The fieldwork for this research was conducted by the specialist youth research agency, YouthSight. The sample consisted of 1,005 interviews with young people between 16 and 24-years-old from across England and Wales. This was split into 500 who had used legal highs and 505 who had never used legal highs. The fieldwork was carried out between 18 March and 9 April 2016.

In addition to this, YMCA conducted 16 focus groups across all regions of England and Wales, engaging more than 100 young people. These were conducted between 12 April and 20 May 2016.

This report refers to Poppers as a legal high. While we recognise that this will no longer be included in the Psychoactive Substances Act, this was announced after the fieldwork began.

# Acknowledgments

A special thank you goes to all the young people who shared their views and opinions as part of the research as well as the YMCAs across England and Wales who helped facilitate this.

# Summary

---

## Introduction

New psychoactive substances (NPS) refers to newly available drugs that mimic the effects of drugs such as Cannabis, Ecstasy and Powder Cocaine, which may or may not be legal to buy but are often referred to as legal highs.<sup>1</sup>

With the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 set to come into force on 26 May 2016, this report seeks to address this gap in knowledge by investigating the motivations that young people have for using legal highs and the effect the Act will have on usage.

The purpose of this report is not to critique the individual elements of the Act. Instead, it is to give a voice to young people, all of whom have had different experiences of legal highs, to examine the potential effects of the legislation change and understand what measures they believe could be introduced to help mitigate the harms caused by some legal highs.

## Findings

### **The majority of legal highs users take them infrequently...**

Of the current legal highs users surveyed, 59% use substances less than once a month.

### **The majority of young people taking legal highs started between the ages of 16 and 18-years-old...**

Of the young people surveyed who had ever taken legal highs, the majority (57%) started between the ages of 16 and 18-years-old. A small number of young people even reported starting using legal highs under the age of 11.

### **Nearly all young people who use legal highs have friends who have also used them...**

Of those young people surveyed who have taken legal highs, 94% had friends who had also used them.

### **Legal highs are predominately taken in social situations...**

The most popular place for young people to take legal highs was at a house party (43%) closely followed by a friend's house (35%). Only 4% of respondents said they had taken legal highs at home alone.

### **Laughing Gas is the most popular legal high among young people...**

68% of legal highs users stated Laughing Gas, 14% stated Poppers and 4% stated Salvia as the substances they use the most.

### **The majority of young people have taken legal highs with another drug...**

63% of those individuals who had ever used legal highs had done so in conjunction with alcohol.

### **Of those young people who have used both, the majority took illegal drugs first...**

Of those young people surveyed who had taken legal highs, 59% had also used an illegal drug in the past. 71% of these reported that they took illegal drugs first.

### **The majority of young people currently using legal highs are likely to use them in the future...**

Of those currently taking legal highs, 64% said that they would be likely to use them in the future.

### **The ban will likely reduce overall usage of legal highs...**

47% of young people currently taking legal highs said that criminalising these would likely decrease their usage.

**However, there is a darker side to legal highs causing many young people significant harm, this may go unaddressed by simply introducing the new Act...**

---

## Conclusions

While drug use, whether that be legal highs or illegal drugs, is seemingly inevitable, the harms that young people are experiencing in many cases are not.

Evidence uncovered in this research shows that the majority of young people taking legal highs are doing so infrequently, and with very little perceived harm to their health and wellbeing. However, for those whose use is more entrenched, there is a darker side to legal highs that the Government is doing little to address.

The need to act on legal highs usage represents a very real chance to examine the wider way in which we address drug use among young people.

While the research found that the blanket ban will likely reduce usage, in order to affect behavioural change the Government must focus on the information, advice and support that is available to young people who may be experiencing harms associated with legal highs.

Currently young people are ill-informed and unprepared for the very real risks that are associated with many legal highs. Throughout the research few young people had positive experiences to report of the harder end of legal highs, but still young people are continuing to experiment with substances akin to Heroin, without prior knowledge.

## Recommendations

YMCA is calling on the Government to look beyond the ban and implement the following changes to help reduce the harm suffered by many young people at the hands of legal highs:

- ▶ **Undertake a review of current drug laws to consider how the classification and enforcement can better reflect the harms posed by substances including legal highs.**
- ▶ **Promote the existing and new drug laws clearly to young people to ensure they are made aware of the legal ramifications of their actions and can make better informed decisions.**
- ▶ **Commit to undertaking a full review of the Psychoactive Substances Act, which examines its impact on both the usage and harms that legal highs have on young people.**
- ▶ **Focus enforcement activity on websites and shops continuing to sell legal highs, in particular targeting those selling the most harmful substances such as synthetic cannabinoids.**
- ▶ **Promote accurate and impartial drugs education in schools and colleges, which includes legal highs, and is delivered by people with lived experience of substance use.**
- ▶ **Promote responsibility within the media when reporting on legal highs and drugs more generally.**
- ▶ **Equip drug services to provide specialist legal highs advice and support to ensure young people are able to get help when and where they need to it.**
- ▶ **Put in place arrangements to better monitor the UK drug market focussing on the availability and harms of substances, including legal highs.**
- ▶ **Expand the network of drug clinics available in locations where legal highs usage is most prominent so young people experiencing harm from legal highs can get medical support.**
- ▶ **Promote peer-to-peer schemes for young people struggling or suffering with legal highs.**

# Introduction

---

## What are legal highs?

While not a new phenomenon, legal highs have been pushed into the limelight in recent years by a number of media reports on the harm they are having on young people.

However, while the growing media interest has increased public curiosity, this has not so far been matched with proper analysis about how and why young people are using legal highs, the effects they have and what can be done to tackle the harms associated with them.

With the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 set to come into force on 26 May 2016, this report seeks to address this gap in knowledge by investigating the motivations that young people have for using legal highs and the effect the Act will have on usage and harms.

New psychoactive substances (NPS) refers to newly available drugs that mimic the effects of drugs such as cannabis, ecstasy and powder cocaine, which may or may not be legal to buy but are often referred to as legal highs.<sup>2</sup>

The Psychoactive Substances Act<sup>3</sup> defines psychoactive substances as:

- (1) Any substance which
  - (a) Is capable of producing a psychoactive effect in a person who consumes it, and
  - (b) Is not an exempted substance.
- (2) For the purposes of this Act a substance produces a psychoactive effect in a person if, by stimulating or depressing the person's central nervous system, it affects the person's mental functioning or emotional state; and references to a substance's psychoactive effects are to be read accordingly.
- (3) For the purpose of this Act a person consumes a substance if the person causes or allows the substance, or any fumes given off by the substance, to enter the person's body in any way.

Given that the majority of young people refer to these substances as legal highs, this report will echo this terminology, while recognising the limitations of the term and that it differs from the legislation.

While legal highs are often presented as a homogenous group, in reality there are significant differences between them. Hundreds of substances currently fall under the banner of legal highs.

The legal highs mentioned most commonly throughout this report largely fall into two categories. Synthetic cannabinoid substances mimic Cannabis and are traded under such names as Spice, Black Mamba, Swear Lead and Psy-Clone.

Salvia and Nitrous Oxide or 'Laughing Gas' are dissociative drugs, which distort perceptions of sight and sound and produce feelings of detachment, dissociation, from the environment and self.

Drug policy and usage more generally, either illicit or legal, by its very nature is controversial with strong opinions residing on all sides. This report seeks to go beyond these controversies by speaking openly to those who are typically most affected by legal highs use - young people.

It brings together the voices of young people across the spectrum of experiences – current users, past users and non-legal highs users. This is in recognition of the vastly different experiences that young people have with legal highs.

---

## History of legal highs

The use of legal highs is not a new phenomenon with psychoactive substances having existed in some form for a number of years. However, in recent years legal highs have gained particular notoriety as anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that their use is growing, particularly among young people, and as stories of their harm have dominated the headlines.

Official Government figures estimate that about one in 40 (2.8%) of 16 to 24-year-olds in England and Wales took a legal high in 2014/15, which equates to approximately 174,000 young people.<sup>4</sup> These figures estimate that young people are over three times more likely to take a legal high than the wider population.<sup>5</sup>

When compared to illegal drugs, the usage of legal highs is significantly lower, with one in five (19.4%) of young people aged 16 to 24-years-old having taken an illegal drug in 2014/15, which equates to about 1.2 million people.<sup>6</sup> This level of drug use is significantly lower compared to a decade ago when 26.5% of young people aged 16 to 24 had taken illegal drugs.<sup>7</sup>

While legal highs seem to be bucking the trend of drug use, with increasing usage being reported, this is difficult to quantify with a lack of official data on legal highs usage prior to last year. However, it is clear that the harms associated with legal highs seem to be growing with Public Health England reporting that the number of young people under the age of 18 being treated for addiction to legal highs has risen by 176% in the past year alone.<sup>8</sup> However, evidence gathered by YMCA found that many young people with addictions to legal highs are not accessing support services when they need them and thus the number affected by addiction is likely to be much higher.

Government statistics reveal that between 2004 and 2013 there were 76 deaths involving legal highs in England and Wales. Specifically, these are drug-related deaths where the death certificate mentioned a legal high; although the named legal high may not have been the primary cause of death in all cases.<sup>9</sup>

## Drug policy

Legal highs started to dominate public life with the arrival of Mephedrone, an Ecstasy and Cocaine substitute, on to the market in 2009. Mephedrone was designed to evade current drug laws and became widely available via the internet, making it hugely popular among young people.

The popularity of Mephedrone and the ensuing media interest successfully pushed the phenomenon of legal highs into the mainstream and fundamentally changed the drug market as more and more new substances became available online and in shops.

Mephedrone was made illegal in April 2011, but with it came a widespread recognition that the move would do little to stem the increasing number of legal highs on the market. In November 2011 the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 was amended to enable the Home Secretary to place new psychoactive substances, causing sufficient concern about potential harm, under temporary control by invoking a Temporary Class Drug Order (TCDO).

The TCDO could last for up to 12 months, subject to the approval of Parliament. During this time a full assessment should be done by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD). The order bans the unlawful importation, production and supply of a temporary class drug in the UK for 12 months. Possession, however, is not a criminal offence.

In April 2012 the Coalition Government used the temporary class drug order for the first time to ban the legal high Methoxetamine, also called Mexxy or MXE. However, whilst the measures were successful in targeting specific legal highs that were identified as problematic, as more substitute legal highs continued to flood the UK, the Government became under increasing pressure to take further action.

The Psychoactive Substances Bill was announced in the Queen's Speech on 27 May 2015. On 26 May 2016, The Psychoactive Substances Act will make it an offence to produce, supply or offer to supply any psychoactive substances if they are likely to be used for their psychoactive effects.

The Act does not replace the existing Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 with laws around existing illegal (controlled) drugs remaining in place. TCDOs can still be applied and the Human Medicines Regulations 2012 will remain. However, the Intoxicating Substances Supply Act 1985 will no longer apply.

Under the Psychoactive Substances Act possession of a psychoactive substance will not be an offence, except in a custodial institution. However, possession with intent to supply and importing or exporting a psychoactive substance will all become offences under the new legislation with sentences of up to seven years.

