

Illicit vaping

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Working collaboratively to educate young people on the dangers of illicit vaping

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Many people assume that vaping is something all young people do and that it's completely harmless. After all, at least it's not cigarettes, right? So what's the issue?

That assumption could not be more wrong. In my role at Lancashire Constabulary, I look at the highest harm caused by anti-social behaviour (ASB). Upon reviewing evidence and CCTV footage, we started to notice that nearly every child in ASB hotspot areas was holding a vape. It was pure curiosity that prompted the question, "Do vapes play a part in ASB?"

I shared this question with a colleague from the Community Safety Partnership (CSP) for East Lancashire. Coincidentally, they had seen a news article the night before about research that the University of Bath was conducting on illicit substances in vapes. These included 'spice' and tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).

Background research

Synthetic cannabinoids (SCRAs), commonly known as 'spice' or 'K2', represent a diverse and rapidly evolving class of new psychoactive substance. SCRAs are designed to mimic the effects of THC (the primary psychoactive component in cannabis), but they are pharmacologically distinct. They can strongly activate cannabinoid receptors, to a much greater extent than THC.

Working with concerned schools and police forces across England, the University of Bath had tested 596 vapes confiscated from schools. 'Spice' was detected in vapes in 28 out of 38 (74%) schools across London, the West Midlands, Greater Manchester and South Yorkshire. About one in six (16.6%) of the vapes tested contained 'spice', while roughly one in 90 (1.17%) contained THC.

We believed we may have had a similar problem in Lancashire, and sought opinions from local schools and partners through forums and surveys:

- Over 60% of secondary schools were seizing three or more vapes per week.
- 20% of schools had vape detectors installed.
- 100% of schools implemented harm reduction responses to children involved with vaping.
- Consistently, partners in education reported that school years nine and 10 were most affected by vaping.
- One school had documented 56 students having an adverse reaction to a vape between 2022 and 2024.
- Between May 2023 and September 2024, there had been at least 35 hospital admissions whereby a person had cited vaping as causing them to feel ill.
- Trading standards reported a 31% failure rate for test purchasing, where a child was allowed to buy a vape from a shop.
- In a 12-month period across East Lancashire, there were at least 270 vape-related incidents, of which 68% were youth-related, based on reports held solely on police systems.

Using this data, we approached the University of Bath and agreed to participate in their trial.

Research trial

Over a four-month period, secondary schools in one East Lancashire town were asked to seize and retain vapes that entered their education setting, with information provided around the legislation allowing them to do this. A letter was sent to all parents to ensure that they were aware of what we were trying to accomplish and why.

The schools seized and retained 215 vapes fit for sampling, which were tested at the University of Bath. The results were, quite frankly, shocking.

Of the 215 samples, 29% were illicit in some form:

- 58 tested positive for 'spice'
- four tested positive for THC
- one tested positive for ketamine

The number of vapes seized and tested showed the commitment of the schools that chose to work with the police on this issue. They, like me, realised that something was not right and wanted to

tackle the problem earlier, rather than react to it later.

The results were shared with the schools and relevant partner agencies, such as drugs and alcohol workers.

Education

From speaking to other forces who had taken part in this trial, we learned that education played a huge part in tackling this issue, so this was our next focus.

At Lancashire Police, we rely on using [Pol Ed](#), a bank of policing-related education resources covering various age groups and topics, to deliver important messages in schools. The existing Pol Ed package on vapes did not cover the topic of 'illicit vaping' in depth, so we commissioned work for Pol Ed to update the content.

Given their specialist knowledge, we concluded that drugs and alcohol services colleagues would be best placed to deliver this material in schools. Over a period of eight to 10 weeks, each school involved in the testing received a session from our commissioned providers.

Students were visibly shocked by the findings from the trial. All schools involved in the trials, bar one, were mainstream schools that did not have specialist care for neurodivergence or behavioural-related issues.

On the whole, students were shocked that they could have potentially been inhaling 'spice', a drug typically used by adults entrenched in addiction. Now they had been informed of the risks, students may be more likely to make safer, more considered decisions.

Next steps

We have now moved into phase two of seizure, retention and testing of vapes confiscated from the same cohort of schools. The University of Bath has provided us with a mobile vape testing machine, which allows us to spot-test vapes with results in as little as 30 seconds.

Positively, we are seeing a reduction in the number of illicit vapes seized, with the percentage of vapes testing positive for additional substances sitting at approximately 11% following delivery of

the educational package.

However, there is still a lot of work to do. Over one in 10 vapes in the schools in the area are illicit. This number needs to be driven down even further, so we will continue to educate and spread awareness on this topic and roll this out wider to towns across Lancashire.

Conclusion

A child may not even know that they are putting illegal substances into their body, particularly if they have obtained a vape from a 'street dealer'. One thing is certain, though, young people are far from naïve. When we give them the right information and raise awareness, they are fully capable of making safer and more informed choices.

Based on the research conducted by the University of Bath, we are confident that this challenge extends beyond Lancashire and is reflective of a national issue. Our main partners, including drug and alcohol services, schools and youth engagement teams, play a vital role in addressing this. Their specialist knowledge and experience in delivering safety messages is essential.

While the police do have an important role in providing safety education within schools, we also recognise that the uniform can sometimes create a barrier, which we are keen to avoid in this context. Working collaboratively with partners ensures that young people receive the most effective, accessible and relatable guidance possible.

- This article was peer reviewed by Inspector Bill Turner, Metropolitan Police Service

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