

Written evidence submitted by Mentor UK

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Mentor is the UK's authoritative voice on protecting children and young people from the harms of alcohol and drugs, bridging the worlds of academic research, policy and on-the-ground practice. We engage with young people in a variety of settings, including schools, criminal justice and community settings, developing and delivering evidence-based prevention programmes to ensure that young people are able to thrive free from the harms of alcohol and drug misuse.

Mentor is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Home Affairs Committee inquiry on psychoactive substances. We welcome the Government's intention to tackle this accelerating issue, and hope that measures to restrict production and distribution of psychoactive substances introduced by the Psychoactive Substances Bill will be bolstered by renewed efforts in drug education and prevention.

Mentor recognises that the speed and scale of the emergence of new and, in some cases, dangerous drugs demands action;¹ and we are therefore supportive of the Government's efforts to tackle the growing impact of new psychoactive substances (NPS). With certain NPS readily available at headshops and on the internet, and with other legislative alternatives unable to keep pace with the volume of new substances, we understand and support the ambition to control the supply of these drugs.

Mentor's key areas for consideration

However, Mentor firmly believes that legislative controls alone will not be sufficient to arrest the growing use of NPS among, in particular, young people. Many experts and commentators have already advised that the Bill will not be a silver bullet;² and this is confirmed by the experience of Ireland, where NPS use increased despite the Criminal Justice (Psychoactive Substances) Act 2010 placing a blanket ban on production and distribution of NPS.³ Legislation to restrict supply may be an important component of the NPS strategy; but an effective response to this issue necessitates a broader approach that, above all, prioritises education, prevention and early intervention.

The Government's legislative response to NPS must be complemented by renewed investment in evidence-based education and prevention.

Investment in evidence-based drug education and prevention represents the most effective response to the use of all illicit drugs, including NPS. The latest instalment of the Health and Social Care Information Centre (HSCIC) survey on smoking, drinking and drug use reveals that the scale of NPS use among young people remains relatively small: 2.5% of 11-to-15-year-olds have tried NPS, compared to 15% who have taken other illicit drugs;

and 49% have never heard of 'legal highs'.⁴ As the experience of Ireland shows that controlling environmental factors alone is not sufficient, it appears more important than ever, therefore, to reach young people at an early age to ensure that they never begin to experiment with these drugs.

HSCIC data also highlights the value of a holistic approach to prevention, one which addresses all drugs – illicit or otherwise. With 15% of young people having tried illicit drugs and one in 12 drinking on a weekly basis, it is evident that NPS use does not exist in isolation and, accordingly, should be addressed alongside a host of other interconnected health risks. Enhanced investment in universal prevention and targeted early intervention represents the best way to address both NPS use and a range of other risky behaviours among young people.

Recent correspondence with the Minister of State for Policing, Crime, Criminal Justice and Victims, the Rt Hon Mike Penning MP, shed light on the latest estimate spending on drugs. At £341 million, annual spending on early interventions and education represents 14% of the overall spend on tackling drugs, which, according to figures in the 2010 Drug Strategy,⁵ is less than a quarter of the expenditure on enforcement. The Psychoactive Substances Bill will surely necessitate additional spending on criminal justice – in prosecution and testing substances for psychoactivity; Mentor cautions that this should not further imbalance the Government's spending priorities in addressing drug misuse. As shown by international research centres such as the Dartington Social Research Unit and the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP),⁶ effective prevention is not just the best way to ensure that young people are able to thrive free from the harms of drugs; it is also the most cost-effective approach to tackling societal drug misuse.

Investing in what works

The legislative response to the NPS issue must, therefore, be complemented by enhanced investment in proven, evidence-based interventions – both universal programmes and interventions that target specific at-risk groups. Over the last two decades Mentor has pioneered the development and delivery of a range of prevention activities; by addressing drugs and related risks in a holistic way, we have demonstrated the effectiveness of prevention and strengthened the evidence base of what works in tackling drug misuse among young people.

The Alcohol and Drug Education and Prevention Information Service (ADEPIS)⁷ provides a range of support and guidance to ensure that schools are able to deliver age-appropriate information on drugs and to encourage the development of behaviour that leads to healthy lifestyle choices. Universal school-based programmes, like the Good Behaviour Game⁸ and Unplugged⁹, promote attitudes and behaviours that have been proven to reduce the likelihood of problematic drug use. And targeted interventions – with young offenders¹⁰ and children in kinship care¹¹ – have shown the long-term benefit of conducting focused work with young people who face multiple disadvantages.

There is a raft of national and international evidence that supports the effectiveness of this approach. Mentor also manages the Centre for Analysis of Youth Transitions,¹² a research centre that serves as a repository for evidence on what works in preventing drug misuse among young people. Such interventions must form part of the Government's response to psychoactive substances: without investment in drug education, prevention and early intervention, the impact of the Psychoactive Substances Bill will be significantly limited.

Concluding comments

Mentor welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Home Affairs Committee's inquiry on psychoactive substances, and we sincerely hope that the review will contribute to an increase in prevention practice at a national level.

While the Psychoactive Substances Bill has merits, we are concerned that it might be viewed as an end in itself. Controlling environmental factors is important, but the best way to arrest the growth of NPS use is to ensure that young people do not begin to experiment with these drugs. Although the scale of the emergence of psychoactive substances is worrying, the most effective response remains the same: increasing the provision of drug education and prevention within the broader drugs strategy – investing in what works.

Mentor is grateful for the opportunity to contribute to this important piece of work and looks forward to engaging further as it develops.

¹ EMCDDA. 2015. New psychoactive substances in Europe: An update from the EU Early Warning System (March 2015). Luxembourg: Publication Office of the European Union.

² See, for example: Lord Farmer, House of Lords, Tuesday 9 June 2015 [<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201516/ldhansrd/text/150609-0001.htm>]; and Andrew Brown, "Blanket ban on 'legal highs' is no 'silver bullet'" [<http://thejusticegap.com/2015/06/blanket-ban-on-legal-highs-is-no-silver-bullet/>].

³ TNS Political & Social. 2014. Flash Eurobarometer 401: Young People and Drugs. Brussels: European Commission.

⁴ Fuller, E. 2015. Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2014. London: HSCIC.

⁵ Drug Strategy 2010. Reducing demand, restricting supply, building recovery: supporting people to live a drug free life. London: Home Office.

⁶ The Social Research Unit is based on the work of the US-based WSIPP, and provides the best cost-benefit analyses of prevention programmes. Their findings demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of a number of prevention programmes in the UK. See <http://investinginchildren.eu/> and <http://wsipp.wa.gov/>.

⁷ <http://www.mentoruk.org.uk/adepris-project-page/>.

⁸ <http://www.mentoruk.org.uk/good-behaviour-game/>.

⁹ <http://mentor-adepris.org/unplugged/>.

¹⁰ <http://www.mentoruk.org.uk/breaking-out-project-page/>.

¹¹ <http://www.mentoruk.org.uk/breaking-out-project-page/>.

¹² <http://cayt.mentor-adepris.org/>.