

Home Affairs Committee
House of Commons
London
SW1A 0AA

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Dear Sir or Madam,

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YMCA England response to the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry on psychoactive substances

Patron:
Her Majesty the Queen
President:
The Most Reverend
& Right Honourable
Dr. John Sentamu

Every year YMCA provides drugs and alcohol counselling to over 5,000 young people. YMCA is committed to creating healthy, sustainable communities in which people can fulfil their aspirations. We are also the largest voluntary sector provider of activities and services that promote health and wellbeing in England.

YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. YMCA works with all people regardless of their background, gender or faith, however central to our work is supporting those most vulnerable and in the communities with the greatest needs.

YMCA launched its Manifesto, *We Believe*, in Parliament on the 10th March 2015. The manifesto development process engaged over 350 people, including the five main stakeholders for YMCAs; its chief executives, staff, trustees, young people and service users. It is the thoughts and experiences of these stakeholders that form the basis of this response.

A theme which consistently occurred during this development was the negative impact that drugs and alcohol were having on young people. Further to this was the danger which access to legal highs within communities posed.

Which groups will be particularly affected by a ban on psychoactive substances?

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.



- 1 According to the latest Home Office statistics on drug misuse¹ 174,000 young people in England and Wales have used new psychoactive substances (NPS) in the last year, equating to around 1 in 40 (2.8%) of 16 to 24 year olds taking them. In particular the use of NPS is concentrated among young men aged 16 to 24 with 4% of the group having used them in the past year, accounting for almost half of users. As such it is young people, in particular young men, who are most likely to be affected by a ban on psychoactive substances.
 - 1.1 People who have consumed alcohol once or more in the last month were significantly more likely to have used an NPS in the last year. Among young adults aged 16 to 24 who had consumed alcohol once or more in the last month, 4% had also used an NPS compared with only 0.8% of those who had not had any alcohol. Accordingly, those young people who drink alcohol, even in moderation, are more likely to be affected by the ban.
 - 1.2 NPS are often used in conjunction with other substances, including illegal drugs, and approximately 84% of young adults who have used NPS have also used other illicit drugs in the past year.² As such, the use of the two are often interlinked and a ban on psychoactive substances is likely to affect those who also take illegal drugs.

What steps can the Government take to educate these groups about the dangers?

- 2 Early education is key if the Government want to allow young people to make informed decisions and limit the use of NPS. YMCA's experience of providing drug and alcohol counselling to over 5,000 participants has shown that generally young people do not understand the dangers associated with taking NPS, many of which are untested and have side-effects that are unknown. Early education would help to combat this.
 - 2.1 Schools are the easiest point of access to young people but the pressures on the curriculum are already high. The young people taking part in YMCA consultations expressed frustration with personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, stating that it was often used as a 'filler' class

¹ Home Office, *Drug Misuse: Findings from the 2014/15 Crime Survey for England and Wales, Statistical Bulletin 03/15*, edited by Deborah Lader, July 2015
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/450181/drug-misuse-1415.pdf

² Home Office, *Drug Misuse: Findings from the 2014/15 Crime Survey for England and Wales, Statistical Bulletin 03/15*, edited by Deborah Lader, July 2015
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/450181/drug-misuse-1415.pdf

rather than a meaningful lesson. The subject would provide the perfect opportunity to educate young people about NPS but this must be done in an engaging way that young people can relate to. As such the use of youth workers, school nurses or similar to provide education in a more personal and meaningful way would be useful in reaching young people who might not listen to a teacher in the same way.

