

(SPI0032)

Written evidence submitted by Nottingham Sexual Violence Support Services, Nottingham Trent University Students' Union, The University of Nottingham Students' Union, Nottingham Women's Centre, and the Office of Nadia Whittome MP (SPI0032)

We are a collective of organisations in Nottingham that have been working in partnership to create strategies to combat the recent rise in spikings in our city. This submission includes evidence from Nottingham Sexual Violence Support Services, Nottingham Trent University Students' Union, The University of Nottingham Students' Union, Nottingham Women's Centre, and the Office of Nadia Whittome, Member of Parliament for Nottingham East.

The sharp rise in spikings in our city towards the end of 2021 led us to undertake a number of actions alongside other organisations. We are therefore able to provide evidence of effective partnership working and methods to combat spiking. This submission will focus on how spiking should be prevented and assessed.

1. How effective is partnership working between the police and others in safeguarding potential and actual victims of spiking?

1.1 Partnership working between statutory and other services such as students' unions, support services and businesses in the night time economy is a vital part of safeguarding victims of spiking. Any response must be centred on the detrimental personal impact of spiking and its impact on communities as a whole.

1.2 Spiking is a pernicious form of violence which has been occurring for decades without resolution. When reports of increased spikings and spiking by needle came to light in Nottingham, a meeting was held between relevant organisations to discuss how best to prevent spiking and support victims. We have been impressed with the way in which Nottinghamshire Police, night-time venues, universities and other relevant organisations, including both students' unions in Nottingham, have worked together.

1.3 At Nottingham Trent Students' Union, members had a dim view of the police throughout the pandemic due to how they were treated in the enforcement of Covid legislation. However, the police have handled spiking concerns by engaging effectively with the Students' Union and providing support at every stage to make students feel supported and comfortable.

1.4 These conversations have continued and strategies have been put in place to prevent spiking and protect victims, with regular meetings taking place. A night time economy safety group meets regularly with representatives from services mentioned above. This could be replicated across the country to ensure a victim-led and person-centred approach.

1.5 Inclusion of women's and LGBTQ+ support services in these conversations would be a gold standard approach. The culture of victim blaming that exists around crimes such as spiking needs to be tackled. Nottingham Consent Coalition aims to bring issues regarding consent into everyday conversations. This should be taking place across the country.

1.6 Welfare officers and welfare rooms have now been put in place in two of the biggest nightclubs in Nottingham and a safer taxi scheme has been set up by the University of Nottingham. It is important that services, groups, and organisations work together in a way that is proactive and not just reactive.

1.7 It is clear from the opinions of the students' unions that this partnership working has been a critical part of making students, who are most likely to be victims of spikings, feel safe when enjoying a night out in the city.

2. How effective are the measures used to prevent spiking, including the advice and guidance that is used to train, educate and support those handling this type of crime?

2.1 Whilst awareness and training have been helpful, it is clear from the increase in the number of spiking incidents that this alone is insufficient. We welcome the additional support and resources available to those responding to these incidents, however as previously stated, spiking has been a problem for a long time and this has not improved.

2.2 The experience of the students' unions and their members has been that the appropriateness and efficacy of the response to reports of spiking is dependent upon the individual who is responding to the crime. There needs to be further specific training for all police, A&E staff, and nightclub/night time economy staff on the culture of victim blaming around crimes such as spiking. Regardless of where an individual reports that they have been spiked, they should be believed and receive the same level of professional care and support, both at the time of the incident and after through victim care pathways.

2.3 Spiking is often a precursor to other crimes, such as sexual assault, so it is extremely important that potential victims are supported and not simply removed from venues because they appear "too drunk". Staff in bars and clubs need to be aware that people may be vulnerable to other crimes where they are not given the appropriate support to ensure that they are able to return to a place of safety.

2.4 The response time from statutory services such as the police and in A&E needs to be swift, as a delay decreases the likelihood that testing will uncover evidence of drugs used in spiking. The response when a potential victim presents at A&E must also be sensitive, as the individual may have been a victim of a sexual assault but may not remember or know what has happened to them. Where possible, we believe that specially trained hospital staff and police officers should be the first responders to victims and potential victims of spikings. East Midlands Ambulance Service (EMAS) introduced a vehicle to respond directly to spiking incidents and conduct drug urine tests. Maintaining this service would be a step in ensuring victims are seen immediately and tests conducted swiftly.

3. What barriers to victims face in reporting spiking incidents and obtaining treatment and support?

3.1 As previously mentioned, many conversations around crimes such as spiking involve victim blaming narratives and a culture of disbelief. This means that victims are less likely to report the crime where they feel they will be misunderstood or not believed.

3.2 Whilst spiking occurs often as a form of violence against women, it must be remembered that men and non-binary individuals can also be victims. It is important that gender is not a barrier to victims receiving the support they need, through biases or stereotypes. We must ensure that when communicating about spiking and how to report it our language is inclusive of everyone.