## **The report**

The purpose of this report is not to critique the individual elements of the Act. Instead, it is to give a voice to young people, all of whom have had different experiences of legal highs, to examine the potential effects of the legislation change and understand what measures they believe could be introduced to help mitigate the harms caused by some legal highs.

# Usage

## Introduction

It is important to recognise that there is no one 'typical' legal highs user. Drug taking, either legal or illegal, is personal by nature and therefore no two people are likely to have the same experiences, or have been affected in the same way.

In recognition of this YMCA sought the opinions of a range of young people when examining legal highs use, including those who have taken legal highs – either in the past or presently, as well as those who had never tried them.

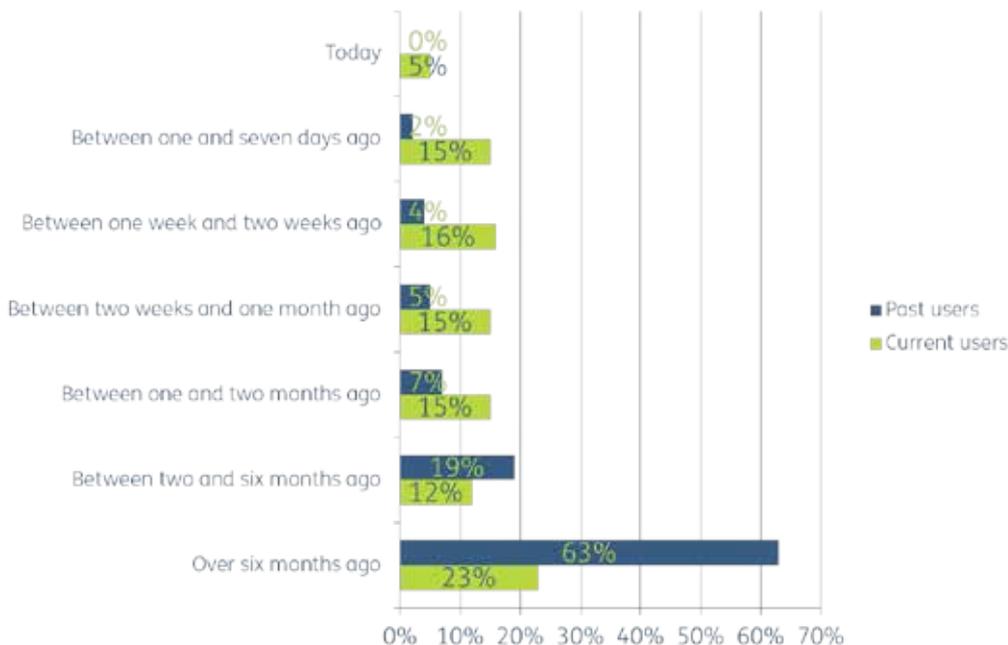
While recognising the deep distinctions that exist between individual's experiences, data and evidence collected by YMCA does allow for a number of conclusions to be drawn.

## The majority of legal highs users take them infrequently...

While frequency of use is relative to the individual and the substance taken, the results of the research indicate that for the majority of those taking legal highs, substance use is not habitual. The majority of current legal highs users are infrequent users, with 59% of this group using substances less than once a month.

Accordingly, when asked about the last time they used legal highs, half of current legal highs users last used substances more than a month ago.

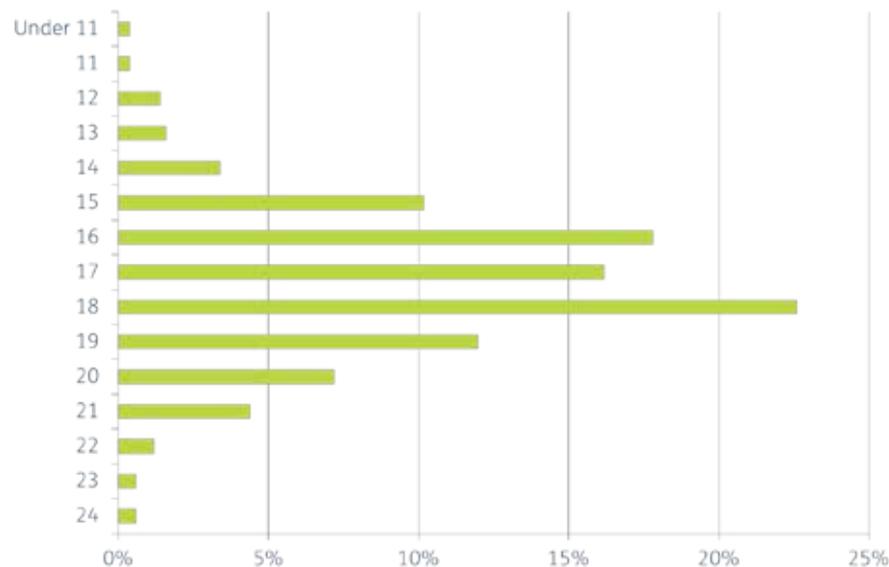
When did you last take legal highs?  
(n=500)



## The majority of young people taking legal highs started between the ages of 16 and 18-years-old...

Of the young people surveyed who had ever taken legal highs, the majority (57%) started between the ages of 16 and 18-years-old. The most common age that people started using legal highs was 18 years-old, with 23% of respondents reporting starting at the age. A small number of young people even reported starting using legal highs under the age of 11.

How old were you when you first took legal highs?  
(n=500)

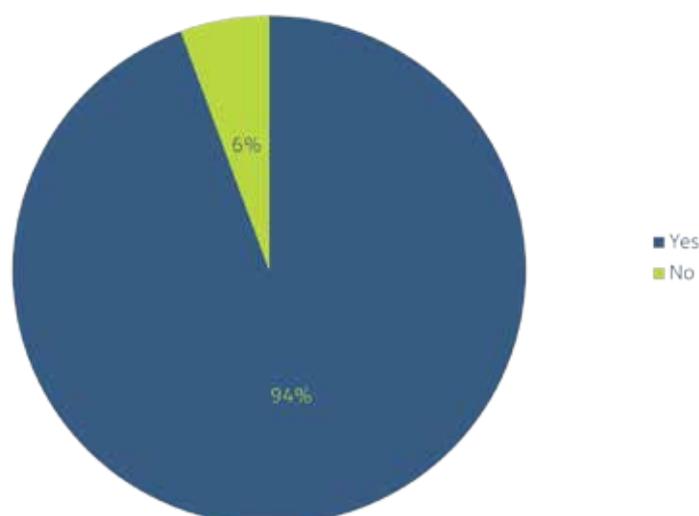


These results are consistent to the findings on illegal drug use among young people. The British Drug Survey found that the mean age range that people started illegal drugs was between 16 and 18 years-old.<sup>10</sup>

## Nearly all young people who use legal highs have friends who have also used them...

Of those young people surveyed who have taken legal highs, 94% had friends who had also used them.

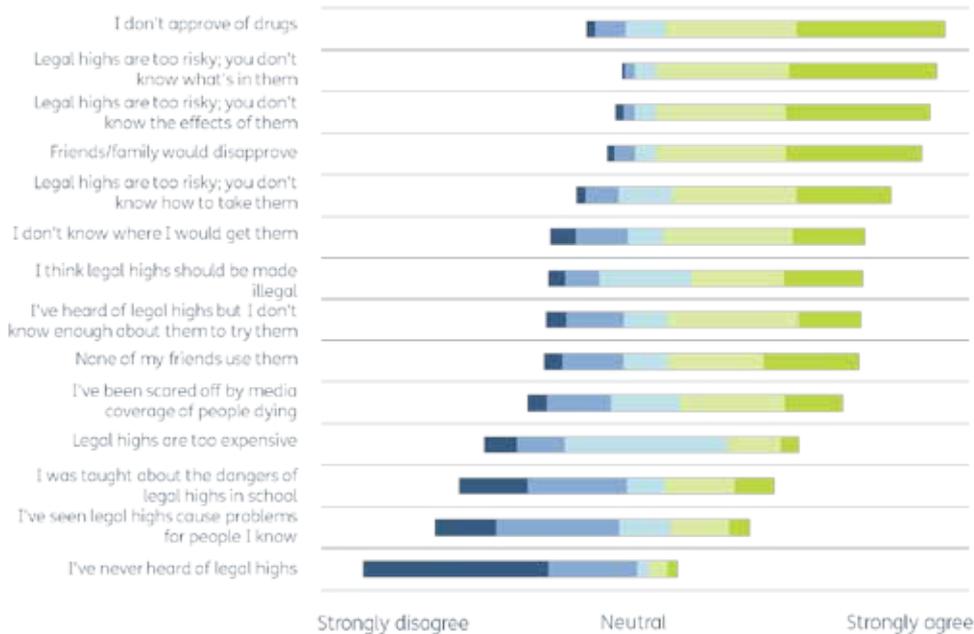
Do any of your friends take legal highs or have any of your friends taken legal highs in the past?  
(n=500)



The link between friends and legal highs use is further revealed by the fact that 27% of legal highs users said that the substance they use most commonly is because it was the drug that their friends were taking.

Similarly, friendship is also a common reason why people do not take legal highs. Of those who had never used legal highs, 55% agree that they don't take them because none of their friends do.

How much do you agree that the following things are reasons why you have never taken a legal high? (n=505)

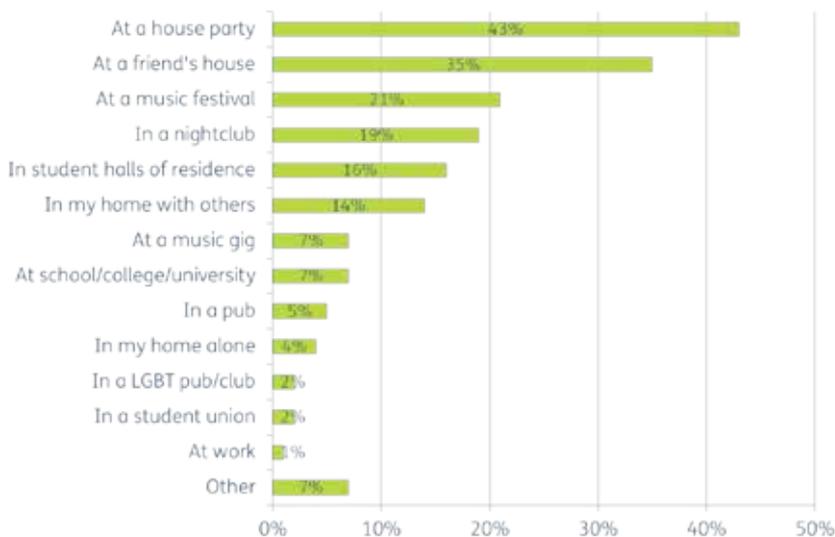


### Legal highs are predominately taken in social situations...

The most popular place for young people to take legal highs was at a house party (43%) closely followed by a friend's house (35%), illustrating the social nature of the majority of legal highs use.

