

Operation Freight – reducing ketamine use and associated harm among young people

An intelligence-led, partnership approach to identify, disrupt and prevent ketamine-related offending, safeguard vulnerable young people and reduce drug-related harm.

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Key details

Stage of practice	Untested
Purpose	Prevention
Topic	Child abuse Drugs and alcohol Serious organised crime
Organisation	Merseyside Police
HMICFRS report	PEEL 2025–27 Police effectiveness, efficiency and legitimacy: An inspection of Merseyside Police
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Key details

Partners	Police Community safety partnership Health services Local authority Voluntary/not for profit organisation
Stage of implementation	The practice is implemented.
Start date	May 2025
Scale of initiative	Local
Target group	Children and young people Communities Families

Aim

The aim of Operation Freight is to use an intelligence-led approach to prevent young people from using and dealing ketamine.

Intended outcome

The intended outcomes of Operation Freight are to:

- increase the number of intelligence submissions relating to ketamine supply, use, distribution networks and criminal exploitation
- increase the number of proactive engagements, stop searches and targeted activities involving identified nominals and locations
- increase the number of positive criminal justice outcomes for ketamine-related offences
- improve the identification and safeguarding support offered to vulnerable young people at risk of ketamine misuse or criminal child exploitation

- increase the number of drug seizures, cash seizures and mobile phone recoveries linked to ketamine-related offending
- reduce the risk of hospital admissions and long-term health complications associated with ketamine misuse through education, early intervention and safeguarding activities

Description

Merseyside Police developed Operation Freight in response to an increase in ketamine use and the associated harm being experienced by local communities. Force intelligence identified that young people were becoming increasingly involved in the supply of ketamine, with evidence suggesting that some were being exploited through drug-related criminal activity. Additional concerns were raised by partner agencies regarding the long-term health implications of ketamine misuse and the growing accessibility of the drug among younger age groups.

Planning process

The operation was intelligence-led and commenced with an analytical assessment of ketamine-related offending across a policing area of concern. The analytical assessment looked at:

- crime recording data
- intelligence reports
- safeguarding information
- nominal profiles
- geographical hotspot analysis to identify key offenders

Intelligence gaps were also identified to help direct proactive activity and improve the understanding of local supply networks, criminal exploitation and distribution methods. Hotspot areas and individuals were prioritised according to threat, harm and risk, with consideration given to both enforcement opportunities and safeguarding needs.

A tasking and coordination plan was developed to ensure activity focused on:

- disruption of drug supply
- intelligence gathering
- safeguarding vulnerable individuals
- engagement with partner agencies

Roles and teams

Operation Freight involved the following teams and organisations:

- neighbourhood and proactive policing teams – conducting proactive patrols, stop searches, warrants and targeted activity against identified offenders
- local officers and supervisors – coordinating operational deployments and tasking
- force intelligence bureau – identifying trends, mapping hotspots, and producing intelligence products which informed operational decision-making
- school officers – engaging with educational establishments to raise awareness of ketamine-related harm and gathering community intelligence
- safeguarding teams – supporting vulnerable individuals identified through enforcement activity and intelligence development
- partner agencies including schools, colleges and health services – providing information sharing, prevention messaging, and safeguarding support
- North West Regional Organised Crime Unit (NWROCU) and the cyber dark web team – using social media to identify hotspot locations and offenders for ketamine dealing

Implementation

Officers are briefed on identified offenders, locations and intelligence opportunities. They are then tasked with proactively targeting individuals linked to ketamine supply and distribution. This includes the following activities:

- conducting stop searches
- developing intelligence
- identifying associates,
- obtaining mobile telephone numbers and social media handles linked to the supply of ketamine where appropriate

Alongside enforcement activity, officers actively sought to identify and safeguard vulnerable young individuals affected by ketamine misuse or criminal exploitation. Safeguarding measures include:

- referrals to appropriate agencies
- submissions of vulnerable person referral forms (VPRFs)
- consideration of target-hardening opportunities

- use of partnership interventions to reduce vulnerability and further harm

The operation also incorporated preventative activity through engagement with schools and other educational establishments. Officers deliver awareness sessions focusing on ketamine use, the associated health risks, and the indicators of criminal exploitation. Information gathered through these engagement activities is fed into intelligence systems to further enhance understanding of the local threat picture.