- 2.2 Similarly, it is often the danger associated with NPS that makes them attractive to young people and accordingly messages from traditional sources are unlikely to reach them. The use of peer mentors/volunteers who are able to speak to these young people on a more individual level would help to break down the barriers between young people and service providers.
- 2.3 Often young people's behaviour is influenced by their home life and as such, the family is crucial in affecting behavioural change. The use of NPS, and other illegal substances, is something that some children and young people encounter at home which normalises the experience. In these cases it is important that information and support is provided to affect behaviour change in the whole family and consequently reduce the usage of NPS amongst adults and young people alike.
- 2.4 While education is crucial, its effect is often limited by the nature of NPS and the lack of information that is available. Whilst illegal drugs are relatively well established and known about, the nature of NPS means that new drugs are being created all the time, often with increasingly obscure substances that are likely to be poorly understood. As such it is difficult for the educators to stay ahead of the changing drug environment and relay these changes to young people in a meaningful and effective way.

How will the Government explain the change in the legal status of these substances?

- 3 Any change in the legal status of NPS must be properly communicated, especially to young people who are often misinformed about the legality of certain substances. The Psychoactive Substances Bill will effectively create a two-tier system in which while all drugs are illegal, possession will result in different implications depending on the substance in question. This is likely to be confusing for people and it is important that the distinction between the two is well known.

- 3.1 YMCA welcomes the decision not to include non-personal prosecution in the Bill. However, given the fact that almost 20%³ of NPS tested were found to contain a controlled (illegal) drug, making any person possessing it liable to arrest and prosecution, young people must be informed about the risks associated with NPS use despite the fact that there is no personal possession offence included in the Bill.

What specialist treatment do users of psychoactive substances require?

- 4 As previously noted, NPS are often not used in isolation and 84% of young adults aged 18 to 24 who have used NPS have also used another illicit drug in the past year. Accordingly, treatment for users of psychoactive substances is likely to be needed to be combined with treatment for a wider range of substance abuse to be truly effective.
- 4.1 There is often a stigma attached to accessing services and work needs to be done to encourage those who need help to seek it. There is a perception that services are for those people with drug dependencies rather than occasional users and thus the latter group are unlikely to access them and seek support.⁴ It is important that services are applicable to people on all ends of the spectrum of drug use, whether that is NPS or more traditional illegal drugs.
- 4.2 Similarly, it is important that services tailor messaging to meet the needs of the different audiences. For those users which are particularly hard to reach and for which drug use is particularly entrenched preaching abstinence is unlikely to have a positive effect. In such cases it is important that users are taught how to mitigate some of the dangers associated with drug use so as to reduce harm.
- 4.3 This approach will likely help to foster a better relationship between the user and service provider and consequently increase the likelihood of the person accessing more intensive services at a later date. This will have a greater overall benefit on the health of the individual.

³ Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust, Club Drug Clinic: Legal highs or research chemicals' <http://clubdrugclinic.cnwl.nhs.uk/club-drugs/drugs-we-work/legal-highs/> [Accessed 26 August 2015]

⁴ Barnard, M. and Russel, C. 'The Use and Responses to 'Legal Highs'/ Novel Psychoactive Substances: A Needs Assessment for Buckinghamshire County Council, 25th November 2015, p. 19

- 4.4 When people do seek help, often there is a lack of availability and funding for services.⁵ Given the proliferation of NPS use it is likely that the new Psychoactive Substances Bill will require increasing resources and funding to implement.
- 4.5 It is important that the additional resources for enforcement are not provided at the expense of services aimed at helping those using NPS to quit. The introduction of the Bill will not eradicate the pre-existing demand for NPS and as such interventions aimed at helping those in need transition into sobriety are likely to be the most effective in reducing the use of such substances.
- 4.6 As previously noted, the difficulty in addressing NPS is the sheer number of substances and their ever changing nature. While more traditional drugs and their side-effects are known to service providers, often NPS have unpredictable results which make them harder to manage and treat. In order to support services, including YMCAs who work with young people frequently, up-to-date information must be provided about what users are taking and how best to help.
- 4.7 Drug and NPS use are often linked to wider mental health issues. However, too often the cyclic and interdependent nature of these go unrecognised as young people are forced to seek treatment for drug abuse before they can receive help with mental health problems. This often proves ineffective as young people tend to alternate between the two sets of services making the cycle of substance abuse unlikely to end. Instead, where applicable, drug and mental health services must work together in order to provide the most comprehensive and effective care for young people.
- 4.8 In order to minimise the harm to young people taking NPS, users should be provided with a safe space to go and seek help when needed. One example of a service is the SOS Bus⁶ at Southend YMCA which provides people with a safe haven in which they have access to first aiders, youth and voluntary workers and a selection of alcohol, drug and solvent abuse advisors.
- 4.9 The bus is positioned in the town centre between 9pm and 4am on Friday and Saturday nights and a mobile support vehicle is used to collect vulnerable people from other parts of town and take them to the bus. The

