

Legal but Lethal Project Evaluation, 2015-18

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Legal but Lethal is a community-led prevention programme developed in response to the growing problem of legal psychoactive substances in Stoke-on-Trent. The Big Lottery funded the first three years of the programme, from August 2015 – July 2018, with the goal of raising local awareness about ‘legal highs’ and building stronger community resilience.

Background to the problem

In recent years, the UK has seen the emergence of new drugs, collectively called New Psychoactive Substances (NPS) that, through a loophole in the law, were legal to sell and use – hence ‘legal highs’. Use, particularly among young adults, soared despite the drugs’ effects being unpredictable, often dangerous and increasingly fatal. At the time, there was no early prevention or awareness work across Stoke-on-Trent and no coordinated community-based approach to the problem. And yet these substances were cheap, readily accessible and erroneously considered to be ‘safer’ than other drugs despite [a call from the Chief Inspector of Police](#) urging people “to think again, get help and please don’t risk your life.”

Re-Solv’s theory of change

As the only national charity working in the field of solvent abuse and other ‘legal’ drugs, Re-Solv plays a key role in education and prevention, the restriction of supply and public safety.

The ‘Legal But Lethal’ programme was developed to deliver a sustainable, local, community-led prevention-based approach to all ‘legal highs’ including volatile substances. Re-Solv identified four key drivers to change (detailed below) and the resulting activities were developed with young people, schools, parents, community groups, support, care and leisure services and other local community workers and partners.

‘Legal but Lethal’

The programme’s goals were based on four key drivers to change and achieved as follows:-

1. **Children (11-15) make healthier life choices through improved knowledge of volatile substance abuse (‘VSA’ or ‘solvent abuse’) and are more resilient to peer pressure.**

“Be sensible, don’t do things that aren’t safe or you don’t want to do.” (Yr 7 student)

Over 3,400 11-15 year-olds across the city (1,785 at-risk) engaged with the programme and reported improved knowledge and confidence. Tailored, age-appropriate sessions were delivered not only in schools, but through alternative providers and Stoke-on-Trent's pupil referral units. As VSA is the most common form of substance abuse among children aged 11-13 and second only to cannabis by the age of 15, prevention work for this age-group focused around these substances, around developing strategies to help manage peer pressure and about how to access support and help, should it be needed. On average 88% of young people participating concluded that they not only knew more about VSA but had the confidence to make better – and independent – decisions about drugs in general.

2. Young people (16-24) have improved health/wellbeing due to increased knowledge about new psychoactive substances ('NPS') and better coping strategies/support networks.

"We absolutely need this work. My daughter takes them – sends her loopy. Makes her mental health worse. But she won't take my advice."

Over 14,200 young people across Stoke-on-Trent engaged with the project. As well as taught and drop-in sessions at sixth forms and colleges, focused work took place with vulnerable young people with complex needs including unemployment, substance abuse, homelessness, mental health issues, teenage pregnancy and offending. As well as providing information and, where necessary, practical harm-reduction advice, work also focused on ensuring that young people were aware of and could access support pathways. Training and support was also provided to staff in organisations working with young people, 89% of whom reported feeling more confident advising and supporting young people after engaging with Re-Solv.

3. Families/carers are better able to support children and young people in their care through increased knowledge and confidence to deal with NPS/VSA.

"As a parent of three young adults – information like this is fantastic. There was a big gap in my knowledge on the subject and ... we can now have an informed discussion. Thank you to those who have provided the info – more of the same please."

Over the course of the programme, information reached over 102,800 parents citywide. A parent guide *Talking with your child about 'legal highs' – 10 top tips* was developed in consultation with parents and disseminated to over 15,800 parents across the city through schools (supporting the early intervention work with young people detailed in (1) above) and at outreach events in 14 local communities across the City. Through these events and further partnership working, 86 parent volunteers participated in the programme and extended its 'ripple' effect by providing information to other local parents and signposting.

4. Professionals and community members are more able to effectively meet local needs due to greater VSA/NPS awareness, skills and capacity.

"Your workshop helped us to start an open conversation with our young people; it showed that we care about issues that affect them and it helps us gain their trust."

Full-day, half-day and training workshops were delivered to over 1,600 professionals from public, third sector and community services across the City – including safeguarding, education, health and social care, mental health and emergency services. In addition, bearing in mind the recreational nature of NPS such as nitrous oxide, Re-Solv targeted the night-time economy, upskilling pub staff, security staff and taxi-drivers. 95% of feedback received rated the training as ‘excellent’ or ‘good’.

Impact and Sustainability

“It’s easy to pin the problems on street homeless [but] it’s going on in houses on our streets and people need to know the dangers.”

Long-term prevention requires place-based change. Although the time-scale and funding of this project does not allow for long-term monitoring of behavioural change, Legal but Lethal has nevertheless achieved some of the necessary outcomes that facilitate such change – namely increased, city-wide:-

- awareness of the issue
- sense of collective responsibility
- individual, family and community engagement
- practical knowledge of *what to do* and
- increased confidence to do it.

Re-Solv too has learnt a great deal in the course of the project. Activities have been shaped by the project’s stakeholders, beneficiaries and participants so outcomes have naturally reflected community ideas and priorities. As an organisation, Re-Solv is now more embedded in the communities of Stoke-on-Trent and has a stronger base from which to continue delivering support.

Looking Ahead

A further year’s work to continue building young people’s resilience around nitrous oxide has already been commissioned from Re-Solv by Stoke-on-Trent City Council. Elsewhere, the success of the Legal but Lethal project has inspired the launch of a similar two-year community programme that Re-Solv are now delivering in Glasgow.

The 2016 Psychoactive Substances Act has changed the ‘legal highs’ landscape by removing NPS from the high street. There are now two separate problems: firstly that synthetic substances are still extensively used by marginalised and vulnerable communities such as the homeless and prison population. However, for Re-Solv there is an urgent continuing need for effective education and prevention, not least because nitrous oxide remains legal to use and, in 2018, is far and away the most popular NPS used by young people in the UK today. Re-Solv has already garnered funding for an additional year’s work in Stoke-on-Trent focused specifically on nitrous oxide.

“Is there a need for prevention work in the community? 100 bloody per cent!”

