

Home Secretary seeks expert advice on 'laughing gas'

The Home Secretary has asked the independent Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) to review the harm caused by nitrous oxide, known as laughing gas, after over half a million young people reported taking the drug in 2019-20.

Now the second most used drug by 16-24 year olds in the UK, the ACMD's assessment could include more education for young people on its harms or tougher punishment for those who supply the drug to children.

Nitrous oxide, which is usually sold in small silver canisters and inhaled, can cause serious long-term effects such as vitamin B12 deficiency and anaemia. It is also commonly used at anti-social gatherings and leads to widespread littering in public places, bringing misery to communities.

As part of the review, the ACMD has also been asked to consider whether unlawful possession of nitrous oxide should be made an offence.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

Misusing drugs can have a devastating impact on lives and communities – we are determined to do all we can to address this issue and protect the futures of our children and young people.

Should the expert Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs recommend further restrictions on this drug, we stand ready to take tough action.

The sale of nitrous oxide for its psychoactive effects was made illegal after the Psychoactive Substances Act in 2016, but it is not currently a crime to be caught in possession of the drug. The government has concerns that this could be a significant factor resulting in the increasing consumption of the substance.

The ACMD previously provided advice on nitrous oxide in 2015 and concluded that it did not seem to warrant control under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. However, given the increase in use among young people and concern over potential long-term effects, the Home Secretary has requested an updated assessment.

In 2019-20, 8.7% of 16 to 24-year-olds reported using nitrous oxide in the last 12 months, equivalent to around 549,000 people, according to the Crime Survey for England and Wales.

The government is taking a whole-system approach to tackling drugs – actively disrupting criminal supply chains which fuel illegal markets, supporting

people through treatment and recovery, and ridding communities of the harm drug misuse causes.

Dame Carol Black was recently appointed as an independent advisor to drive forward progress in tackling drug misuse across society. Immediate actions to deal with the problem include expanding Project ADDER, which combines targeted law enforcement against drugs gangs with improved treatment and recovery services, to eight new local authorities with £31m in new funding for the next two years.

This follows [a £148m package](#) of new investment, announced in January, aimed at protecting people across the UK from the scourge of illegal drugs. The package included:

- £40m of new money to tackle county lines, bringing the total to £65m since November 2019. So far, this investment has seen more than 1,000 drug lines closed, over 5,800 arrests, over £2.9m in cash seized, and more than 1,500 vulnerable people safeguarded
- £28m to set up pilots of Project ADDER in five areas with some of the highest rates of drug misuse – Blackpool, Hastings, Middlesbrough, Norwich, and Swansea Bay
- an extra £80m to invest in drug treatment services across England to provide support to offenders with drug addictions