

**REPORT OF
Assistant Director Healthcare Public Health**

**TO Community and Neighbourhoods Scrutiny Panel
ON 21st September 2020**

TITLE: Nitrous Oxide Briefing Note

RECOMMENDATIONS: The Panel is requested to note the content of this briefing

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

There has been local intelligence from our communities that the use of nitrous oxide is an area of concern for residents of Salford. The public health team coordinated a response in collaboration with Early Break (young persons' substance misuse service) and the Big Life assertive outreach team. Key findings included:

- 1) the predominant users were teenagers and young adults who had a licence to drive,
 - 2) the location of use witnessed was in empty car parks at night,
 - 3) the users either left the used nitrous oxide cannisters in the car park or fly-tipped them,
 - 4) this left litter in public places. The public health put an article in the August 2020 Salford Life magazine and continue to work with Early Break to ensure public health social media messages are being communicated. The Substance Misuse CSP (Community Safety Partnership) group is being re-instated; with a formative meeting held in August 2020 with GMP.
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BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

N/A

KEY DECISION:

NO

DETAILS:

Background

Laughing gas, 'hippy crack, Nos

Nitrous oxide is a colourless gas used clinically as a sedative and anaesthetic agent. It is also used in the catering industry as a mixing and foaming agent in the production of whipped cream, and is often contained in silver, pressurised containers.

Health effects

When inhaled nitrous oxide can make people feel happy, relaxed and giggly, hence the name 'laughing gas'; A single inhalation will result in effects starting almost immediately, peaking about 10-30 seconds after inhalation and then rapidly diminishing. If the dose is repeated effects reach a plateau about 30-60 seconds after the first breath. Whilst the user often feels back to normal within about two minutes after the last inhalation some users report that effects, such as a sense of well-being, can be felt for up to 30 minutes after last use. It can also lead to mild euphoria, feeling light-headed or dizzy and hallucinations. Some people experience headaches and/or nausea.

The gas is usually inhaled from a balloon that has been inflated using a whipped cream charger canister (example in picture below). A balloon may be passed around a group, with each person taking a 'gulp'.



The risk of harm from the use of nitrous oxide is generally low however Inhaling nitrous oxide can result in a lack of oxygen to the brain. This can result in a person falling unconscious and even dying through suffocation or heart problems. This risk is likely to be greater if the gas is consumed in an enclosed space.

Regular or heavy use of nitrous oxide has been linked to a deficiency in vitamin B12. This can lead to nerve damage which causes pain and tingling in the toes and fingers. Studies have also linked heavy use of the gas to some forms of anaemia.

The latest national figures for nitrous oxide deaths was published in 2017 with an average of 3.1 deaths per year. No deaths related to nitrous oxide were reported in Salford during this period. For comparison, over the same decade deaths from alcohol were of the order of 50,000 in the UK. From 1993 to 2015 there were 22 nitrous oxide related deaths reported in the UK; about one per year.

Legal Status

Nitrous oxide is not covered under the Misuse of Drugs Act. However, it is covered by the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016 (PSA). Possession under the PSA is not an offence except in a 'custodial institution' (prison, young offender centre, removal centre etc.).

It is an offence to be found in possession of nitrous oxide with the intent to supply, offer to supply, import or export for its psychoactive effects. 'Supply of **nitrous oxide** for recreational purposes is **illegal** under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016'. This means anyone found to be selling or giving away **nitrous oxide** for illicit purposes could face up to seven years in prison and or an unlimited fine.

It is legal to sell or supply nitrous oxide as a propellant for whipped cream or for any other industrial purpose.

Litter / Environment

Use of nitrous oxide is frequently identified by discarded cannisters left by the roadside, this has been an ongoing cause of complaints by members of our public

In addition to the littering caused by the cannisters being left behind the balloons often used with them can have a deadly impact on local wildlife Nitrogen emissions such as nitrous oxides also contribute to particulate matter and acid rain. These cause respiratory problems and cancers for people and damage to forests and buildings. Nitrogenous gases also play an important role in global climate change contribution to stratospheric ozone depletion.

Current patterns of use

Recreational use is most popular in younger adults: Latest Estimates suggest that in England and Wales 8.7% of 16 to 24 year olds had taken nitrous oxide for its psychoactive effects compared with 2.3% of 25 to 59 year olds. Salford City Council has no quantitative data on local patterns of use; nitrous oxide users rarely feel the need to access support services. The information from Early Break suggests that very few people (only 1 in Salford in 2020) report nitrous oxide as a drug used.

Qualitative intelligence about young people's use in Salford

Based on information from Early Break who interviewed local young people in two areas of Salford on the night of Friday 10th July 2020 along with the outreach team from Big Life, they have summarised their understanding as:

- Key users appear to be young adults who can drive.
- Drivers stop their car and empty cannisters onto the road.
- Most young people using nitrous oxide are not known to the substance misuse services
- Young people use nitrous oxide as “a bit of a buzz”
- Older youths who drive come later in the night, use the cannisters and often leave them in car parks.
- The Early Break team found evidence of discharged cannisters corroborating with what the young people were saying.
- Young people identified at least one alleged local supplier of nitrous oxide
Work with Trading Standards and GMP is essential; consideration that this situation potentially creates an opportunity for grooming and or exploitation is imperative. The information was shared with colleagues in Trading Standards and GMP and the following update has been provided;

Action to address nitrous oxide Use in Salford

The substance misuse lead in the Public Health department has been working with our comms team on an approach based on:

- An article in Life magazine in August
- Posters distributed to shops, fast food outlets and possibly pubs via our Neighbourhood Managers
- A web page on the council website
- A message to parents to be shared via high schools and partners to their staff
- Early Break continues to drive communications via social media routes to warn about harms to health related with recreational use of nitrous oxide.

Additionally, the CSP-Substance Misuse Working Group is being re-established and will meet in September. Some of these issues will be discussed further with partners from GMP, Community Safety, Neighbourhood Managers and Trading Standards to ensure the issues around supply and littering are addressed.

Following consultation with the Lead Member for Environment and Community Safety support is to be given to ongoing national campaigns seeking a review of current legislation in relation to the sale and use of nitrous oxide as well as raising the matter with the local members of parliament and requesting they raise the matter with H.M. Government.

KEY COUNCIL POLICIES:

Community Safety Plan

EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND IMPLICATIONS:

N/A

ASSESSMENT OF RISK:

Low

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS Supplied by:

N/A

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS Supplied by:

N/A

PROCUREMENT IMPLICATIONS Supplied by:

N/A

HR IMPLICATIONS Supplied by:

N/A

CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS Supplied by:

N/A

OTHER DIRECTORATES CONSULTED:

Place, GMP

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WARDS TO WHICH REPORT RELATES:

All