ABOUT THIS SELF-EVALUATION

This document is the culmination of ongoing monitoring and evaluation that has taken place throughout the 3-year Legal but Lethal project and which has continually informed the project's development and delivery.

The aim of this evaluation is to:

1. Assess the success or otherwise of the project through the progress of individual outcomes.
2. Explore the reasons for the achievement/non-achievement of those outcomes.
3. Respond actively to advice and feedback garnered from the community.
4. Collate learning to inform future best practice and focus the development of future work.

Why self-evaluation?

Re-Solv has chosen to do a self-evaluation for the following reasons:

- Re-Solv has been a recognised expert in the field of 'legal highs' for over 30 years and sat on the Expert Panel advising on the Psychoactive Substances Act.
- We are the only expert agency on volatile substance abuse (VSA) and experienced in engaging with young people about this highly sensitive subject.
- We understand the issues underpinning the project and the specific needs of our local community in Stoke-on-Trent.
- As a community-led initiative, the activities and progress of the project were shaped through ongoing monitoring and responsiveness to local opinion, engagement and feedback – and that experience informs this report.
- Professional development: our staff are experienced in monitoring and evaluation but have benefited from the opportunity to further develop these skills over the course of the project.
- Self-evaluation is a cost-effective route proportionate both to the size of our organisation and the project itself (see Costs of self-evaluation, pp5-6).

Who led the evaluation?

Julie Tanner, the Project Co-ordinator, coordinated focus groups and all community engagement, managed the detailed and ongoing monitoring of data and ensured that learning fed back into the project's ongoing development and delivery.

Victoria Leigh has written self-evaluation reports for a number of Re-Solv projects and is responsible for this Legal but Lethal self-evaluation. Victoria has liaised on the project throughout and developed the project's resources.

Management has come from Re-Solv's Director, Stephen Ream, with quarterly reviews by the Board of Trustees.

Who is this evaluation for?

This evaluation will be available publically on the Re-Solv website (www.re-solv.org). Its primary aim is to help Re-Solv - management and staff – review and consolidate learning from what has been an innovative and educational project for us as an organisation. That learning will then feed back into improving our day-to-day services and inform our approach to future work.

We very much hope that communities within Stoke-on-Trent will also review the evaluation and continue to welcome Re-Solv's engagement with the city.

From whom has evidence been gathered?

Legal but Lethal was a community programme; as such evidence has been continually gathered from the local community in order to shape and deliver the project. This has included:

- Young people
- Parents
- Schools
- Community groups
- Night-time economy

As can be seen from the map, involvement has come from individuals and groups across the city and input for this final evaluation has also come from staff members involved in the project's day-to-day delivery.



How has evidence been gathered?

Re-Solv has recorded quantitative data on impact throughout the project, i.e. the numbers of young people, parents, community influencers, etc. not only reached, but actively responsive to the programme. As a community-led initiative, qualitative data has been consistently garnered over the three years and Re-Solv has used the project management system [VIEWS](#) to record data and enable evaluation and reporting. Although the time-scale and funding of this project does not allow for long-term monitoring of behavioural change, Re-Solv has consistently obtained feedback from before and after sessional work and has been able to monitor increased knowledge about NPS and improved confidence both to take preventative action and to respond to situations requiring help.

Both in developing the project initially and in evaluating its ongoing impact, other external research has also been illuminating, ranging from Stoke-on-Trent's own [public health profiles](#) to a particularly interesting piece of [research led by Year 2 medical students](#) from Keele University. The students devised and disseminated a survey looking at the existing

perception of and knowledge about NPS among students and received 1,500 responses – learning from which fed back into Re-Solv’s work with 16-24 year-olds (Outcome 2).

Projected costs of self-evaluation

For the purposes of this internal self-evaluation we have calculated the average daily cost of staff time to be £150 per day. The cost of producing this self-evaluation were factored into the project budget and will not impact on Re-Solv’s reserves.

Task	Staff Days
Ongoing interviews, focus groups, feedback and monitoring over the duration of the project by Julie Tanner	Not included in this cost estimate
Mid-term practitioner paper written and published in <i>Drugs & Alcohol Today</i>	5
Quarterly evaluation planning and update meetings with Victoria Leigh in final year of the project	4
Collation and hand-over of all monitoring information from the project	2
Reading and analysis of all internal data	5
External desk research	3
Interviews with internal project staff and community members (in addition to those carried out over and integral to the delivery of the project)	2
Writing report	10
Additional Management days	3
Total days	34

For the same £5000 budget, an external evaluator employed at a rate of £550 per day + VAT (based on the [NCVO estimate](#) that fees would be quoted between £300 and £800 per day), would have been able to provide fewer than 7.5 days’ work – and less if the staff time needed to fully inform the evaluator about the project was factored in. Bearing in mind the time needed to write a report, it was not felt that this would be cost-effective, or provide sufficient time to thoroughly evaluate the project.

How will this evaluation be used?

As above, Re-Solv will use this evaluation to improve, develop and shape future work. We will aim to build on aspects of work which have been successful; either looking to develop these further in Stoke-on-Trent or to use this experience to develop community projects in other areas or around other issues of need.

We will also identify areas of learning where aspects of the project were not as successful as we’d hoped or perhaps developed in ways other than we had anticipated and explore these with additional insight from community members.

Finally, we will use the evaluation to help us identify key recommendations for the future that will help shape best practice and policy around VSA and NPS. This learning will be shared with policy-makers through the [All Party Parliamentary Group for NPS and VSA](#), with industry through the British Aerosol Manufacturers’ national VSA Committee and to regional health care, substance misuse and social service providers on the ground through Re-Solv’s ongoing work delivering professional and peer mentor training.



By 2014, concerns were growing about new psychoactive substances – the ‘NPS’ or ‘legal highs’ that could be sold on the high street but which contained unknown chemicals in unpredictable doses. The [Office for National Statistics](#) reported that deaths were on the rise and it seemed young people were most at risk. The [Home Office](#) noted that “use of NPS in the last year appears to be concentrated among young adults aged 16 to 24” and, in [DrugScope](#)’s opinion, the situation carried “distinct echoes of the glue-sniffing epidemic of the 1980s.”