The link between legal highs use and festivals is illustrated in that 21% of legal highs users reported using them at a music festival, making it the third most common location for taking substances. Notably, only 4% of respondents said they had taken legal highs at home alone.

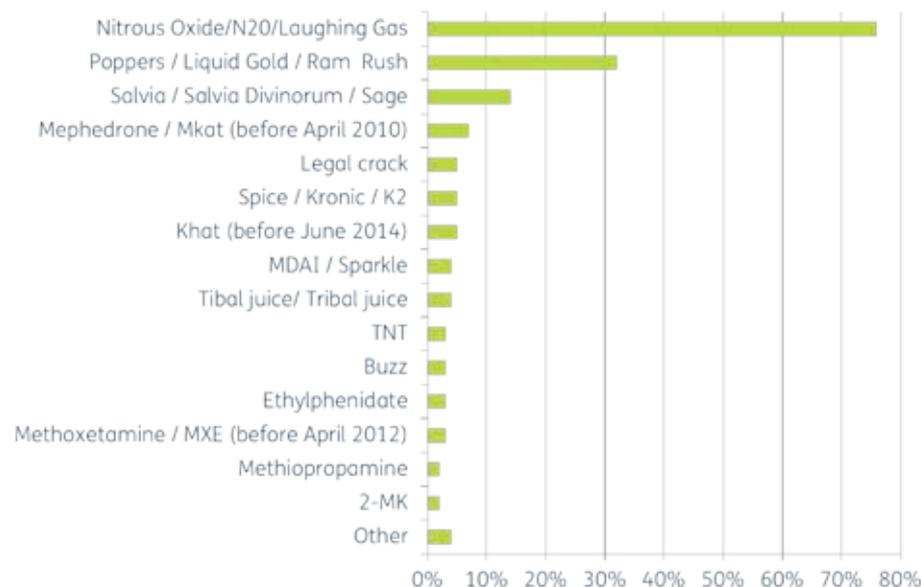
Where do / did you take legal highs? (n=500)



## Laughing Gas is the most popular legal high among young people...

Examining which legal highs people have ever used reveals the wide range of legal highs that are currently being used by young people. Laughing Gas has been used by 76% of legal highs users, Poppers by 32% of users and Salvia by 14% of users.

Which legal highs have you taken?  
(n=500)



Similarly, when asked about the substance they most commonly use, 68% of legal highs users stated Laughing Gas, 14% stated Poppers and 4% stated Salvia.

Legal Crack was most commonly used by 3% of individuals, Mephedrone (pre-criminalisation in April 2010) was most commonly used by 2% of individuals and Spice was the substance most commonly used by 1% of legal highs users.

By nature, Laughing Gas and Poppers tend to be on the more casual end of the legal highs spectrum. While both do have dangers associated with them, for the majority of users consulted in the research, the experience was reported short lived and relatively harmless.

While Laughing Gas and Poppers were revealed to be most commonly used, conversely it was the synthetic cannabinoid substances like Spice and Black Mamba that young people reported to have the greatest impact on the health and wellbeing. This will be examined later in the report.

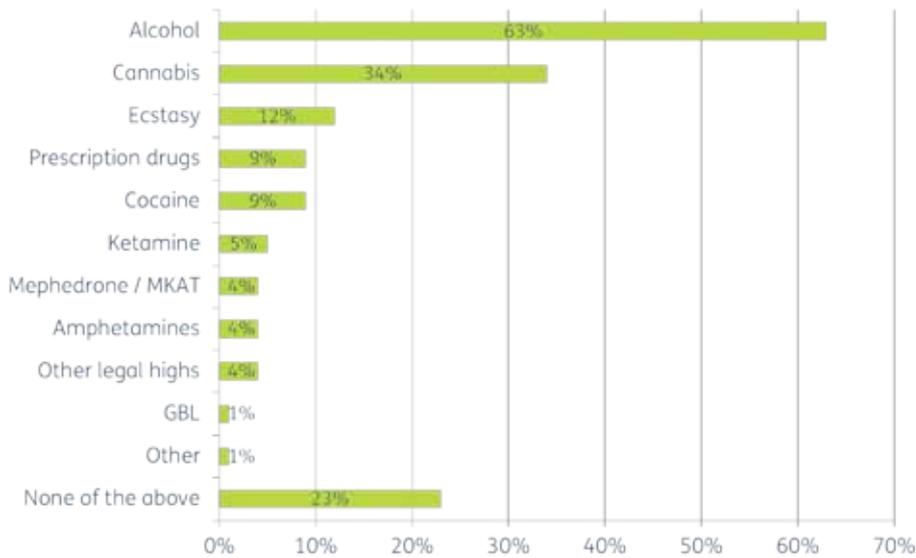
## The majority of young people have taken legal highs with another drug...

Mixing drugs is likely to increase the dangers faced by young people when taking legal highs. However, despite this, 63% of those individuals who had ever used legal highs had done so in conjunction with alcohol.

Cannabis was the second most popular substance used in conjunction with legal highs, with 41% of users having taken the two in conjunction.

Ecstasy was the third most common substance used in conjunction with legal highs, with 12% of users having taken the two in conjunction.

Have you ever taken a legal high with any of the following?  
(n=500)



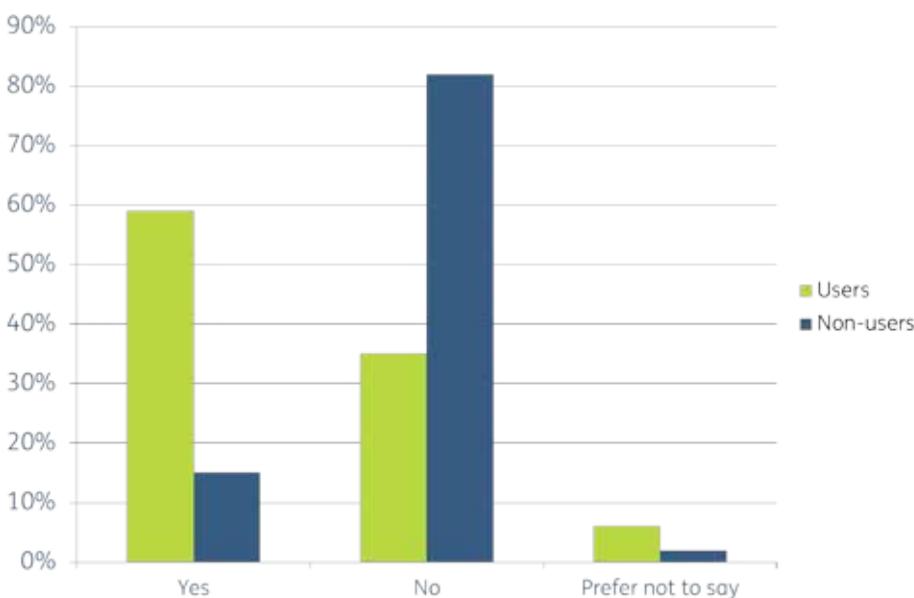
## Of those young people who have used both, the majority took illegal drugs first...

The research reveals a strong correlation between legal highs and illegal drug use, illustrating that for many young people legal highs use cannot be viewed in a vacuum. Of those young people surveyed who had taken legal highs, 59% had also used an illegal drug in the past.

Current users of legal highs are more likely to be taking an illegal drug at present (39%), compared to past users (18%), which further emphasises the link between the two.

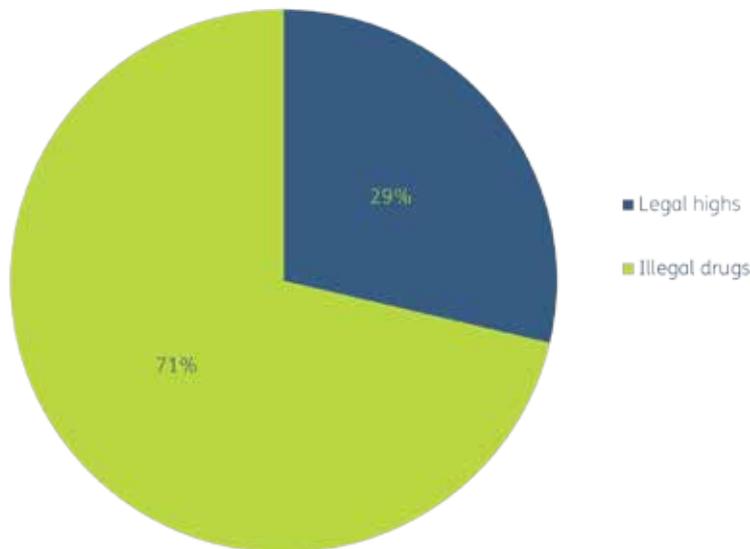
In contrast, illegal drug use among those young people surveyed who had never tried legal highs was much lower, with 15% of people reporting to have used them. In total, 82% of young people surveyed who had never tried legal highs, had never used an illicit drug.

Do, or have you ever used illegal drugs?  
(n=1,005)



However, while there is a strong link between legal highs and illicit drugs, it is not possible to argue that legal highs act as a gateway for many young people, given that 71% of legal highs users surveyed who had also used illegal drugs said that they took illegal drugs first.

Which did you use first, legal highs or illegal drugs?  
(n=293)



## The majority of young people currently using legal highs are likely to use them in the future...

Comparisons of the likelihood of a young person taking a legal high in the future illustrates the fluidity of usage among young people with even some of those identifying themselves as past users and non-users stating that they would be likely to take legal highs in the future.

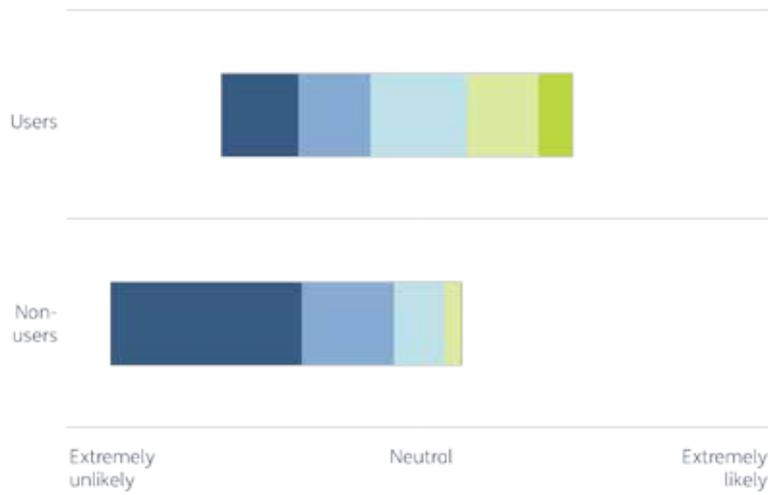
Accordingly, of those currently taking legal highs, 64% said that they would be likely to use them in the future.

In addition, among those young people who identify themselves as past users, 16% said that they were likely to use legal highs in the future. Even among those individuals who had never taken legal highs, 5% still said they were likely to use legal highs in the future.

On the other end of the spectrum, 14% of current legal highs users said they would be unlikely to use legal highs in the future, compared to 55% of past users and 81% of individuals who had never taken legal highs.

