

## 'Exploring Novel Psychoactive Substance (NPS) use and its consequences for police practitioners and substance users in the North East of England.'

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**Study term:** 1st May 2016 – 30th April 2016

### Research Objectives

- To conduct 8-12 semi-structured qualitative interviews with police staff to explore the impact NPS has on their role and the custody suite setting.
- To conduct 20-24 semi-structured qualitative interviews with NPS users to explore the impact NPS has on their everyday lives, and interactions with the police.
- To explore care pathways for NPS in emergency settings

### Progress

- **Recruitment:** Recruitment of police staff and NPS users has been very successful because of pre-existing networks that were utilised in this study. There were some challenges when trying to arrange interviews with NPS users: 1. Transience – several interviews were cancelled and/or rearranged. We were persistent following up with rearranging of interviews; 2. Mistrust: some NPS users were cautious about participating in research linked to the police. It was made clear to the participants that they would be anonymised and their participation would be kept confidential; 3. Venue: accessing an appropriate venue where the participant felt comfortable required some sensitivity. We frequently used safe spaces within a service provider setting to overcome this.

We used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling approaches to meet our quota. Participants were recruited from custody suites, through social media, Changing Lives, Basis Acquila, Lifeline, Women's support groups, homeless networks, and housing groups. We tried to recruit through universities and student unions also.

- **Fieldwork** - conducted between June-Sept 2016.
  - **Police Staff** – n=15 semi-structured interviews conducted: n=4 female and 11 males; n=1 Sergeant, n=1 Ch/Insp, n=13 DOs
  - **NPS users** – Participants self-selected/self-identified as NPS users. No verification process (for example via the police) was used to check up on this status. N=25 semi-structured interviews conducted: n=female, 16=male; 18-46 years old; n=8 infrequent user; n=13 current user; n=4 ex user; n=25 Caucasian; n=3 LGBT
- **Steering Group**
  - We have delegates from across several organisations: Andy Hackett (Service User Involvement Officer, Newcastle City Council), Rachael Hope (Community Safety Specialist – Drugs, Newcastle City Council), Lorna Smith (Speciality Registrar in Public Health, Public Health England North East), Adele Irving, (Senior Researcher, Northumbria University), Nitin Shukla (Police Crime Commission North East, Policy, Performance & Scrutiny Officer), [CHAIR] John Liddell (Health Improvement Manager – Health & Wellbeing Team, Public Health England)
  - 1st Steering group will meet in Nov 2016.

## Preliminary themes

Transcripts are being analysed and coded through Nvivo in the forthcoming months. Some preliminary themes are included below:

- Police Staff

All staff expressed concern about NPS and how to manage and treat the user. Some felt that the users were extremely volatile in custody and this impacted on the way staff interacted with the offenders. For example, staff demonstrated emotional dissonance in order to desensitize themselves from users. They were also concerned about managing risk and so would err on the side of caution by transferring NPS users to A&E if they felt urgent treatment was required. They felt that NPS had infiltrated poorer communities and concern was expressed about the vulnerability of users. Police staff were receptive to the provision of treatment in the form of a brief intervention within custody.

- NPS Users

NPS was widely considered to be worse than heroin – many expressed fear about the side effects of NPS arising from continuous use. Little support was accessed to help with NPS use; participants said that they tended to access acute treatment at crisis points. Whilst some used it recreationally, the main reasons for using NPS were expressed as a form of escapism or numbing out pain. NPS were regarded as highly stigmatised substances associated with vulnerable groups (NPS users were referred to by some as ‘smeg heads’ (instead of ‘smack head’ - heroin). Using and funding NPS use was widely linked to criminal activity. Participants also talked about covert distribution networks within the north east. They felt NPS is highly addictive and linked to rapidly deteriorating health. Mental health is also a major concern here with many participants expressing reasons for taking NPS to be linked with depression and suicidal thoughts.

## Conference and presentations

- Presented study at Public Health England North East commissioners meeting - Sept 2016
- Partnership between Fuse, PHE NE and Newcastle University to organise NPS event, ‘Exploring NPS Use and its Consequence’ at The Core, 3rd Nov, 12.45-4.30pm
  - Speakers include: Prof Eugene Milne (PHE), Kieran Platts (Youth Homelessness North East), Prof Simon Thomas (IONA project), Lorna Smith and Rachael Hope (Newcastle City Council), Ex User, and Chief Inspector Lisa Hogan (Northumbria Police).
  - 100+ delegates from service providers and third sector. Organisations include NHS, range of universities, police forces, prisons, Banardoes, Changing Lives, Lifeline, homeless networks etc.

## Planned publications

- ‘Exploring Novel Psychoactive Substance (NPS) use and its consequences for police practitioners and substance users in the North East of England’ in *Drugs: Education, Prevention & Policy*, Special Issue: Intersections in new drug research
- ‘The stigmatization of NPS users: Inhibitor to support access?’ Journal tbc

## Links and future bids

- Links with Newcastle city council Public Health team, Public Health England North East, Northumbria University; PCC, Fuse, North East Ambulance Service. These will be utilised in March workshop.
  - Public Health England – discussion about grant application looking at NPS in prisons.



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