National volatile substance abuse (‘VSA’) charity, Re-Solv, had had over thirty years’ experience in tackling these original ‘legal highs’ and, geographically situated on the outskirts of Stoke-on-Trent, was ideally placed to propose a community approach to dealing with the problem. Stoke was particularly at risk: the city’s [2013 Health Profile](#) reported that drug misuse rates in 2013 were 58% higher than the national average and the [Health & Wellbeing Board](#) reported that “anecdotally, there has been a significant increase in the use of Novel Psychoactive Substances in the city.” Re-Solv was also aware that a teenager transitioning out of care and a hairdresser in her early 30s had both recently died in Stoke-on-Trent from another ‘legal’ high – the volatile substance, butane.

‘VSA’ and ‘NPS’

The substances themselves fall into two main groups:-

- Volatile substances – i.e. the substances involved in ‘volatile substance abuse’, known as ‘solvent abuse’ or ‘VSA’. This is the inhalation – for the purpose of getting ‘high’ – of volatile chemicals found in legitimate, everyday household products, commonly cigarette lighter refills and aerosols but also petrol and some trade glues. VSA can kill instantly through a form of fatal heart attack known as ‘sudden sniffing death syndrome’ (SSDS).
- New psychoactive substances (NPS) – i.e. synthetic chemicals manufactured to mimic the effect of illicit drugs, commonly synthetic cannabinoids such as ‘mamba’ and the synthetic stimulant known as ‘monkey dust’ – a particular problem in Stoke-on-Trent. At the beginning of the project, it was legal to sell these substances. The [2016 Psychoactive Substances Act](#) prohibited sale and supply but some products remain cheap alternatives to traditional drugs and accessible through dealers.

It should be noted that nitrous oxide is a volatile substance commonly classed as an NPS.

Place-based Change

A key focus of drug policy is controlling supply through legislation and regulation – but this was problematic. In 2014, NPS were being sold legally via a legislative loophole which meant that they could be bought from high street ‘headshops’ and market stalls as well as online and from dealers. And VSA has always involved the abuse of legitimate household products readily available in all our homes and high streets.

Instead, Re-Solv took a place-based approach to what might be done to control *demand*. As the government noted in their [2017 Drug Strategy](#), “parents, families and friends also play an integral role in preventing substance misuse and supporting those with a dependency towards recovery.” So how might a community work together to develop proactive prevention strategies for the long-term that would effectively reduce demand for these potentially destructive substances? Early focus group work then took place with young people, parent groups and community organisations in the city to discuss how such a programme might work and specific area needs.

*“I’ve seen loads of people turn round and say I think I’m going to die from this”
(Yr 11 pupil)*

“As a parent and health professional, I am confused by this world of legal highs – what do I tell my kids?”

*“Great to hear you’re thinking of covering this, definitely a big need”
(AP teacher)*

*“I would want to learn more about it and know what I can do about it first before I call in anyone else.”
(Parent)*

As a result, in developing the ‘Legal but Lethal’ programme, Re-Solv committed to four key goals which were to be achieved as follows:

1. Effective prevention initiatives delivered early enough to enable children (aged 11-15) to make healthier life choices.
2. Improved awareness and understanding of risk reduction among young people (aged 16-24).
3. More knowledgeable and confident parents/carers able to talk with young people about drugs.
4. Upskilled professionals and community workers better able to anticipate, recognise and respond to need.

Outcome 1

Children (11-15) make healthier life choices through improved knowledge of VSA and are more resilient to peer pressure as:-

- At risk children report that they have improved knowledge of VSA and are more aware of the dangers.
- At risk children report that they have better coping strategies and feel more able to resist peer pressure.
- At risk children tell us they are more aware of where to go for support if they or a friend need help with any personal/emotional/drug or health related issues.

Outcome 2

Young people (16-24) have improved health/wellbeing due to increased knowledge about NPS and better coping strategies and support networks as:-

- Young people (16-24) receive information about NPS – 80% of feedback given is positive.
- Schools, colleges, universities and community groups report that they are better informed about NPS and feel more confident advising and supporting young people about NPS.
- Youth, leisure, sports and community associations report they feel more informed and more confident advising and supporting young people about NPS and more able to signpost.

Outcome 3

Families and carers are better able to support children and young people in their care through increased knowledge and confidence to deal with NPS and VSA as:-

- Parent volunteers are recruited and trained to give informed advice to other local parents about VSA and NPS and/or signpost people to other appropriate local support services.
- Local parents and carers are directly reached with accurate information about VSA and/or NPS – 80% of feedback given is positive.
- Local parents are signposted to our guide about how to talk to your children about drugs – 80% of feedback given shows the guide is useful and accessible.

Outcome 4

Professionals and community members are more able to effectively meet local needs due to greater VSA/NPS awareness, skills and capacity.

- Professionals in drug services and wrap-around services (e.g. sexual health, mental health, housing) are trained and report an improved knowledge and awareness of VSA/NPS.
- Community members (youth group leaders, retailers, pub/club staff) are given VSA/NPS awareness training and report they are more able to give informed advice and signpost people.
- Staff in educational and care settings are trained to spot the warning signs of VSA/NPS use and/or sales report they are more able to give informed advice/signpost people.

The approach taken to achieving each of these Outcomes and the impact achieved are explored in detail in the following chapters.

OUTCOME 1: Children (11-15) make healthier life choices through improved knowledge of VSA and are more resilient to peer pressure

Be careful when using household products.

The problem

VSA is the most common form of substance misuse among children under the age of 14 and second only to cannabis by the age of 15. An 18 year-old transitioning out of care had recently died from VSA in Stoke-on-Trent.

Re-Solv's approach

Re-Solv believes in giving children and young people the information they need to make healthier life choices. Instead of a 'just say no' approach to drugs, information about substances is delivered within a wider framework of resilience-building so that young people not only have the factual information they need but the skills to be able to make positive choices. As [Mentor UK](#) note in their analysis of drug prevention programmes in schools, "the approaches which appear to be most effective are those based on social influences and life skills."

Over the course of the project, Re-Solv worked with young people in a range of settings including secondary schools, alternative pathway education providers and pupil referral units across the city.