A number of people were also not sure about their future legal highs use – 22% of current users, 30% of past users and 14% of individuals who have never taken legal highs - suggesting that the drug taking behaviours of young people, to some extent, are open to influences and can be affected by external factors.

How likely are you to take legal highs in the future?  
(n=1,005)



These general conclusions formed about legal highs users form a useful background on which to assess the potential impact of the Psychoactive Substances Act and formulate targeted interventions to reduce the harm experienced by many using legal highs.

# Effects

---

Despite the popularisation of the all-encapsulating terms legal highs or psychoactive substances, distinct differences exist between the drugs that fall under these headings. These differences need to be recognised in order to assess the effects; both in themselves and in the impact they are having on young people.

The distinction is such that numerous young people do not consider many substances that fall under the classification to be legal highs.

*“There is a difference between something being a legal high and legal highs. They are two different things.”*

Stephen, 23, North East

The distinction is between legal high – referring to substances such as synthetic cannabinoids that young people use – and legal highs, which includes substances like Laughing Gas, under the popular terminology in the media. This is important as it also illustrates the confusion that exists around drug laws and the legality of a number of substances.

The distinction made is borne out of the effects legal highs are perceived to have on young people. Those taking part in the research whose use of legal highs had focused primarily around Laughing Gas and Poppers were more likely to report a positive experience of legal highs use.

*“I did balloons [Laughing Gas] a few times at festivals. Everyone else was doing it and I thought it would be fun – So I did it and it was fun.”*

Beatriz, 21, South East England

*“I’m happy to do things like balloons, because they are quite low impact and quite easy to get the information about them.”*

Sebastian, 22, East Midlands

This was in stark contrast to those who had primarily used synthetic cannabinoids substances like Spice and Black Mamba, where very few young people reported positive experiences.

*“Sweet Leaf was definitely the worst. I had about three drags of a joint and I ended up locking myself in the toilet of a bus station in town crying. I was scared, my eyes were really red, I didn’t really know where I was.”*

Leah, 17, Yorkshire and Humber

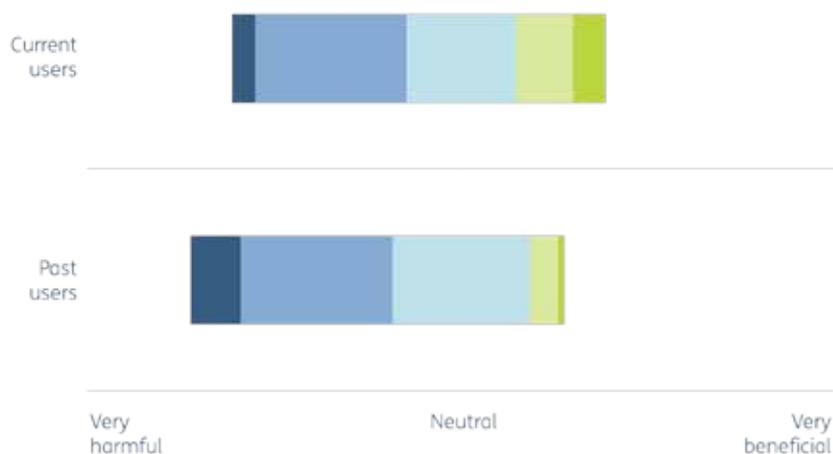
*“I only had two or three off it and I felt like I was dead. I walked out of this guy’s room and the walls just felt like they were closing in on me.”*

Danny, 22, North West

While Government statistics examine the deaths associated with legal highs, in examining effects this report looks at wider harms caused by these substances.

Only half (52%) of the young people surveyed who had taken legal highs said that it had any negative impact on their health and wellbeing, with the vast majority of these reporting that this had been slight as opposed to very harmful.

What effect, if any, do you think that legal highs have on your health and wellbeing?  
(n=500)



This view is likely reflective of the fact that the majority of young people surveyed used legal highs infrequently and identified Laughing Gas as the substance that they used most commonly, which is generally perceived to be one of the least harmful legal highs if used on an occasional basis.

In contrast to this, the research also revealed a darker side to legal highs use as participants spoke about using highly addictive synthetic cannabinoids substances, which had hugely negative repercussions on their health and wellbeing.

*“Black Mamba, Synth, Psy-Clone, and Pandora’s Box – I think that was the worst one. After seven months I started realising I was getting really badly addicted to it and I ended up in hospital on a life support machine like with those things attached to me testing my heart and testing my blood pressure. It just ruined my life.”*

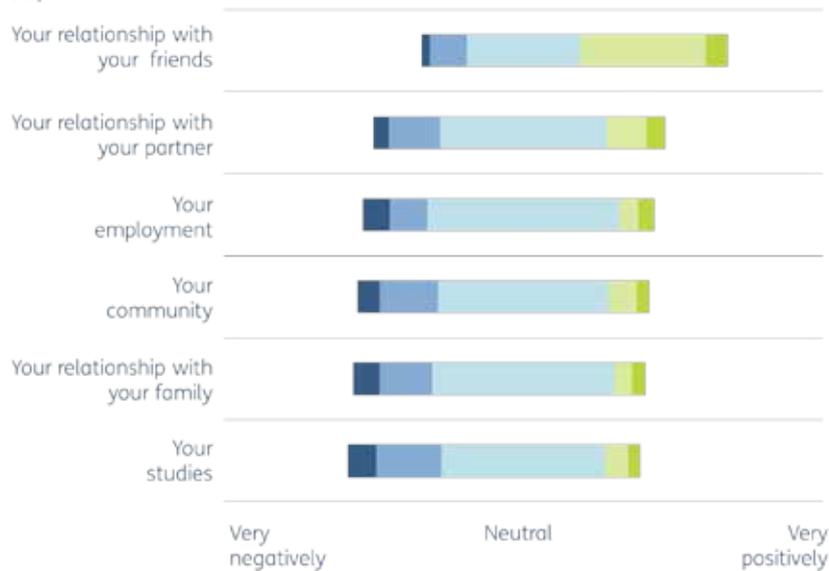
Callum, 17, Yorkshire and Humber

*“I was addicted to them for two years and I’ve never felt the same since.”*

Callum, 21, North East

The results of the research also showed that the majority of legal high users were either neutral or not sure about the effect that their legal highs use has had on a number of specified areas of their life, including their studies, employment, relationships with friends, relationship with family and their community.

How do you think legal highs affect, or did affect, the following areas?  
(n=500)



Again this neutrality is perhaps not surprising given the frequency of use and the type of legal highs used by those participating in the survey.

While these results are likely to reflect the experiences of the majority of young people using legal highs, again the research revealed some of the problems associated with the use of the more harmful legal highs reported like Spice and Black Mamba.

*“My mum noticed there was something odd about me and she’d started saying I’d lost my character and that everything that defined me wasn’t really there... my whole attitude had changed, the way I looked at everything had changed.”*

Antony, 18, Yorkshire and Humber

*“If it wasn’t for legal highs I would probably still be in school.”*

Emily, 18, North East

Notably, the one area in which legal highs use was specifically identified as having a positive effect on people’s lives was their relationships with friends. Of those young people who have ever used legal highs, 41% said that their usage has had a positive impact on their relationships with their friends. In contrast, only 9% of individuals said that it negatively affected their relationships with their friends. This reflects the social nature of the substantial usage of legal highs.

Recognition of the differing harms caused by legal highs based on both the substances taken and the frequency of use is critical when tackling their usage among young people. Evidence collected throughout the research suggests that the perceived harms associated with the infrequent use of substances like Laughing Gas and Poppers are for the most part, minimal.

While there will always be exceptions to this, and inevitably all drug usage comes with risks, in taking forward the ban it is important that the Government focuses its attention on the legal highs that are causing the most harm to young people – those like Spice and Black Mamba, which are having a dramatic impact on the lives of those who take them across England and Wales.

This distinction between the different substances and the harms associated with them is important as it helps to determine the necessary measures that should be put in place. This will be explored further in the proceeding sections.

# Access

One way to decrease the harm caused by legal highs is by reducing access to them. In many areas it is currently possible for young people to purchase legal highs on the high street, with 16% of legal highs users surveyed stating that this is where they purchase them – the second most popular option after friends.

Legal highs for sale on the high street can either be explicit, via headshops specifically designed to sell legal highs and drug paraphernalia, or more covert via under the counter sales in corner shops and such like.

*“You can get everything you want in one shop, then you walk 10 minutes down the road and get spangled.”*

Kieron, 22, South East England

*“They have the opportunity to get it at such a young age and it’s so easily accessible, like for example, he’ll just serve anyone [in the shop] down the road.”*

Jay, 18, South East England

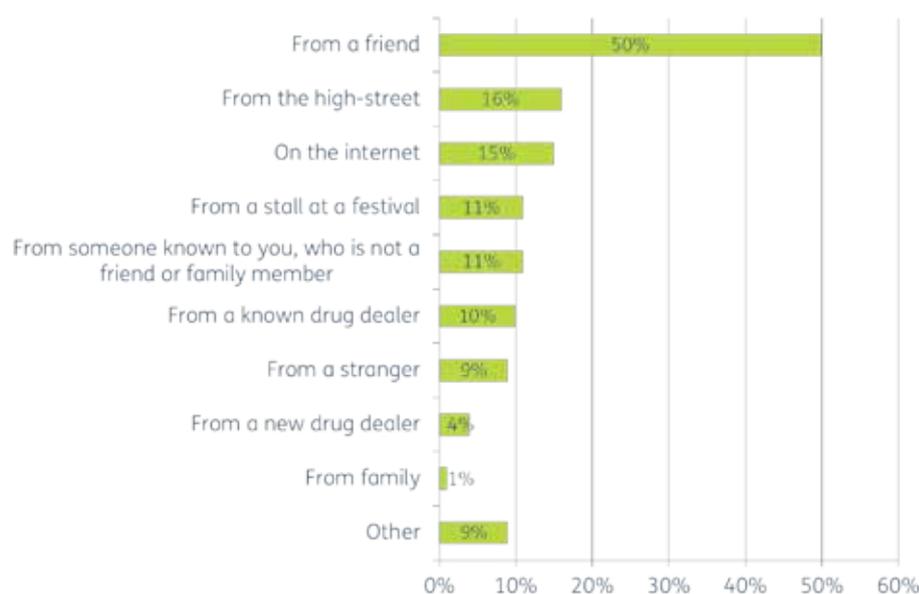
The emphasis on the Psychoactive Substances Act on tackling the supply side of legal highs, means its enactment is likely to address the presence of headshops selling legal highs on the high street.

Given that the demand in many cases will still exist for legal highs, particularly for those whose use is more entrenched, it is critical that the police and law enforcement agencies focus their attention on stopping them being sold covertly by shops under the counter.

However, given the relatively small proportion of young people who report purchasing legal highs on the high street, it is clear that access to legal highs will remain unchanged for many.

The majority (61%) of young people buy their legal highs from a friend or someone they know. While it is not possible to know where these originated from and therefore the effect that the closure of headshops will have on this element of access, it is possible to conclude that for the majority of young people, the high street is not the first port-of-call for purchasing substances.

