

Executive Summary

New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) which are commonly known as “legal highs” are drugs deliberately manufactured to mimic the effects of traditional recreational drugs, although often marketed as “legal” alternatives, selling new psychoactive substances for human consumption is illegal and poses a serious risks to public health and safety and has proven to result in fatalities.

Within Edinburgh, Police Scotland and the City of Edinburgh Council Community Safety Team respectively reported increases in the volume of anti-social behaviour and discarded paraphernalia in the vicinity of ‘head shops’ and other premises selling NPS. Analysis of the evidence from partners clearly showed an increase in the use of NPS, especially those that were injected. This resulted in the formation of a Community Improvement Partnership to address this growing issue.

The project focused on reducing the harm caused by these products with the aims of; constraining the availability of NPS, educating young people and the community about the dangers of NPS and working in partnership to coordinate actions and pieces of work to tackle the issue.

The project developed a strategy to interact with the NPS providers, created an education and awareness event and examined legislation with the view to formulating change relating to preventing the legitimate sale of NPS products.

The holistic approach resulted in a large decrease in the use of NPS and a significant increase in the awareness of the dangers associated with NPS use. This was evidenced by reductions in the demand for front line services such as NHS and needle exchanges. In particular the staphylococcus and streptococcus epidemic that had been directly attributed to the use of ethylphenidate based NPS products was declared over in October 2015. This was attributed to the use of Temporary Class Drug Order (TCDO) to limit the availability of specific substances used in intravenous NPS use.

This project won the Early Intervention and Education Safer Communities Award 2016

Background and Aims

In 2015, partners in Edinburgh initiated a Community Improvement Partnership (CIP) to tackle the challenges caused by increases in the use of New Psychoactive Substances (NPS). Data collected from the NHS Harm Reduction Team and the Needle Exchange Outreach Network (NEON) evidenced that the use of injectable NPS and the demand for needles had increase rapidly and had resulted in an epidemic of infections attributed to the toxic nature of the injectable NPS.

The partnership included members from the City of Edinburgh Council, Edinburgh Division (Police Scotland), Edinburgh Alcohol and Drugs Partnership and NHS Lothian.

The project aimed to reduce the harmful effects that NPS by applying for new legislation to disrupt the sale of NPS products, and developing an education programme to increase awareness of the dangers of NPS use.

Activities

The CIP collected data to monitor activity associated with NPS use, including:

- Number of transactions at Needle Exchange where users report NPS use
- Admissions to the Poisons Ward at the Royal Infirmary Edinburgh (RIE)
- Number of outlets supplying the substances
- Levels of antisocial behaviour
- Levels of violent crime
- Surveys into the types of NPS use and the level of the problem were conducted by Police and Trading Standards.

Police and Trading Standards undertook a survey of the various stakeholders and it became clear that the local situation differed markedly from national trends with a clear propensity for users to choose intravenous use. Given the health harms and implications for community safety it was deemed appropriate to escalate matters to the UK Government and, as a consequence, officers from Edinburgh Division presented the situation to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) on 5 March 2015. The ACMD advice was to place ethylphenidate and its analogues under a Temporary Class Drug Order (TCDO), which was introduced on 10 April 2015 making the manufacture and distribution of products containing this compound illegal.

In October 2015, Edinburgh Division were invited back to the ACMD and delivered a further presentation, highlighting the developing concerns regarding a new NPS product methiopropamine. Following this, a Temporary Class Drug Order in respect of methiopropamine came into force on the 28th November 2015.

A case was then developed to seek Forfeiture Orders for products under General Product Safety Regulations 2005. The forfeiture order was the first in Scotland and stopped the legitimate sale of NPS in Edinburgh ahead of the introduction of the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016.

On receipt of the forfeiture order Trading Standards and Police Scotland conducted visits to all NPS retailers and providing written intimation of the recent ruling, and advising that should they continue to sell NPS for human consumption they would be prosecuted.

An education event 'Legal Highs – Lethal Lows – Are you the Experiment?' was also delivered to over 200 pupils, 40 teachers and numerous partners. Speakers included the NHS, CREW 2000 and the Angelus Foundation. Young people and teaching staff were encouraged to visit the Choices for Life website and to explore other useful interactive resources where they could get trusted information about substance misuse, including New Psychoactive Substances.

Impact

The CIP was instrumental in raising awareness and understanding of a problem. It enabled consistent messages to be conveyed to reinforce the message that legal does not mean safe.

Sending letters to retailers informing them of the up and coming legislation changes resulted in retailers ceasing the trade of NPS and over £50,000 of stock was voluntarily forfeited for destruction.

The regulation of the most prolific injectable components of NPS resulted in a large decrease in the incidents of harms resulting from NPS.

The project supported the work being conducted to submit a Psychoactive Substances Bill, which was ratified and agreed as an Act in April 2016.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Data associated with the use of NPS and anti-social behaviour was monitored throughout the project and was collated to evidence the following outcomes:

- Demand on needle services reduced dramatically and there was a reduction in admissions to the Toxicology Department at the Royal Infirmary Edinburgh
- Complaints about discarded needles reduced along with the number of needle finds
- Complaints relating to drug dealing reduced
- Incidents of anti-social behaviour decreased with the residents in the vicinity of head shops reporting feeling safer

Police and Trading Standards continue to monitor the situation around availability of products and at this time there is no overt selling of NPS products within Edinburgh. The Choices for life events evaluation highlighted that the pupils liked hearing the 'real life' story of someone affected by NPS use in her family and hearing about how NPS can affect the teenage brain.

Further analysis of impact has since been commissioned and this work is currently on going with support from the Scottish Institute of Policing Research (SIPR).

Resources

There was no specified budget allocated to the project. Each contributing partner provided their staff and resources.

The awareness raising NPS events for secondary school pupils was funded through Choices for Life, which is a budget external to the project.

Practice Note Information

Practice Note Title:	NPS Community Improvement Partnership (CIP)
Practice Note No:	PN70
Date Produced:	August 2016

Contact Information

Organisation:	Police Scotland
Contact Name:	Liz McAinsh
Email Address:	Edinburghdcu@scotland.pnn.police.uk
Address:	Edinburgh Division Command Support Unit, St Leonards Police Station, 14 St Leonards Street, Edinburgh EH8 9QW