Sessions

Sessions were tailored to the needs of each individual setting but might typically include:-

- An introductory discussion to gauge young people's existing knowledge.
- A discussion of 'what solvent abuse is' and the products young people think may be relevant.
- EGG ROULETTE! A game of breaking eggs (some hardboiled ... some not!) enabling discussion on why people might choose to engage in risk-taking behaviours.
- Factual information about risk and using products safely.
- DOG FOOD CHALLENGE! A game which demonstrates the effects of peer pressure and the importance of making your own decisions about what you choose to put in your body.
- Thinking about the consequences of our actions.
- Round up and questions.
- Signposting information and where to find help.

"What I really liked was that the session was tailored to the local intake. This really got the students thinking and will definitely have an effect on the decisions that they make in the future."
(Headteacher)

I learnt: "Be sensible, don't do things that aren't safe or you don't want to do"

"Always look for the SACKI logo on products"

"I now know the website so I can go on it to get help."

Measurable change indicators

Re-Solv's three measurable change indicators were as follows:-

Measurable Outcome	Target	Actual
At risk children report that they have improved knowledge of VSA and are more aware of the dangers.	300	625
At risk children report that they have better coping strategies and feel more able to resist peer pressure.	300	519
At risk children tell us they are more aware of where to go for support if they or a friend need help with any personal/emotional/drug or health related issues.	300	910

Universal, age-appropriate prevention education sessions were targeted towards high school years 7 and 8. Measurable outcomes were drawn from pupils in high pupil premium secondary schools, particularly those in areas of deprivation, alternative pathway education providers and pupil referral units. 90% of those participating rated their session as either 'good' or 'brilliant' - feedback gathered through post-session evaluation forms.

Impact

Clearly a key focus of Re-Solv's work is to provide factual information about VSA to help young people make informed decisions about what they choose to put into their bodies. Depending on age, this was done through presentation, discussion, video and interactive learning. On average, after sessions 96% of at-risk children reported that they now knew more about the risks involved. 88% of young people also felt that the session would help them make better decisions about, not just VSA but drugs in general.

In terms of resilience-building, 88% felt that participating in the session had made them feel more confident to make their own decisions, including standing up to peer pressure. Critically, following the session, young people understood that there are support pathways with 87% reporting that they are now more aware of where to go for support if they, or a friend needed help.

There is often some reluctance to integrate teaching around VSA into the curriculum because of concern that the accessibility of the products involved will encourage young people to experiment. However, feedback from Re-Solv's sessions shows that, on average, over half of young people (54%) claim to have some knowledge of VSA before the session begins. But what is this 'knowledge' and where has it come from? What happens if, in the words of one young person "you do prat about"? In the opinion of one youth group leader working extensively with 14-16 year-olds, this information about VSA and other 'legal' substances is coming "either from people who are selling or through hearsay, rumour or myth." In his opinion, this "myth-busting" is one of the most important aspects of Re-Solv's work in keeping young people safe.

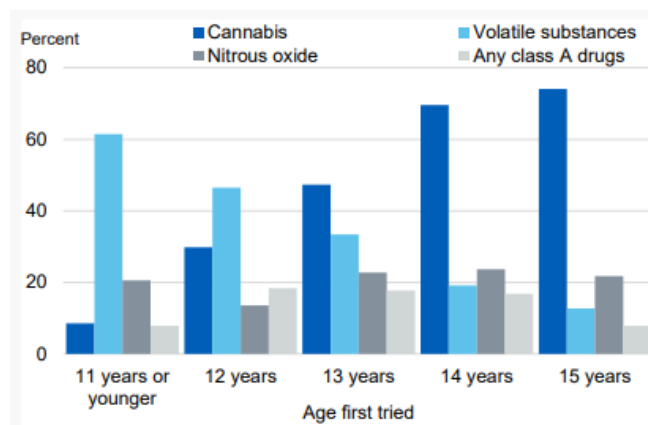
Do not let people peer pressure you into doing dangerous things.

Learning

Re-Solv established successful relationships with the majority of Stoke-on-Trent's high schools, prioritising those with the highest percentages of disadvantaged pupils and focusing work primarily towards years 7 and 8 (i.e. ages 11-13 where solvent abuse is the most common form of substance misuse). However, transition from primary to high school is a time of particular trauma for some children and a separate research project carried out by Re-Solv in conjunction with Keele University has suggested that targeting year 6 children (i.e. children in the final year of primary school) should be integrated into future plans. Re-Solv's universal approach could help embed broader resilience-building skills at this earlier age and ensure that each cohort of children are aware of and have access to help and support pathways should they need them over the period of transition.

This approach could also enable Re-Solv to develop and offer a broader scheme of prevention education by starting to deliver age-appropriate content earlier. Questions about the prevalence of NPS and nitrous oxide (laughing gas) were added in to the 2017 [Smoking, drinking and drug use](#) report which gives us additional evidence on which to build.

This table, taken from p64 of the report, suggests that it would indeed be appropriate to focus on solvent abuse and nitrous oxide as early as year 6 and, while continuing to consolidate that teaching, to gradually introduce information about cannabis in years 7-8 and then other illicit drugs (including NPS) as pupils move further into adolescence. This is something that Re-Solv is now exploring further.



Sustainability

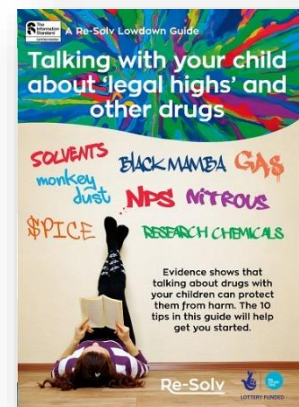
In total, Re-Solv reached over 3,400 11-15 year-olds across the city (1785 at-risk and others in mainstream provision). Young people have indicated that their heightened awareness and knowledge of NPS/VSA will help them make healthier, more helpful future life choices. This will contribute to their improved long-term health and wellbeing outcomes.