Partnership working with education providers, health services and community stakeholders has been used to maximise intelligence-gathering opportunities and support a coordinated response to the emerging issue of ketamine misuse among young people.

Regular intelligence submissions and ongoing analysis have enabled operational tactics to be continuously reviewed and refined throughout the operation. Officers have conducted days of action at a local college, involving numerous partner agencies, to raise awareness of the consequences of drug dealing and the health implications associated with ketamine misuse.

Neighbourhood officers work closely with local drug and alcohol support services. Each Friday, joint patrols of hotspot locations are conducted with plain-clothes police officers and specialists from these agencies.

Funding and senior management approval

Operation Freight has been delivered using existing force resources and staff. Supervisory oversight has been maintained throughout, with activity conducted in line with local policing priorities, safeguarding responsibilities, and force intelligence requirements.

Overall impact

Operation Freight has delivered a coordinated response to the emerging threat posed by ketamine use and supply within a hot spot policing area. The intervention has improved local understanding of ketamine-related offending, helping to identify key offenders, vulnerable individuals and opportunities for partnership working.

A key outcome has been the identification that ketamine-related offending is most prevalent between 5pm and 2am from Thursday to Saturday. This has provided officers with clear evidence to

inform proactive deployment plans and targeted patrol strategies.

The intervention has seen more proactive safeguarding activities. Vulnerable young people identified through enforcement and intelligence activity are referred through appropriate safeguarding pathways, with officers encouraged to consider VPRFs, and partnership interventions where indicators of criminal exploitation are present. This has improved the identification of individuals at risk and ensured safeguarding considerations remain central to enforcement activity.

Feedback from officers and supervisors has been positive, with staff reporting that the operation has improved their understanding of the scale of ketamine misuse locally, identified priority offenders and locations, and enabled more effective deployment of resources. Officers particularly valued the intelligence-led approach, which combines enforcement opportunities with safeguarding and prevention initiatives, providing a more comprehensive response than traditional drug enforcement activity alone.

Learning

What went well

- A key strength has been using analytical data to identify the scale, location and characteristics of ketamine-related offending. This led to an intelligence-led approach which ensured that operational activity was focused on the areas, times and individuals presenting the highest levels of threat, harm and risk.
- The operation also successfully combined enforcement, safeguarding and prevention activity. Rather than focusing solely on arrests and drug seizures, officers were encouraged to identify vulnerable individuals, recognise indicators of child criminal exploitation and utilise safeguarding pathways. This created a more holistic response to the problem and strengthened partnership working with schools, colleges, health professionals and safeguarding organisations.

Challenges and barriers

- A significant challenge was the limited intelligence available regarding ketamine supply networks. While possession offences were frequently identified, considerably less information was available regarding wholesale suppliers, supply methods and organised criminal involvement. As a result, the operation required sustained intelligence development before a comprehensive understanding

of the local supply chain could be established.

- Another challenge has been the emerging nature of ketamine misuse. Compared with more established drug markets such as cocaine and heroin, there was less historical information available and fewer established enforcement tactics tailored specifically to ketamine-related offending. This meant that officers often had to develop new approaches to understanding patterns of use, exploitation and distribution.
- The operation also identified challenges relating to crime and intelligence recording. Analysis highlighted occasions where ketamine-related offences had been recorded under broader drug offence categories, making it more difficult to accurately assess the scale of the problem and identify trends. Consistent recording practices have therefore been recognised as essential to improving future analysis and operational planning.
- Intelligence assessments are based on available crime and intelligence records, meaning the full scale of ketamine-related activity may not be captured. As with many drug markets, the true scale of offending is likely to be greater than the level identified through recorded incidents alone.

Recommendations

- It is important to ensure that the intervention is intelligence-led from the outset and supported by detailed analytical products identifying hotspots, offenders and trends.
- It is recommended that the force engage with pattern agencies at the earliest opportunity to maximise intelligence opportunities and support a whole-system response.
- Regularly review findings and adapt operational activity to reflect changing patterns of offending, locations and emerging threats.

Best available evidence

The [crime reduction toolkit](#) currently features the best available evidence on [hot spots policing](#).

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