Where do you, or where did you buy your legal highs?  
(n=500)



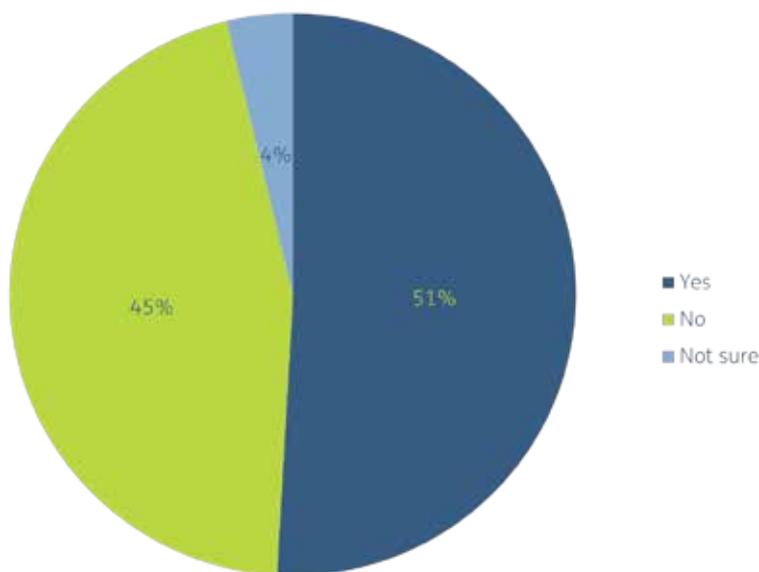
Notably, 15% of legal highs users reported purchasing substances from either a known or a new drug dealer. Given that legal highs are currently legal this illustrates the extent to which they have already infiltrated the illegal drug market and that many young people are not adverse from purchasing substances from a dealer.

*“It’s harder to get drugs off your doctor than it is from your drug dealer.”*  
Ben, 20, Yorkshire and Humber

The shift from headshops to dealers is seemingly inevitable as long as the demand for legal highs exists. While the Act puts in place custodial sentences for those caught dealing legal highs, the prominence of illegal drugs in England and Wales suggests that this is not going to be an effective deterrent for many.

The prevalence of illegal drugs in society is illustrated by the fact that 51% of individuals surveyed who have never taken legal highs have been offered drugs. Of these 18% said that it was a drug dealer, either known or new, who made the offer.

Have you ever been offered illegal drugs?  
(n=505)



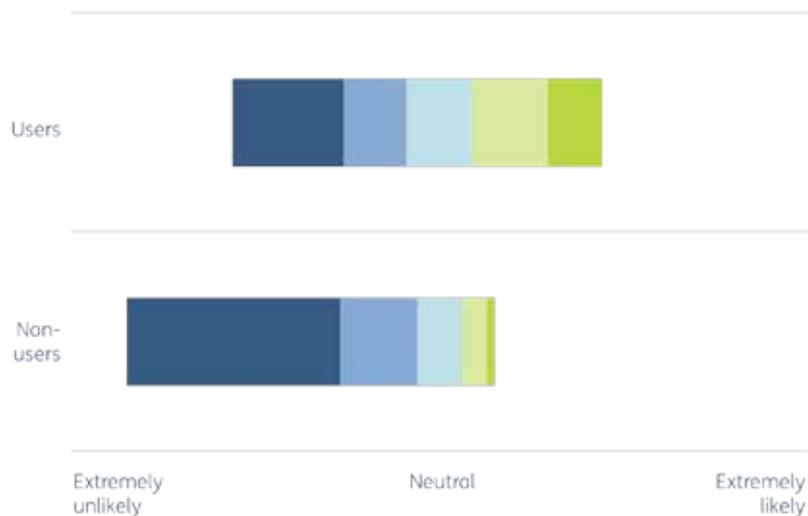
This is in comparison to 32% of those surveyed who have never taken legal highs having being offered them in the past, of which 5% said that it was by a drug dealer, either known or unknown.

Furthermore, given the link between illegal and legal highs, many young people felt that banning legal highs will simply encourage young people to take illegal drugs again. The ban therefore may not discourage many young people from taking drugs in general, but will merely succeed in disincentivising the use of legal highs over currently illegal drugs.

*“People will just move on to illegals, because they are not legal now. They might as well get the good stuff rather than the bad stuff.”*  
Charlotte, 17, East of England

This point is especially pertinent given that 51% of young people surveyed who currently take legal highs said that they were likely to take illegal drugs in the future. In comparison, only 9% of people who had never taken legal highs said that they would likely take illegal drugs in the future.

How likely are you to take illegal drugs in the future?  
(n=1,005)



To truly halt the use of legal highs, many young people participating in the research felt that Government intervention should be targeted at the production of the drugs, in order to stop them at the source.

*“We can’t prevent people from selling them, the thing we need to prevent is them coming from other countries.”*

Elizabeth, 21, East of England

Inevitably, restricting supply of a substance will ultimately increase its cost, which is likely to put some individuals off purchasing it. Interestingly, while only 12% of legal highs users gave ‘because they are cheaper than illegal drugs’ as a reason for taking legal highs and 6% of individuals named ‘cheapness’ as the reason why they take their chosen legal high most often, 61% of individuals said that an increase in price of legal highs would decrease their usage.

However, in contrast, many young people felt that individuals would still be willing to pay increased prices, but that this could likely lead to increased criminal behaviour for some, especially those with heavy usage or dependency issues.

*“If you put the price up now there will be more crime, so you can’t win because they’ll be wanting £20 instead of £5. And if they found £5 they will find £20. It’s encouraging women to go out and sell themselves and it’s encouraging other things, it’s encouraging a lot more worse things.”*

Sarah, 24, East Midlands

*“When you ain’t got Spice, you’re constantly thinking how you can get money for Spice.”*

Jade, 23, South East England

While legal highs are readily available to buy online they will continue to be attractive for some young people. Of those young people surveyed 15% said that they bought legal highs online, although only 6% said that their availability online was one of the main reasons why they take them.

Websites make it easier for young people to bypass restrictions on legal highs sales present in some shops, and often encourage bulk buying with incentives for purchasing larger quantities. Bulk buying of substances is particularly likely to be an issue in the run up to the introduction of the ban as suppliers look to sell-off stock before the legislation comes into force.

*“Everyone is buying it from the internet, that’s the biggest problem, the internet. They’ve closed down the shops, but now they’ve got these websites selling it.”*  
Jordan, 19, Wales

Controlling drugs sales on the internet is notoriously difficult, especially given the international nature of both the internet and drug market and as one site closes another opens. To help mitigate against this more enforcement activity should focus on websites continuing to sell legal highs.

While action to shut down websites selling legal highs is welcome, it is clear that it will not be possible to stop the online trade completely. Decreased access and increased price will undoubtedly have an impact on legal highs usage. However, it is notable that friends’ usage (36%) and socialising (34%) were named as the second and third most popular reasons respectively for taking legal highs by those surveyed.

For the majority of people this was tacit, however, 14% of legal highs users stated that pressure from friends or peer groups was one of the main reasons they have used legal highs. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence found that some individuals had been tricked into taking legal highs by friends.

*“I didn’t know the first time I tried it. I thought I was just smoking a spliff with everyone.”*  
Sarah, 24, East Midlands

*“Two of his friends had just been put in hospital because of it and he tricked me into taking it.”*  
Ben, 20, Wales

Legal highs use is most common in social situations, the most popular being at house parties where 43% of legal highs users take, or have taken them. Significantly, only 4% of respondents said that they have taken legal highs in their home alone.

Given the critical role that friends and social groups play in legal highs use, it is clear that social norms need to be addressed and changed in order to reduce usage and the harms experienced by young people.

More than half (55%) of non-legal highs users agreed or strongly agreed that ‘none of my friends use them’ was a reason why they have never taken legal highs. Similarly, more than three quarters (79%) agreed that they did not take legal highs because either their friends or family would disapprove. Young people participating in the research recognised the importance of social norms in affecting behaviours.

*“It’s trends isn’t it? If like people are using it, in sort of like a friend group, if one person stops and one person turns round and says I don’t want to do that anymore, another person will turn round and be like ‘oh yeah, I don’t want to do that anymore either’ and it’ll just go from there.”*  
Kieron, 17, Yorkshire and Humber

*“It depends what’s socially acceptable at the time.”*  
Liam, 20, North East

Given the prevalence of illegal drugs in society it is clear that reducing access alone will not stop usage among young people, particularly among those whose use is heavier or more entrenched. It is important therefore that attempts to limit access to legal highs are combined with an increased focus on providing information and support to young people to allow them to make informed decisions about drug use and reduce the harms associated with use.

## Recommendation

► **To focus enforcement activity on websites and shops continuing to sell legal highs, in particular targeting those selling the most harmful substances, such as synthetic cannabinoids.**

## Emily, 18, North East

*"I've seen what addiction to legal highs can do and it breaks my heart. I tried to persuade people I knew using them to get therapy but they kept choosing legal highs instead. In the end, I had to leave them all behind and move on. I haven't seen that group of friends since."*

Emily, from North Tyneside, was just 16 years old when she took her first legal high. Lonely at school, she had discovered a new group of friends who encouraged her to try a form of synthetic cannabinoid, called Psy-clone. It started a period of dangerous experimentation that left Emily with significant emotional scars she is now having to overcome as she rebuilds her life.

Emily says: *"I wasn't very popular at school so when I met a new group of people who were doing legal highs, I wanted to fit in."*

*"I tried Psy-clone first through a homemade bong we made together. It was legal so I didn't think it would be dangerous but it was so much more powerful than I could have imagined. It was so bad, it almost felt like I was on heroin."*

*"Soon, I was taking every legal high there was and although I would never say I was 'addicted' to them, I knew the dangers. There were times when I would be so out of it, I'd be lying there not able to speak or move. Anything could have happened to me."*

Emily's experimenting with legal highs grew over time. Eventually, she left school with no qualifications and spent more and more time with the friends who had first introduced her to the substances.

As her difficult behaviour continued, she was kicked out of home by her mum and ended up sleeping on her brother's sofa, who was, himself, struggling with alcohol use. Realising that something had to change, she presented to her local council and, in September last year, moved into YMCA North Tyneside. By that time, she had fallen out of love with the substances and her former friends.

*"I've seen what addiction to legal highs can do and it breaks my heart," she says. "I have been stolen from by people wanting to get money and I've begged others to get help but they have always chosen legal highs. I don't see that group of people anymore but I understand the physical and mental effects of what these substances do."*

Emily, who is now on a skills training course at college and wants to be a carer in the future, fully backs a ban on legal highs. She adds, however, that education for young people is just as important.