Read or look, or think before
you do

Sustainability is key to the way in which Re-Solv has developed and delivered the programme. This has been influenced by the findings of Sigfúsdóttir et al (2008) in their pioneering [Substance use prevention for adolescents: the Icelandic Model](#). This recognises that “reaching young people early in their school years, as well as the parents of younger adolescents, is critical to success.” As a result:-

- Reaching young people early enough – This is particularly relevant for VSA as solvents are the most commonly misused substance among younger children. Re-Solv’s work has focused particularly on young people aged 11-13, providing tailored, age-appropriate prevention sessions that deliver factual information through broader resilience-building activities.
- Involving parents – Re-Solv’s sessions with young people have all been accompanied by supportive outreach to parents (discussed in detail in Outcome 3). A guide to *Talking with your child about ‘legal highs’ and other drugs* was developed in consultation with parents and this was disseminated at the same time as local sessions were made available for parents to attend. In this way, Re-Solv could involve parents not only in their children’s learning but in having the knowledge and confidence to take on prevention roles themselves. *“Things have changed so much in the past few years. I don’t know what’s out there ... Parents need to know.”* (Sneyd Green parent)

Having said this, the third learning point from the Icelandic Model is that this approach “is a long-term strategy.” Not only do future cohorts of Stoke-on-Trent’s children need to benefit from an ongoing programme of prevention education, but there is a need for funding to enable longer-term, city-wide behavioural change to be monitored and evaluated.



OUTCOME 2: Young people (16-24) have improved health/wellbeing due to increased knowledge about NPS and better coping strategies and support networks



The problem

In 2014, unregulated psychoactive substances were being sold legally online and on the high street. The packaging targeted young people; bright, eye-catching and looking no more harmless – to quote one Stoke-on-Trent parent – than “popping candy”. Use among 16-24 year-olds was rife and, as the [Office for National Statistics](#) noted, “deaths involving legal highs (like all drug-related deaths), are preventable and each one is a tragedy.”

Re-Solv’s approach

Early focus groups with young people showed a range of life experience – from “*what the hell is that?*” to graphic stories of personal NPS use. In response to this, Re-Solv took two different approaches: small group sessions tailored for specific need and informal drop-ins in populous spaces such as student unions. At these latter, bright signage attracted general interest and enabled harm reduction messages to be disseminated but a keyworker was present should individuals wish to talk more personally.

Harm reduction was the key focus of work for this 16-24 year-old age group. There was no ‘just say no’ messaging; rather a frank recognition that some people do choose to experiment with substances – although it is not the ‘norm’ – and a balanced approach to acknowledging, on the one side, what the attraction might be and, on the other side, raising awareness of what the risks involve. Targeted resource materials (discussed in detail below) were developed throughout the project to raise awareness, embed key safety messages and provide signposting information.

“You get 5 spliffs out of a gram of Mamba but only 2 out of a gram of weed.”
16-year-old

“If you tell someone not to do something, they will do it more.” Parent

“I wouldn’t speak to my mum about drugs - she’d know I was doing them!”
Yr 11 student

“NPS is becoming more prevalent and impacting on educational achievement.”
Alternative Ed. Provider

As well as direct work with young people, Re-Solv worked to upskill welfare and support staff in local educational settings and set up a programme of outreach to upskill staff and volunteers working with young people across the city in a range of community, sports and

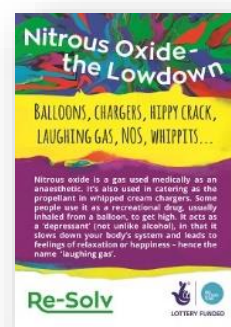
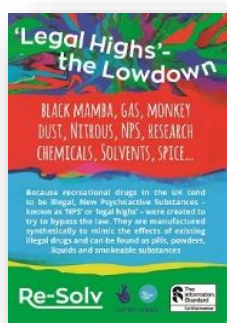
leisure organisations. Sessional workshops were delivered within organisations or at local venues and tailored to suit the availability and needs of those attending. The goal was to enable those coming into contact with young people to recognise and better identify need and then to have the knowledge and skills to signpost and/or support.

Resources

Over the three years, and in response to focus groups and field work, a range of resources were developed to provide differentiated messaging for different 16-24 year-old audiences and to suit a variety of locations. For example, the fake NPS packets pictured at the top of this chapter were printed in business card size with signposting information on the back. As a result, they were effective in attracting young people's attention at an outreach session but could be picked up and taken away discreetly in a back pocket or kept in a wallet.



Other resources included posters for noticeboards at Stoke College promoting a drop-in day (left) and a toilet-door campaign at Staffs Uni (right) giving harm reduction messages about the use of nitrous oxide – the most popularly used NPS among 16-24 year-olds. A TV screen for the Student Union was also developed (below) and a range of leaflets on solvent abuse, nitrous oxide and 'legal highs'.



The house style was developed over time in response to feedback from young people requesting “colourful” and “eye-catching” designs with content that told you about “effects” and “how to be safe.” Although mobile-optimised web content was also available, young people told us that they valued print due to reservations that “online is not always true.”

Measurable change indicators

Re-Solv's three measurable change indicators were as follows:-

Measurable Outcome	Target	Actual
Young people (16-24) receive information about NPS — 80% of feedback given is positive.	9,000 80%	14,220 100%
Schools, colleges, universities and community groups report that they are better informed about NPS and feel more confident advising and supporting young people about NPS.	21	30 98% knowledge uplift 89% confidence uplift
Youth, leisure, sports and community associations report they feel more informed and more confident advising and supporting young people about NPS and more able to signpost.	30	41 98% knowledge uplift 84% confidence uplift

In group-work, Re-Solv encourages interactive participation and questioning which ensures that every session is responsive to the needs and interests of those attending. In addition, a range of evaluation forms were developed to garner feedback. These were anonymous, to encourage frank feedback, and ranged from simple 'smiley face' ratings ...

The information I received today was useful	    	
I know where to go to get more information or help if I need it	Yes	No
I took some info	Yes	No

... to detailed pre- and post-evaluation questionnaires where self-assessed knowledge and confidence uplift could be quantified.

The questionnaires also gave participants the option to offer feedback on the quality of the session and to make further recommendations and suggestions for Re-Solv to act upon. For example, the feedback: *"it would be great if Re-Solv had regular drop-in slots to tag onto our activities"* led to a programme of direct work with young carers. In another instance: *"The school should be taking to them about [NPS] but they don't"* led to active engagement with a local school who welcomed Re-Solv being available to deliver this work and timetabled sessions into their PSHE curriculum.

