

Spiking of university students to be tackled

University students will be safer as spiking is set to be stamped out at universities following the launch of a new working group from the Department for Education and Home Office dedicated to tackling the number of attacks against students. This forms part of the wider government mission to tackle violent and sexual crimes and strengthen victims' rights.

Universities Minister Michelle Donelan has called for and convened the group, which will bring together vice-chancellors, police, campaigners and victims to produce plans for practical action to help keep students safe, reporting back before the start of the autumn term.

Professor Lisa Roberts, University of Exeter Vice Chancellor, has been appointed to lead the working group and coordinate the higher education sector's response.

Following personal experience with a victim of spiking, Minister Donelan will ask every university to introduce a policy on tackling spiking by the end of the year to ensure victims are recognised and supported.

Last month a Home Affairs Select Committee report found the true prevalence of spiking – which can range from drink spiking to attacks with needles – remains unknown, though a recent survey by student outlet The Tab suggested 11% of students believed they have had their drink spiked, and research by the Alcohol Education Trust found more than 1 in 10 young adults had been victims of spiking.

The Government has already taken action to reclassify GHB and closely related substances, which have been used for drink spiking, and will work with law enforcement and local authorities to look at further action to tackle these horrific crimes, including considering the case for a specific criminal offence for spiking.

Universities Minister Michelle Donelan said:

This is an issue that is very close to my heart, having had someone close to me spiked when I was younger, which had devastating consequences. So I know first-hand what a horrific crime this is and I am determined to stamp it out.

Recent incidents show that perpetrators are becoming more brazen in the way they are committing this appalling crime – which is why I am tasking a new working group to look at the issue more closely and come up with practical actions to stamp out spiking at our universities – I've been pleased to see innovative schemes already underway at the University of Exeter and Nottingham Trent University.

I am committed to tackling real issues that affect students across campuses – whether it is ending the use of non-disclosure agreements, standing up against antisemitism or now looking to end spiking – I will always fight to ensure students are protected at our universities.

Universities Minister Michelle Donelan and Home Office Minister for Safeguarding Rachel Maclean today met victims, campaigners, senior police officers and university leaders to discuss the attacks seen in different parts of the country, and how closer working between universities and police could give a clearer picture of the scale and nature of the crimes against students.

Following a roundtable on spiking in March, with ministers from across government and hosted by Minister Maclean, it was agreed that a cross-government, multi-agency approach would be pursued to tackle the issue.

Minister for Safeguarding Rachel Maclean said:

Spiking is a heinous crime which puts lives at risk.

We have already reclassified drugs which have been used for drink spiking and provided funding through the Safety of Women at Night and Safer Streets funds to support initiatives which prevent people from becoming victims of spiking.

I know more must be done, which is why I will continue working with experts across the sector to discuss how we can go even further to tackle this crime and bring offenders to justice.

Insight and evidence will be used to inform the Government's report to Parliament on Spiking, to be published next Spring.

Professor Lisa Roberts, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Exeter said:

Everybody has the right to be safe and enjoy their night out with friends without the fear of spiking or violence. As chair of the new working group I will work with partners to look at the evidence, best practice and incidents across the U.K. so that we can make practical recommendations to improve the night-time economy for students.

We are fortunate in Exeter to have very strong working relationships with local agencies such as the Police, NHS Trusts, campaign groups, licensing and regulatory bodies which has been a key aspect of our approach to gender safety. This is obviously an issue for wider society that affects people from all walks of life and we want to play our part in tackling social problems in our towns and cities. We also work with our own students to take a

holistic approach to spiking and night-time safety from prevention to support.

Stamp out Spiking founder Dawn Dines said:

I have been campaigning now against drink spiking issues for nearly two decades. It is a disgusting cowardly crime that I have been actively raising awareness on to help protect and educate to safeguard on this issue.

We know that this crime has been hugely underreported for years and I have personally spoken to hundreds of victims and their family members, with this learning we can help to safeguard future victims to ensure that we gain more convictions and educate the general public on what drink spiking actually is, with a multi-agency approach, we can really get to the heart of the problem and make such a huge difference to stamp out this crime.

I am looking forward to being able to share my expertise to ensure the safety of students in higher education to ensure we make every effort possible to raise awareness to stamp out drink spiking in the future.

Universities have already set up their own initiatives to tackle the issue – with the University of Exeter offering drink safety test strips, and Nottingham Trent University funding and delivering bystander intervention training to staff in night-time city venues. The new working group will look at these and other solutions being tested on campuses across the country.

Last year students across the country took part in a mass boycott of nightclubs following a spate of reported attacks in Nottingham, Exeter, Birmingham, Southampton, and other university towns across the UK.

The launch of the new working group to tackle spiking on campuses follows a campaign to end the use of Non-Disclosure Agreements (NDAs) by universities to silence victims of sexual harassment, abuse and bullying. Over 50 universities have signed a pledge committing to end their use, which was unveiled by Minister Donelan and campaign group Can't Buy My Silence in January this year.