She says: *"When I first started taking legal highs, I could see the appeal. They were colourfully packaged and available in shops so there was no need to go to drug dealers."*

*"The problem is you don't know what you're going to get and [at the time] we didn't know how they would affect us."*

*"We used to have people come into our school to talk about drugs but they never mentioned legal highs. Now, if educational talks are going to happen they have to include this."*

*"If I could speak to my 16-year-old self today, I would just say to watch what happens to people on legal highs. That would have been enough for me to stay away."*

# Legality

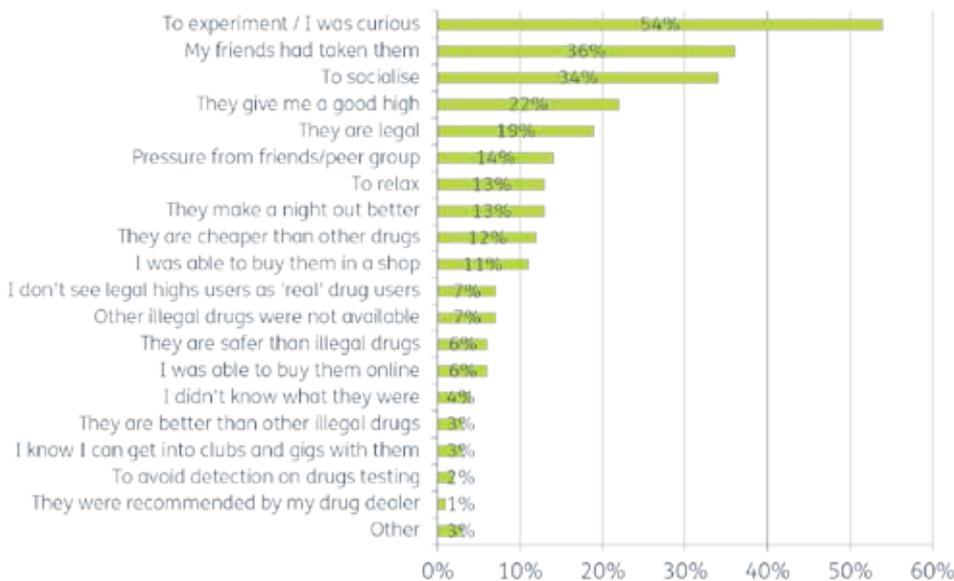
The Psychoactive Substances Act will make it an offence to produce, supply or offer to supply any psychoactive substance if it is likely to be used for its psychoactive effects. The blanket nature of the ban is all-encompassing and makes no distinction between the relative levels of harms caused by different substances.

The ban is primarily designed to tackle the shops and websites that are currently selling legal highs to individuals, and it clearly puts the onus on the sellers and producers of a substance to ensure that it is not 'likely' to be consumed for psychoactive substances.

However, the findings from this research indicated that the Act is only likely to be partially successful in reducing legal highs use among young people in England and Wales. Less than half (47%) of young people currently taking legal highs said that criminalising legal highs will decrease their usage.

While the legality of substances undoubtedly made them appealing for some, only 19% of legal highs users recognised the legal status of a substance as a main reason for taking it, making it the fifth most popular reason for taking legal highs after curiosity, friends' usage, socialising and the high that they give.

What are the main reasons you take/ have previously taken legal highs?  
(n=500)



However, young people also recognised the cheapness of legal highs (12%), ability to purchase them in a shop (11%), ability to buy them online (6%), ability to get into clubs and gigs with them (3%) and avoidance of drugs testing (2%) as reasons for using legal highs. These are inevitably linked, to a certain extent, to their current legal status and will be affected by the ban.

Young people are fundamentally split on whether legal highs should be made illegal and on the effect that the ban will have on both usage and harm experienced by young people.

*“The ban doesn’t stop anything. The ban is for the police to say ‘It’s illegal now, you’re arrested’, it’s not for us and anyone who is using it.”*

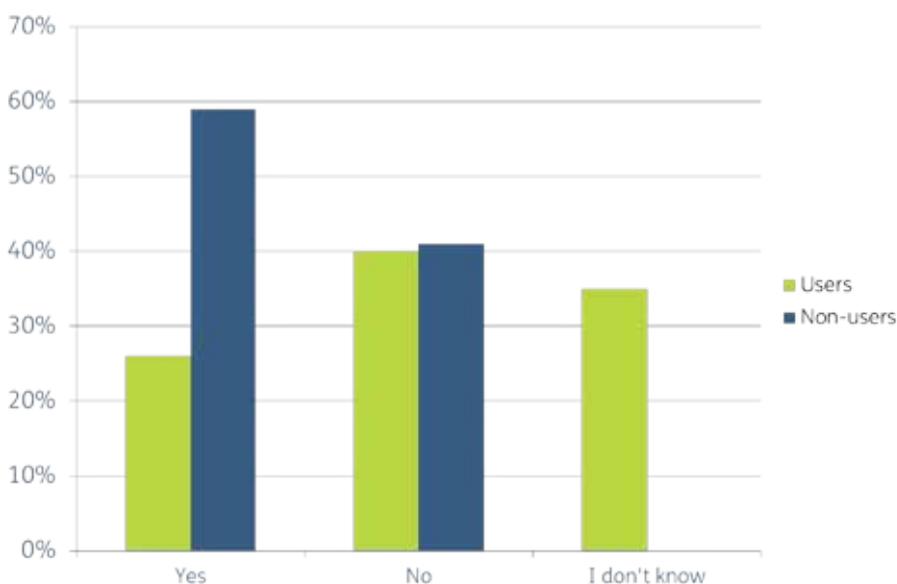
Danny, 22, North West

*“It’s alright the Government doing a blanket ban but we know that doesn’t work. Look how many illegal drugs there are and how easy people get them. Blanket bans do not work.”*

Robert, 24, London

The results of the research revealed that support for making legal highs illegal was higher among those who have never used legal highs (59%) than those who have (26%).

Do you think legal highs should be made illegal?  
(n=1,005)



Again the evidence collected in the research showed a divide in the opinions given by those who had experience of taking Laughing Gas and Poppers compared to those who had experience of substances like Spice and Black Mamba.

Individuals participating in the research were almost unanimous in their opinion that Laughing Gas does not constitute an explicit threat to young people when taken and should therefore not be made illegal. The majority of users reported taking the substance on a casual basis in a social environment, predominately at house parties with friends and at festivals.

On the other end of the spectrum, young people expressed confusion over the classification of synthetic cannabinoid substances like Spice and Black Mamba.

Many of the young people taking Spice and Black Mamba describe the effects of it, and the withdrawal symptoms when not taking it, as akin to Heroin, yet that this is not reflected in current drug laws.

*“I started researching it when I started getting all the symptoms from not having it [Spice], and then that’s when I actually realised that the withdrawals are actually really similar to Heroin. I thought to myself ‘like woah, I don’t want to be doing Heroin’.”*

Jay, 18, South East England

*“We’ve got two friends who have got off Heroin with Spice, but now they are addicted to Spice.”*

Jade, 23, South East England

The severity of the substances and the huge harm that they are having on young people, both in terms of their health and wellbeing and on their lives, is not reflected under the ban, which puts all substances in the same category.

Accordingly, many of the young people participating in the research did not feel that the current UK drugs laws accurately reflect the harms associated with different substances, which for many, fundamentally undermined their confidence in them.

*“Every drug that gets brought up gets shown to be such a bad thing and yet it’s just the same thing over and over again. Smoking, drinking, drugs, everything, it just gets shown in the same light so everything’s bad, so nowadays at 13 or 14 kids are thinking well everything is bad so what can I do? I’ll just do something anyway.”*

Mercy, 18, Yorkshire and Humber

*“Government decisions around drug policy are to do with national headline horror stories.”*

Mark, 24, East of England

This distrust in UK drug laws is particularly prevalent around Cannabis, and the perceived harm that the drug has compared to substances like Spice and Black Mamba.

Furthermore, many individuals (41% of current users and 31% of past legal highs users) report using legal highs – specifically synthetic cannabinoids - and Cannabis simultaneously. For these individuals the differences in perceived harms between the different substances are particularly pertinent when critiquing drug laws.

*“It just doesn’t make sense, like Weed, Cannabis is illegal, but legal highs are legal but they do more damage to you than what Cannabis would.”*

Jess, 19, South East England

To counteract the mistrust that many young people have towards the Government to provide impartial information on drugs, and to create confidence in UK drug laws, they must be reformed based on evidence of the harm that each substance can have.

In addition to making sure drug laws reflect harm as well as usage, young people should be made more aware of them and the legal ramifications that are associated with the use of different substances.

A number of the young people participating in the research were unaware of the Psychoactive Substances Act and were unclear about the legality of a number of substances. It is important that the Act is communicated clearly and that young people are aware of the changes.

While many young people reported paying little consideration to the legality of the substances they are taking, it is important that they have all the information in order to make an informed decision.

As already stated, evidence collected by YMCA suggests that the ban on legal highs will only have a partial effect on the legal highs usage of young people across England and Wales.

Many young people involved in the research were sceptical that Government intervention would ever be able to stop legal highs use among young people.

*“Banning it is a good move, but also a terrible option.”*  
Alex, 20, East of England

*“At the end of the day the Government is fighting a cause that they’re never going to win.”*  
Levi, 24, Wales

Given the prevalence of illegal drugs in society it is clear that a demand for drugs of some sort will still exist after the ban has come into force. Similarly, the link between illegal drugs and legal highs use previously identified illustrates that it is unlikely that the ban will act as a deterrent for many individuals.

Instead, many of the young people involved in the research felt that banning substances would merely push activity into the hands of dealers and criminalise current activity, which could increase the harms experienced by young people.

*“If it’s illegal there will be more dealers out there doing it and they’ll be able to get more money out of it because customers will be available to them.”*  
Liam, 23, London

*“You are giving the power to drug dealers basically. Young people are going to go to drug dealers to buy these psychoactive substances and a dealer is not going to ask for ID.”*  
Josh, 24, Wales

While the ban on legal highs will inevitably have some success in decreasing legal highs usage among some individuals, there is a danger that this reduction will occur primarily among more casual users and those using the less harmful legal highs.

The success of the Act therefore should not be measured purely in these terms. Instead an assessment should be done on the relative harms that are experienced by young people as a result of their use. The Government should commit to reviewing the effects of the legislation on both the usage of legal highs and the harms they cause and make changes as necessary.

## Recommendations

- ▶ **To undertake a review of current drug laws to consider how the classification and enforcement can better reflect the harms posed by substances including legal highs.**
- ▶ **To promote the existing and new drug laws clearly to young people to ensure they are made aware of the legal ramifications of their actions and can make better informed decisions.**
- ▶ **To commit to undertaking a full review of the Psychoactive Substances Act, which examines its impact on both the usage and harms that legal highs have on young people.**

# Information

As revealed previously, the majority of legal highs users tend to take those substances with the least perceived harms attached to them. This tends to be on an infrequent basis, experiencing little lasting damage to their lives or health and wellbeing as a result.

However, at the other end of the spectrum, young people are taking substances about which they have little information, and which are causing serious amounts of harm and in some cases even death.

By nature drug use, illegal or legal, is experimental. Certainly, more than half (54%) of the legal highs users surveyed stated that ‘to experiment / I was curious’ was a primary reason for taking legal highs, making it the number one reason for usage.