Impact

Re-Solv built strong relationships with the City's main sixth forms and universities which enabled direct work with young people and, more holistically, improvements to welfare services through the delivery of professional training to teaching, pastoral and support staff. Positive feedback and word-of-mouth recommendations between youth support workers then led to a growing programme of grass-roots work with community and youth groups and their youth leaders.

As a result, Re-Solv provided outreach sessions across the city to vulnerable young adults outside educational settings. For example, a series of sessions were run for young carers in Fenton; another series of evening sessions were developed for young people experiencing emotional difficulties with Younger Minds in Hanley and a relationship with Gingerbread in Longton enabled Re-Solv to meet and work with young, teenage mothers living in secure and/or sheltered housing. A weekend drop-in at Galaxy provided support and discussion for LGBT young adults and a range of work took place in partnership with Stoke FC's youth and community outreach programmes.

Learning

There was a universally positive response from organisations and community groups across the city to substance misuse training and workshops that were free at the point of delivery. Grassroots and community organisations, especially at a time of economic hardship, do not have training or development budgets so it was key that Re-Solv's services were free and equally as accessible to volunteers as employed staff.

A flexible, responsive approach to working was key. Sessions were timed to fit in with team meetings, scheduled around volunteer availability, made available to tie in with evening or weekend working. The content could be tailored to levels of need, adapted to different learning styles and optimised to make the best use of attendees' available time. Pleasingly, as the project developed, new sessions were increasingly booked as a result of word-of-mouth recommendation.

MIDDLEPORT MATTERS

"We are aware that NPS is used by young people and adults in our area. For this reason, there is need for education for young people, because they see adults taking it and therefore think it's safe!

"Your workshop helped us to start an open conversation with our young people; it showed that we care about issues that affect them and it helps us gain their trust. It was useful to speak frankly about drugs and not to hide away from the issues. Using the 'street' names also made us seem more aware of the real situation that young people face, and we weren't just professionals like teachers who they might feel don't really understand them.

"I was really impressed and a little surprised how engaged the young people were. They found being able to talk freely and frankly refreshing and they are now aware of the dangers involved."

Middleport Matters is a community group founded by a local resident who wanted to make the area safer for her children to grow up in.

The focus on 'legal highs' was particularly attractive. A mixture of first-hand experience and lurid stories in local and national media about these substances had led to a demand for factual information and practical skills that could inform best practice when working with young people. The 'Legal but Lethal' project was well-timed from this perspective.

It is important to recognise, however, that the substance misuse landscape changes. The [Psychoactive Substances Act](#) has led to the closure of headshops and the phasing out of those colourfully packaged and publicly marketed 'legal highs'. Furthermore, synthetic cannabinoids such as 'spice' and synthetic cathinones such as 'monkey dust' are now controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act.

As a result, Re-Solv would suggest that the focus of future prevention work needs to reflect this shift in two key ways:

- i. to recognise that the majority of 'legal highs' are now illicit drugs and should be included in substance misuse education as such;
- ii. to directly address the rapidly growing use of nitrous oxide among young people by responding with factual, practical prevention and harm reduction strategies;

This should be achieved as part of credible, evidence-based education and prevention programmes that focus on building community resilience and developing young people's life skills to help them make healthier choices.

Sustainability

'Legal but Lethal' was a community project that sought to enable place-based change. As Boris Pomroy, CEO of Mentor UK explained, [following an interview with BBC Radio Stoke](#): "If communities like Stoke-on-Trent are to face-down the threat of illicit drugs and regain the sense of pride that used to be palpable within the city, then we must start to empower the people who live there. This means working from the grass-roots up, giving people a real voice in what happens in their communities and then the tools and resources in order to implement change for themselves."

It would be rash to assume that a three-year project can bring about this change. However, there is, without doubt, better understanding about NPS amongst those providing services for young people in Stoke-on-Trent and a cohort of 16-24 year-olds who can choose to make safer, healthier decisions based on factual information. Capacity building within community groups and educational organisations will also enable earlier and more effective interventions from staff who are both more knowledgeable and more confident to signpost and support young people.



OUTCOME 3: Families/carers are better able to support children and young people in their care through increased knowledge and confidence to deal with NPS/VSA

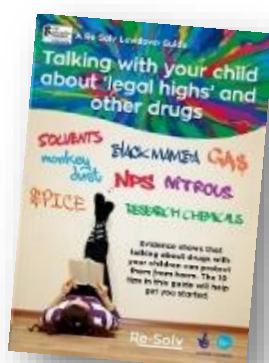


The problem

While parents have some confidence in talking with their children about crossing the road, online safety, even sex, far fewer feel confident – or even think – to talk about drugs. And even when they do, are those conversations the right ones? [Mentor UK report](#) that three-quarters of parents of 11-16 year olds thought they had had a conversation about drugs with their child, but less than half as many (36%) 11-17 year olds said they remembered such a conversation.

Re-Solv's approach

Evidence shows that parents who talk with their children about drugs can protect them from harm. As a result, a key focus for the 'Legal but Lethal' project was on enabling parents to do this, both in terms of raising their awareness and building their skills and confidence to initiate useful and ongoing conversation.



There were a number of strands of work. The first was to create a practical, local resource and, following focus groups and consultations with parents, this developed as a six-page, full colour parent guide entitled [Talking with your child about 'legal highs' – 10 top tips](#). As well as the ten tips, the guide contained local help and support information and 'Factfiles' on the different types of substances young people might come into contact with.

As well as distributing the resource itself, the information in it was also repackaged for a range of dissemination channels including radio, city-wide newspapers and newsletters and even television screens at three Stoke City home matches (as pictured above).

Re-Solv also coordinated parental outreach with school sessions. In preparation for a session being delivered in school, a copy of the Parent Guide was sent home together with a flyer advertising a local drop-in event. At these events, held in local children's centres or community centres, parents could pick up more information and ask questions of Re-Solv staff. This meant

that, once the school session was delivered, parents and carers were able to continue the conversation at home. A week-long stand in the Freeport Talke shopping centre also provided a broader outreach opportunity for local residents to come and talk directly with Re-Solv staff.