⁵ BBC News, 'Drug-related deaths reach highest level on record', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-34051104> [Accessed 28 August 2015]

⁶ <http://www.southendymca.org.uk/all-projects/sos-bus>

vehicle also carries out regular patrols of the town to areas where there might be particularly vulnerable people.

What can be done to counter a shift to using controlled drugs once there is a ban?

- 5 As previously mentioned banning NPS is unlikely to get rid of the demand for such products and the market is such that new sources will meet this. Accordingly the Government should focus its efforts on education and early intervention to help ensure that casual NPS users do not go on to become more prolific users.
 - 5.1 Accordingly, early intervention services should be both youth friendly and accessible. Users must feel free to access the service without fear of judgement or prosecution if it is to be effective in helping users of NPS to stop.
 - 5.2 The young people that spoke to YMCA often cited boredom as a reason to take NPS. Youth services provide young people with positive activities to partake in as a valid alternative and also a place where they can seek advice on issues such as NPS use.
 - 5.3 It is important therefore that youth services are invested in. Despite this, over the past five years the role of youth services have diminished significantly as local authorities have had to operate under reduced budgets and there is consistent evidence which shows that youth services have been an easy and frequent target when looking to make savings.⁷

Do the enforcement agencies have the necessary powers and resources to effectively enforce the proposed new laws?

- 6 As previously noted, the nature of NPS makes them particularly hard to police and as such effectively enforcing the proposed new laws will be difficult given current resources. For young adults aged 16 to 24, shops, friends neighbours or colleagues, or a known dealer were the most popular sources of NPS⁸ (39%, 37% and 12%, respectively). While the new laws will make NPS harder to access, particularly via shops, it is likely that the market

⁷ UNISON, *The Damage* – The UK's youth services: How cuts are removing opportunities for young people and damaging their lives, <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2014/07/On-line-Catalogue225322.pdf>, August 2014

⁸ Home Office, *Drug Misuse: Findings from the 2014/15 Crime Survey for England and Wales, Statistical Bulletin 03/15*, edited by Deborah Lader, July 2015 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/450181/drug-misuse-1415.pdf

will adapt to this and substances will become available via alternative means, most probably known dealers.

- 6.1 Enforcing the proposed new laws is made more difficult by the lack of definition of what constitutes 'psycho-activity' and the necessary testing that would be required on each substance to determine its legality. This testing is time consuming and expensive⁹ especially given the sheer number of substances and their ever changing state.
- 6.2 This point is illustrated by the study of use and responses to 'legal highs'/NPS use in Buckinghamshire,¹⁰ which revealed that after excluding alcohol, tobacco and substances regulated as Class A in the UK, people reported using 335 distinct substances which could commonly be referred to as 'legal highs'.

If you require any further information or have any follow-up questions regarding our response, please do not hesitate to get in touch using the contact details included.

Yours faithfully,



Denise Hatton
YMCA England
Chief Executive

⁹ Centre for Drug Misuse Research, 'The Use and Responses to 'Legal Highs/Novel Psychoactive Substances: A Needs Assessment for Buckinghamshire County Council', 25th November 2015

¹⁰ Ibid.