However, young people’s curiosity is not matched by adequate knowledge about legal highs, with only 37% of survey respondents stating that they felt sufficiently informed about legal highs. Interestingly, there was little difference between the reported knowledge of those who have used legal highs compared to those who have not.

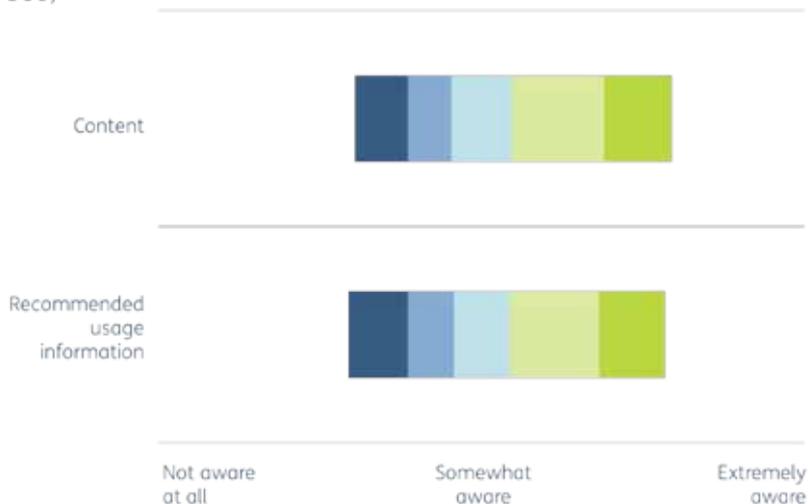
How informed do you think you are you about legal highs?  
(n=1,005)



Despite having used legal highs at some point in the past, less than half of legal highs users surveyed felt they were aware of the content and recommended usage information of the substances they were taking.

*“I don’t think people understand what they’re getting into.”*  
Alex, 20, East of England

When taking legal highs, how aware are you of its content and recommended usage information?  
(n=500)



This lack of information is potentially putting the health and wellbeing of young people at risk as they take substances they have little knowledge about and at quantities they do not know are safe.

The nature of legal highs as synthetic substitutes of currently illegal drugs means that many are active at quantities significantly lower than their more traditional counterparts and replicating these dosages could potentially be dangerous.

This issue was specifically highlighted with synthetic cannabinoids type substances like Spice and Black Mamba, which young people were taking after having experience of taking Cannabis, not realising the huge differences that exist between the effects and harms associated with the two.

*“For us, it just got really dry for Weed around here and there was this guy who was on legal highs and he was basically like ‘try these, it’s just like Weed’. And you try them, and, well it’s not.”*

Antony, 18, Yorkshire and Humber

*“When I first started drugs I was getting introduced to Spice and Weed and I didn’t even know which were bad, I didn’t even know that Spice wasn’t Weed at first.”*

Leah, 17, Yorkshire and Humber

Accordingly, many young people started smoking substances that were likened to Cannabis, not knowing that its effects and withdrawal symptoms were more closely akin to Heroin. While those taking part in research recognised the dangers of Heroin and stated that they would never try it, many were then inadvertently taking substances, which effectively replicated its effects.

*“You don’t see young people jumping into Heroin as when you’re in school you get it battered into your head that Heroin is bad, bad, bad. The word Heroin is a scary word. To say the word Heroin is a swear word.”*

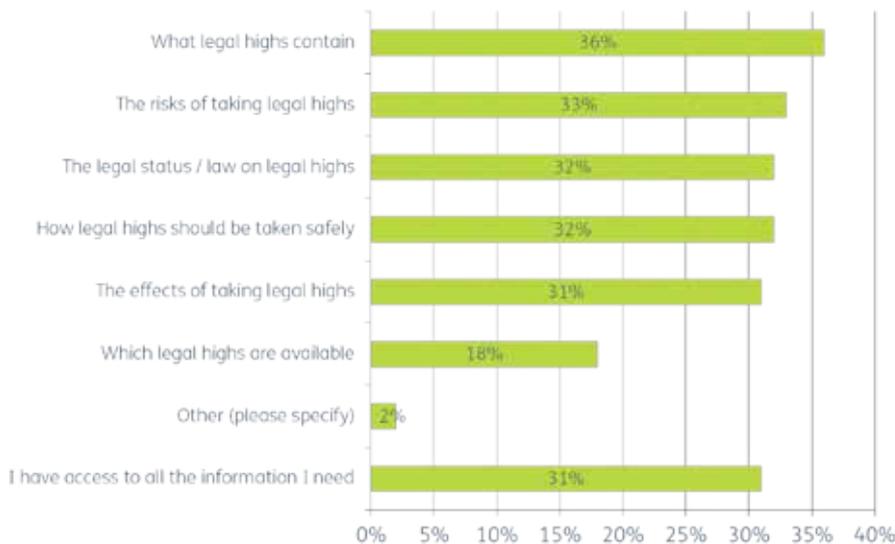
Josh, 21, South East England

To limit the harms associated with legal highs it is important that young people are given accurate and impartial information about what they are taking, which then allows them to make an informed judgement.

When asked about the information they would like on legal highs that they didn't already have access to, less than a third of users surveyed said that they had all the information they required.

The main areas where young people were interested in accessing more information on what legal highs contain (36%), the risks of taking legal highs (33%), how legal highs should be taken safely (32%) and the effects of taking legal highs (31%).

Is there any information that you would like on legal highs that you cannot currently access?  
(n=500)



Crucially, for this group of young people, not having access to this information has not prevented them from taking legal highs. Instead they are still using the substances but are often ill-informed about exactly what it is they are taking, how to take it and the harms associated with it.

While there is clearly a need for young people to have more information about legal highs and drugs more generally, there is often a severe distrust among young people about the information that they are currently given in schools and by the Government.

As examined in previous sections, while the current drug classification system is meant to represent the dangers associated with different drugs, many young people find that it does not match their experiences and therefore question the legitimacy of the system.

Similarly, many young people find the information given to them in schools to be focused too much around abstinence, rather than providing a balanced picture of both the harms and potential effects of drug use.

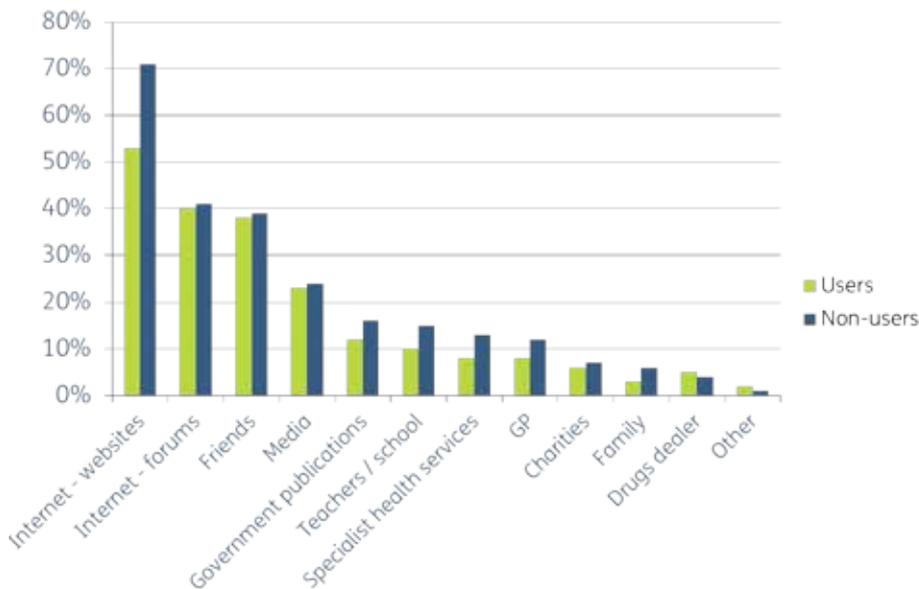
*“When I was in school all we learnt was that drugs were bad and that we shouldn't take them.”*  
Laura, 22, London

*“If I think back to the drug lessons we had in schools, it was all very much about Heroin dens and sitting in a horrible old house on soiled mattresses shooting up – The ‘Trainspotting’ images of drugs. You don't hear about the recreational side.”*  
Sebastian, 22, East Midlands

*“It's like at school, you listen to your mates more than a teacher. You'll listen to more people on your level rather than the Government.”*  
Jack, 19, West Midlands

Given this mistrust of official sources of information, many young people are turning to alternative sources of information, with research revealing that young people are more likely to access information from the internet via websites (62%) and online drugs/legal highs forums (40%) than they are government publications (14%) or teachers/their school (12%).

Where do you access information about legal highs?  
(n=1,005)



This rejection of official information in the most extreme cases can lead to rebellion with some young people seeking to try substances purely because they have been told that they shouldn't.

*"I think the main reason I actually went and tried it was to see whether what he [my science teacher] was saying was a load of rubbish."*  
Kieron, 17, Yorkshire and Humber

While reforming drug laws based on the evidence of harm surrounding different substances would go some way to increase the credibility of information, it is clear that young people must be provided with impartial information from a trusted source in order to counteract the desire for rebellion.

Often the individuals that young people feel are most qualified to provide information and advice are those who have experience of substance use themselves, with the lived experience providing a level of credibility that others do not have.

*"If they got told by someone like an adult, some mid-thirties person, they think they are being spoken down to and are just going to ignore them. If you speak to them on a one-to-one level, with someone round about the same age or who knows what they are talking about, they are going to be able to connect to them."*  
Stephen, 23, North East

*"People are more likely to talk to people who have been through it themselves rather than people who are trying to preach to the choir."*  
Elizabeth, 21, East of England

*"You should be taught differently about drugs, you shouldn't just be told bad, bad, bad."*  
Liam, 20, North East

This use of responsible and impartial information on legal highs and drugs more generally should extend beyond the school environment and echoed in society more generally. This will help to foster an environment where young people are able to talk openly and honestly about substance use and any issues they are having.

*“You’ve got to get rid of the taboo, so you can talk to your family or people like them about it.”*  
Jacob, 22, Yorkshire and Humber

Of those young people surveyed, 24% of young people currently get their information on legal highs from the media. However, to date media coverage of legal highs has often been unrepresentative of the experiences that many young people have with both legal and illegal drugs.

In order to facilitate more open discussion about legal highs, it is important that the media report on their usage responsibly so as not to succeed in closing this channel of communication between young people and adults and discourage young people from seeking help and support when needed.

## Recommendations

- ▶ **To promote accurate and impartial drugs education in schools and colleges, which includes information on legal highs, and is delivered by people with lived experience of substance use.**
- ▶ **To encourage responsibility within the media when reporting on legal highs and drugs more generally.**

## Stephen, 23, North East

*"I had dabbled in Cannabis and I wanted to see what legal highs were like but I didn't know how addictive they were. I had just finished college, I didn't have a job and I was bored. I would still have bought them if they were banned; if anything, it would have made me more determined to get them."*

Stephen, 23, started his own withdrawal from legal highs on Christmas Day 2015. It took seven days for the vomiting, headaches, panic attacks and heart palpitations to end. Now, he is using his experience and the experience of many of his friends to help other people in the same position.