Finally, skills workshops were delivered at community venues across the city from which parent volunteers were recruited. The goal was to cascade learning through informed, trusted word-of-mouth (WOM) communication. Marketing expert [Nielsen](#) tells us that “ninety-two percent of consumers around the world say they trust earned media, such as word-of-mouth or recommendations from friends and family above all other forms of advertising.” If anything, Re-Solv believe this is even more compelling in a community context where wellbeing, rather than advertising is the goal. As a result, each volunteer committed to taking 5 additional Parent Guides and sharing these with other parents or carers in their communities.



Measurable change indicators

Measurable Outcome	Target	Actual
Parent volunteers are recruited and trained to give informed advice to other local parents about VSA and NPS and/or signpost people to other appropriate local support services.	30	86
Local parents and carers are directly reached with accurate information about VSA and/or NPS – 80% of feedback given is positive.	9,000 80%	11,862 100%
Local parents are signposted to our guide about how to talk to your children about drugs – 80% of feedback given shows the guide is useful and accessible.	30,000 80%	102,850 100%

Impact

*“Deffo an eye opener”
(Parent, Scope)*

*“Really informative”
(Foster carer, Fostering People)*

*“Brilliant!”
(Parent, Gingerbread)*

*“Feel more confident knowing what to look for”
(Foster parent, Capstone)*

Re-Solv was convinced that working with parents would be one of the most effective strategies for an asset based community project like Legal but Lethal. Young people consistently name parents as one of their first ports of call for information (see, for example, the annual [NHS Smoking, drinking and drug use reports](#)) and so it is key that parents recognise this need and have the knowledge and skills to nurture and respond to it.

The numbers speak for themselves, but it was important that broad, universal messages (e.g. football screen promotion and the shopping centre presence) were combined with more direct work and engagement. This

included targeting by area (e.g. [the more deprived areas of the city](#)) and by vulnerability (e.g. upskilling foster carers who will necessarily be caring for at-risk young people). The work also needed to be joined-up and this was a key focus of the work with schools where in-school learning could then be extended into the home.

The willingness of parents – and other community members – to take up the volunteer challenge and become word-of-mouth advocates for talking with your children about ‘legal highs’ was a real indicator that the information and skills-building provided was found to be appropriate, practical and relevant by the many parents and carers who engaged with the programme.

Learning

Our parent guide was developed in consultation with parents and those consultations, carried out early in the programme’s delivery, were invaluable in terms of learning. The drugs landscape is constantly changing and our resources need to evolve accordingly. As a result, and in response to changing parental concerns, we are now reworking our parent guide to include more information on nitrous oxide and ‘teen’ drugs such as cannabis and alcohol.

We are also in the early stages of developing new materials in response to a request for *“resources for discussing parental drug usage with younger children; especially for those who have been exposed to a lot already.”* This is certainly something we will look to develop through local consultation.

Once we managed to reach parents, they responded with interest and gratitude. However, it is always a challenge to get busy mums and dads to give up what little free time they have to attend sessions, particularly if they also need to find childcare. As a result, although we provided tie-in parent events to all our school sessions, we saw less take up than we would have liked. Attendance and engagement were always better when we could tie into community or other events that parents were already attending – for example, tenant events, Church socials, parent focus groups in the workplace and local family activities. Now that Re-Solv has built contacts across the City, we are all the more able to get involved and become more embedded in these types of events going forward.

Sustainability

As detailed in Outcome 1 (p. 10), Re-Solv is very aware that parent engagement was found to be a key protective factor in Sigfúsdóttir et al’s [Substance use prevention for adolescents: the Icelandic Model](#) (2008). “Parental support, responsible monitoring and the amount of time spent with children have long been understood as social assets that decrease the likelihood of substance use among adolescents.”

The ‘Legal but Lethal’ project set out to lay the foundations for this kind of longer-term behaviour change. Thousands of parents across the city are now better able to support children and young people in their care because they have more confidence to talk with their children about drugs, better knowledge about the kinds of substances their children might come into contact with, and improved skills to respond in practical and positive ways. After

all, as one parent pointed out: *"What works for one family, doesn't work for another."* It is not possible to give parents a "right" answer; but a programme like Legal but Lethal can empower people to have confidence in finding the approach that is right for their child.

OUTCOME 4: Professionals and community members are more able to effectively meet local needs due to great VSA/NPS awareness, skills and capacity.



The problem

“Users face growing threat from 200-plus synthetic drugs in circulation across UK” reported [The Guardian](#) newspaper in May 2013. “More than 650 new designer drugs have flooded into Europe in the past decade” stated [The Telegraph](#) in August of that year. “Legal highs flooding Britain are ‘MORE addictive than illegal substances’” announced [The Express](#) in February 2015. How were local professionals and community members supposed to respond?

Re-Solv’s approach

While the above stories were all true, the alarmist approach obscured the fact that most NPS fell into five well known drug ‘categories’ – stimulants, depressants, hallucinogens, dissociatives and synthetic cannabinoids – which professionals and community practitioners had been responding to for years. So, as the government wrote reassuringly in its 2016 [NPS Resource Pack for Informal Educators and Practitioners](#): “you will already have the necessary skills to help those using NPS” – all they lacked was factual information and confidence.

As a result, Re-Solv developed a portfolio of training and upskilling programmes for professionals and community practitioners. In addition, Re-Solv recognised the need to reach those other members of the community who were likely to come into contact with people using – or at risk of using – NPS. This included a focus on people working in the night-time economy – including publicans and bar staff, taxi drivers and security workers as well as emergency services.

In the early days of the programme, the priority for Re-Solv was to build relationships with professional and community services across the city in order to deliver this outcome. One key partnership was forged with the [Stoke-on-Trent Safeguarding Children Board](#). Re-Solv’s training was integrated into and provided through the Board and just under 300 multidisciplinary professionals were trained via this partnership over the course of the programme – including staff in police and probation services, fire and rescue, NHS and combined healthcare, CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support) and care home staff.

As well as education, youth justice, care and residential services working with young people, Re-Solv focused on providing training and upskilling for services working with vulnerable adults. This included co-developing and co-delivering training with [Voices](#), a government-funded initiative in Stoke-on-Trent led by local people with lived experience of multiple needs working with people experiencing homelessness, mental-ill health, addiction, and offending in combination.