(SPI0032)

3.3 Individuals may be afraid to report incidents of spiking to the police due to previous bad experiences. As noted above, Nottingham Trent University Students' Union had noticed a poor relationship with the police during the pandemic for its members, and this may be a barrier to students reaching out for help and reporting crimes. The police must be seen to be supporting victims, taking appropriate action, and having the requisite knowledge and training to deal with incidents of spiking.

3.4 Where people have chosen to take recreational drugs, they may not feel safe in coming forward when they believe they have been spiked. It is important that people in this position are supported rather than criminalised, and that this is communicated by the police.

3.5 Marginalised communities who find themselves over-policed may also find it difficult to come forward to seek support or report that they have been spiked. The police need to build relationships with these communities that ensure that they are there to protect and serve the community, not prosecute them.

3.6 Conversations around spiking (whether or not) in the context of sexual violence/consent should be part of social awareness. In Nottingham we have many organisations talking every day about consent, through the work of the Consent Coalition/Nottinghamshire's Sexual Violence Action Network. This helps to keep consent (and the wider issues around sexual violence) on the social agenda, which in turn will make spiking behaviour less tolerable generally. When organisations collaborate in this way it enables them to respond and disseminate information more quickly to a wider audience when incidents occur.

3.7 Additionally, the government must consider its own role in creating barriers through its legislation. For example, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill does not instil trust in institutions that exist to protect people and prevent crime. If the government is serious about tackling spiking, it must also take into account the wider picture.

4. Are the police doing enough to identify perpetrators and bring them to justice?

4.1 As stated above, spiking is often a precursor to other crimes, particularly sexual assault. Rape prosecutions across England have fallen despite a rise in reporting. In 2020, fewer than 1 in 60 reports of rape resulted in the perpetrator being charged by the police, a rate of 1.6%. As of July 2020 out of 55,130 recorded rapes, 2,102 led to prosecution, of which 1,439 resulted in conviction. This calls into question the amount of resources being allocated to sexual crimes, and in turn how much resourcing is being provided to bring charges against perpetrators of spiking.

4.2 Since October 2021, Notts Police has received 146 reports of people potentially being spiked by a needle. During the same time period a total number of 143 incidents were also reported of people potentially having their drinks spiked. In total nine people have been arrested so far during investigations into reports made to the force. But to date nobody has been charged.

4.3 It is our understanding that there is no single crime categorisation for spiking and so different police forces record the crime in different ways. We believe that it is important that there be one single category used by police forces across the country for spiking to ensure clear statistics on its prevalence and that it is dealt with with the severity it requires.

4.4 We are also aware of reports that police have been searching people outside nightclubs and in the street and undertaking drug swabs which we do not believe to be effective or helpful in preventing spiking.

4.5 Whilst it is important to aim to ensure justice for people who have been victims of spiking, a preventative approach would be far more beneficial. Where a report of spiking has been made, investigation must begin as swiftly as possible to provide the greatest chance of charging the perpetrator with an offence. This offence must reflect the seriousness of the crime and be uniform across the UK.

5. What role should the government play in tackling this crime?

5.1 Too much of the focus on crimes such as spiking has been reactive where it is vital that a more proactive and preventative approach is taken. It is also important to ensure that the experiences of victims are not weaponised to fit a 'tough on crime' agenda. The government must ensure a proportionate, victim- and support organisation-led approach that avoids re-traumatising survivors. The voices of marginalised communities and how they interact with statutory services such as the police must also be included and listened to. The government should invest in specific training in dealing with spiking incidents for staff in pubs/clubs, A&E, students' unions etc to ensure a linear response to preventing incidents and supporting victims. This should also extend to security staff working in night-time venues.

5.2 The government should ensure uniform ways of working between statutory services such as the police across the country, to ensure that support and justice are not dependent upon a postcode lottery. The government should ensure that there is a specific crime classification for spiking which is used by police forces throughout the UK and should create clear sentencing guidelines.

5.3 Information campaigns around spiking but also on the issue of victim-blaming more generally would be helpful. Discussions around the crime of spiking must focus on the wrongdoing of the perpetrator and not the actions of the victim. There are already a number of products aimed at preventing an individual from being spiked, such as bottle tops and drinks covers, however the impact of these products are minimal and it is not the responsibility of the individual to ensure they are not the victim of a crime. Nottingham Consent Coalition is an excellent example of the efficacy and importance of making conversations about consent part of all aspects of our lives.

5.4 The government must be proactive rather than reactive. As seen in Nottingham, regular safety meetings of local charities and support organisations, statutory services such as the police, students' unions and night time economy businesses should be encouraged. The government should focus on the efficacy of partnership working and commission reports on the efficacy of these kinds of initiatives to inform policy.

5.5 The government should work with the Good Night Out initiative and ensure funding to allow this to continue in partnership with the police and night time economy businesses across the country. It should also continue the Safety of Women at Night Fund.

5.6 Throughout the submission we have provided examples of how spiking can be prevented and dealt with which would be useful in informing the government's response.

(SPI0032)