*"Getting off legal highs was the single hardest thing I've ever done - it would have been easier to climb Mount Everest,"* says Stephen now a peer mentor on YMCA Sunderland's Mad 4 U project.

*"I got off them with the support of YMCA. The help was in the right place at the right time. When I was going through withdrawal, though, I couldn't trust anyone. I locked myself into my room in a panic and my heart didn't feel right. I thought I was going to die."*

*"Now I use my experiences to support other young people who are going through the same thing. They listen and relate to me because I've been there already."*

Stephen started taking legal highs in 2014. He had previously smoked Cannabis with friends and, after leaving college and struggling to find work, he found himself hanging around Sunderland city centre, bored and looking for something to do. Wanting to try different, Stephen first took spice - a synthetic cannabinoid - and says he was hooked straight away.

He says: *"I didn't think about it at first and it actually took two months for me to realise how bad it was. Unfortunately, by then it was too late."*

*"Two shops were selling legal highs in Sunderland at the time. At the beginning, I could buy a gram of spice for £6 and that would last me a full day. My friends did it and although I was never pressured, I was certainly encouraged to do it."*

Eventually, Stephen was kicked out of his parents' home as his life slowly began to revolve around feeding his habit. He moved into YMCA and accepted help from his keyworkers to quit.

Soon after becoming clean, he joined the Mad 4 U project that gives 16 to 25-year-olds the chance to run their own support and education programmes on the issues affecting them and their peers.

Stephen helped to create a legal highs presentation that has since been given to local councils, social service workers and YMCA clients and has helped other young people to stop taking legal highs.

However, despite his experience, he says that criminalising the substances will only go so far in stopping the problem.

He says: *"I would still have bought legal highs even if they were banned; if anything, it would just have made me more determined to get hold of them."*

*"You can't stop people using the substances simply by banishing them. Instead, the focus needs to be on educating more people on the issues they cause and the dangers they pose."*

*"It is only by people understanding this that changes will be made."*

# Support

---

Given the prevalence of illegal drugs in society, despite repeated government attempts to curb use with legislation, legal highs are unlikely to buck the trend.

Many young people, including those entrenched in their addiction to substances such as Spice, are likely to be unperturbed by this ban on legal highs and the demand will still continue. Accordingly, circulation will still continue in some form after the introduction of the Psychoactive Substances Act.

*“Drugs, whether illegal or legal, most people are only three phone calls away from being able to access. To me that just says that making something illegal doesn’t necessarily make it hard to get hold of.”*  
Mark, 24, East of England

Given the harms that many young people have reported from legal highs use it is clear the Government had to take action. However, the introduction of a ban must not distract from the need to invest in effective and specific drug support agencies that are able to help those individuals for whom legal highs use has become problematic.

Therefore, as previously mentioned the success of the Act must not purely be measured in terms of the number of people using legal highs but also the relative levels of harm experienced by those individuals who do choose to take these substances.

Currently, young people have little faith in many drug support agencies to be able to deliver effective support for those on legal highs. The fluidity of the drug market and ever changing chemical compounds make legal highs notoriously difficult to tackle.

*“You need to have places where people can walk in and say they want to quit.”*  
Liam, 20, North East

*“They told me to buy Spice to calm down, that’s the only thing they knew what to do.”*  
Jade, 23, South East England

It is important that drug support services, and individuals working with those most likely to be affected by legal highs, are provided with the most up-to-date information and training as possible so that they are prepared to tackle the effects of legal highs usage.

While the difficulties associated with this are noted, the Government should provide more investment to allow for effective monitoring of the UK drug landscape, the drugs in circulation, their effects and harms, and the dissemination of information from a centralised source.

It is also important that young people feel able to access services without fear of criminalisation or prosecution. While possession will not be made illegal under the Act, the ban will likely do little to address the taboo that currently exists around drug use, which could make young people less likely to seek help when they need it. This is especially pertinent given the link between legal and illegal drug use with the vast majority of legal highs users having also used an illegal drug.

*“I think the support is hard to find if you’re scared of getting in trouble. Say you’re a 16-year-old kid and you’ve taken something and it’s not going well, my first thought would be that I can’t go to hospital because they will tell my parents or I can’t go to hospital or they will call the police.”*  
Sebastian, 22, East Midlands

---

For many of the young people participating in the research, coming off Spice and other synthetic cannabinoids substances was harder than expected. Many reported painful and lengthy withdrawal processes which were akin to that you would expect from illegal drugs. The majority of the people taking part in the research underwent the process without support from specialised services.

*“I locked myself in my bedroom for a week and went cold turkey... I was smashing things up in my room, I was so evil to people it was unreal, like my behaviour totally turned for the worse, it was not nice.”*

Callum, 17, Yorkshire and Humber

*“I’ve quit [Spice] before and the flu symptoms lasted for four-days, it was the worst four days of my life, I felt like slitting my wrists, I felt like killing people, I felt like killing myself.”*

Josh, 21, South East England

Given the severity of the withdrawal process it is inevitable that many young people attempting to detox alone will not succeed. It is vital that these young people have access to specialised drug support services that can assist them in the process.

However, currently many young people either do not know where to get help, or find the practicalities of accessing services to be a major barrier to access. Accordingly, drug support services should provide more outreach services to ensure that young people can get help when and where they need it.

Specialist drug outreach services are critical to supporting those coming-off legal highs and reducing the harm associated with these substances. However, given the reticence of some young people to visit official services the need for additional support mechanisms are clear.

For those young people who may not feel comfortable accessing formal legal highs services, it is important that more informal peer-to-peer support is available as a first port of call. In a similar way to education, this provision should focus on individuals with lived experience of substance use as it provides a level of reputability for young people.

The nuances between different legal highs users must also be recognised with support services targeted at all levels. While rehabilitation centres for those whose use is most entrenched are critical, services should also be accessible for casual or infrequent users needing immediate medical attention rather than longer-term treatment.

These services are particularly important in areas where young people are likely to take legal highs, such as at music festivals and nightclubs, as the third and fourth most common locations for usage respectively.

Harm reduction messaging should be in place to warn young people about the dangers of taking legal highs, but individuals must simultaneously feel comfortable accessing help if needed without fear of retribution.

Accordingly, the availability of specialist drug clinics should be expanded across England and Wales to provide support for those who do not need long-term support for dependency but require immediate medical attention.

## Recommendations

- ▶ **To equip drug services to provide specialist legal highs advice and support to ensure young people are able to get help when and where they need to it.**
- ▶ **To put in place arrangements to better monitor the UK drug market focussing on the availability and harms of substances, including legal highs.**
- ▶ **To expand the network of drug clinics available in locations where legal highs usage is most prominent, so young people experiencing harm from legal highs can get medical support.**
- ▶ **To promote peer-to-peer schemes for young people struggling or suffering with legal highs.**

# Conclusions and recommendations

---

While drug use, whether that be legal highs or illegal drugs, is seemingly inevitable, the harms that young people are experiencing in many cases are not.

Historically, government drug policy has focused on prohibition, however, sometimes this has been at the expense of harm reduction, and many young people are suffering as a result.

Evidence uncovered in this research shows that the majority of young people taking legal highs are doing so infrequently, and with very little perceived harm to their health and wellbeing. However, for those whose use is more entrenched, there is a darker side to legal highs that the Government is doing little to address.

The need to act on legal highs usage represents a very real chance to examine the wider way in which we address drug use among young people.

The evidence outlined in this report shows that legal highs usage cannot be viewed in a vacuum but instead is intrinsically linked to illegal drug use for the vast majority of young people taking these substances.

Accordingly, it seems apparent that a ban on legal highs is unlikely to be the absolute solution that the Government hopes, with two thirds of current legal highs users stating that they are likely to use substances in the future.

While access may be reduced, it is likely that the trade in legal highs will be pushed underground and into the hands of the numerous drug dealers who are currently selling illegal drugs, and that this is unlikely to deter many young people.

The well documented use of Spice in prison shows that even in the space that is seemingly most controlled by Government, psychoactive substances are still able to infiltrate.

In order to affect behavioural change the Government must focus on the information, advice and support that is available to young people who may be experiencing harms associated with legal highs.

Currently young people are ill-informed and unprepared for the very real risks that are associated with many legal highs. Throughout the research few young people had positive experiences to report of the harder end of legal highs, but still young people are continuing to experiment with substances akin to Heroin, without prior knowledge.

The trust that young people have in the Government and school system on this issue has seemingly eroded, with many viewing the information available and relevant laws as outdated and unrepresentative of their experiences.

The Government must now work to overcome this barrier and rebuild its credibility in the eyes of young people by facilitating a change in dialogue around legal highs and drugs more generally. This dialogue must allow for open and frank discussions about the effects and harms of drug use, and the support that is available for young people in need.

Accordingly, YMCA is calling on the Government to look beyond the ban and implement the following changes to help reduce the harm suffered by many young people at the hands of legal highs:

- ▶ **Undertake a review of current drug laws to consider how the classification and enforcement can better reflect the harms posed by substances including legal highs.**
- ▶ **Promote the existing and new drug laws clearly to young people to ensure they are made aware of the legal ramifications of their actions and can make better informed decisions.**
- ▶ **Commit to undertaking a full review of the Psychoactive Substances Act, which examines its impact on both the usage and harms that legal highs have on young people.**
- ▶ **Focus enforcement activity on websites and shops continuing to sell legal highs, in particular targeting those selling the most harmful substances such as synthetic cannabinoids.**
- ▶ **Promote accurate and impartial drugs education in schools and colleges, which includes legal highs, and is delivered by people with lived experience of substance use.**
- ▶ **Promote responsibility within the media when reporting on legal highs and drugs more generally.**
- ▶ **Equip drug services to provide specialist legal highs advice and support to ensure young people are able to get help when and where they need to it.**
- ▶ **Put in place arrangements to better monitor the UK drug market focussing on the availability and harms of substances, including legal highs.**
- ▶ **Expand the network of drug clinics available in locations where legal highs usage is most prominent so young people experiencing harm from legal highs can get medical support.**
- ▶ **Promote peer-to-peer schemes for young people struggling or suffering with legal highs.**

# Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> The Home Office, Drug Misuse: Findings from the 2014/15 Crime Survey for England and Wales, second edition, statistical bulletin, July 2015

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Psychoactive Substances Bill 2016

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> BBC, Legal highs: Spice addiction 'made me punch myself', May 2016

<sup>9</sup> Office for National Statistics, 'Deaths involving legal highs in England and Wales: between 2004 and 2013', 28 April 2016

<sup>10</sup> Observer, British Drugs Survey 2014, October 2014

National Council of YMCAs  
29-35 Farringdon Road,  
London,  
EC1M 3JF  
020 7186 9500  
[www.ymca.org.uk](http://www.ymca.org.uk)  
Charity number 212810



YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

SUPPORT & ADVICE

ACCOMMODATION

FAMILY WORK

HEALTH & WELLBEING

TRAINING & EDUCATION