There was also a focus on reaching mental health practitioners, achieved both through the Safeguarding Children Board and through working directly with providers such as the Sutherland Centre, YMCA Health Zone and school and university pastoral teams.

Innovative work took place within the night-time economy and focused on harm reduction.



Many of those coming into contact with people supplying and using NPS were not professionals working in support and care services but bar staff, taxi drivers, bouncers – and they were having to respond to people displaying erratic, out-of-character, upsetting and even aggressive behaviours. They needed to think about how to manage these situations in potentially crowded venues and ensure the safety of all involved. For this reason, match-day stewards at both Stoke FC and Port Vale were also trained.

A number of resources were developed. The beer mats (above) were an effective way for publicans and bar managers to raise awareness of NPS and to provide advice for both staff and clientele. [Pubzine](#), a local print and online publication distributed to 66 local pubs, wine bars and music venues across the city (circulation 8000) carried [an article for licensees](#) written by Re-Solv and, later, [signposting information](#). A pack was developed for taxi drivers and Re-Solv’s training is now part of the Council’s statutory programme of training that licensed taxi drivers and providers are required to attend.

Measurable change indicators

Measurable Outcome	Target	Actual
Professionals in drug services and wrap-around services are trained and report an improved knowledge and awareness.	300	453
– improved knowledge		96%
– improved confidence		84%
Community members given NPS/VSA awareness training report they are more able to give informed advice.	300	696

– improved knowledge		91%
– improved confidence		85%
Staff in educational/care settings trained to spot the warning signs of VSA/NPS use and/or sales, report they are more able to give informed advice and signpost.	300	463
– improved knowledge		95%
– improved confidence		94%

Impact

It is not possible to measure long-term impact within the time span of the Legal but Lethal programme (although it is something Re-Solv will continue to monitor informally but with interest in our ongoing work locally). However, it should be noted that Re-Solv's approach and delivery anticipated best practice requirements laid out in the government's [2017 Drug Strategy](#). The strategy noted that, in addition to universal preventative action around reducing demand for drugs, there should be a targeted approach for high priority groups: "Local areas are best placed to understand their local needs and the services required. We expect local partners and agencies to identify groups at risk in their communities and take appropriate action" (p10).

"Other colleagues had attended the course previously and had recommended it."
Crisis Worker

"Very informative and ideal for our purposes."
Princes Trust Team Leader

"This is rife within groups of young people – this training is essential."
YMCA Keyworker

Re-Solv substantially exceeded the targets for this outcome in terms of reach. Again, our deliverables were needed, appreciated and promoted further at a grassroots level by word of mouth. The programme's flexibility was welcomed; key to its efficacy was the fact that this was no 'one size fits all' approach; instead training and resources were always tailored to need. As a result, there is a higher awareness about NPS across the city and over 1,600 professionals and community members with improved knowledge and confidence to recognise and respond to need.

It has been particularly gratifying to see evidence of change taking place. *"This has given me greater understanding of the cause and effect [of NPS] and how we could adapt our interventions as a result"* a Practice Manager told us. The training *"gave me further understanding [that will be] very useful in compiling mental health assessments,"* reported a specialist practitioner. These are precisely the changes in practice that will ensure Legal but Lethal has created lasting impact.

Learning

This was a really rewarding outcome to work on. Enthusiasm for the training and word-of-mouth recommendation meant that Re-Solv were in high demand and there were no problems at all in achieving the reach we wanted.

Having said that, turnover of staff and volunteers in public and third sector organisations can be high. While this is not wholly negative – it can mean that trained staff are taking their skills to benefit new organisations – it does mean that embedded, rather than ad-hoc, training programmes are always going to be more effective in ensuring a consistent level of expertise within individual services. This is why Re-Solv has worked hard to partner with reputable, established training providers such as the Safeguarding Children Board and to integrate our training into statutory Council-led programmes.

Sustainability

As a small organisation operating nationally, capacity-building has always been central to the sustainability of Re-Solv's work.

Many of those reached through Outcome 4 are influencers within their own numerous and varied communities – Voices' expert citizens, night shelter volunteers at Fenton Methodist Church, community pharmacists, St John Ambulance youth leaders and so on. As they integrate learning into their own practice and share that knowledge there will be a ripple effect. This is key to creating place-based change or, as Lankelly Chase put it in their 2017 [Historical review of place based approaches](#), "to build the capacity of the community to take charge of its own future, to speak for itself, and to build social capital and connections within the community."

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Re-Solv is delighted to have achieved all the anticipated outcomes of the Legal but Lethal project. Activities have been shaped by the project's stakeholders, beneficiaries and participants so outcomes have naturally reflected community ideas and priorities. As noted in the Executive Summary, although the time-scale and funding of this project does not allow for long-term monitoring of behavioural change, Legal but Lethal has nevertheless achieved some of the necessary outcomes that facilitate such change – namely increased, city-wide:-

- awareness of new psychoactive substances ('NPS', formerly 'legal highs')
- sense of collective responsibility
- individual, family and community engagement
- practical knowledge of *what to do* and
- increased confidence to do it.

There is now a real opportunity to build on this work and develop a longer-term strategy for substance misuse education and prevention for Stoke-on-Trent. This might involve:

- Targeted work with young people around nitrous oxide, the most commonly used former 'legal high' among 16-24 year-olds.
- Professional and community practitioner training around 'monkey dust', the synthetic stimulant that is causing concern particularly among vulnerable adults and the homeless population.
- A consistent programme of age-appropriate, life-skills-based substance misuse education for schools. The proposal would be to begin in year 6 (i.e. the final year of primary school and preparatory to transition to secondary) and continue through to Year 10. In-school learning would be supporting by a parallel programme of parental education and involvement.
- An asset-based, community-led programme of work to identify specific social concerns around substance misuse in different areas of the city and to develop local, community approaches to addressing and managing these.

Next Steps

- To share learning from this evaluation both internally and with appropriate stakeholders.
- To continue to review our funding development plan and seek to source funding for continued work in Stoke-on-Trent. Re-Solv has already successfully received one-year Stoke-on-Trent Council funding to deliver a prevention programme focusing on nitrous oxide.

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