



11 March 2015

Dear Festival Organiser

Like my predecessors, I am writing to you to draw attention to the Government's continuing concerns about the availability of traditional illegal drugs and new psychoactive substances (NPS), often inaccurately called 'legal highs', at music and dance festivals across the UK.

Historically, the majority of drugs encountered by the Home Office's Forensic Early Warning System (FEWS) at festivals have been the more established illegal drugs – such as MDMA, mephedrone and ketamine. Nevertheless, a number of 'white powders' and pills seized at these events have been found to contain NPS. NPS are often marketed as "legal", when in fact over 500 have been banned since 2010. These substances increasingly appear to have similar risks to illegal drugs including overdose and severe mental health problems.

This year, I wanted to bring to your attention two drugs, where concerns have been raised by the Government's independent advisers on drug matters, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD).

There has been a recent upsurge in the recreational use of nitrous oxide (also referred to as 'laughing gas') which appears to be tolerated and increasingly used at festivals. The ACMD has recently issued advice to highlight the harms of nitrous oxide misuse. Nitrous oxide can slow down both brain and body responses and poses a risk of death from a lack of oxygen especially if the substance is consumed in a confined space or a substantial amount is rapidly used.

In December 2013, the ACMD also published further advice on ketamine, which is now a Class B drug. The ACMD's report highlighted a range of health issues including chronic bladder, central nervous system and kidney damage as well as toxicity associated with ketamine misuse. Both the ACMD's nitrous oxide and ketamine advice can be found at www.gov.uk.

As you make your arrangements for this year, I strongly encourage you once again to review measures to discharge your responsibility to provide a safe environment for the public, especially young people, and to work with the police and other agencies to achieve this. You may want to consider:

- In addition to stipulating that illicit drug use will not be tolerated, adding or maintaining (as appropriate) a 'no legal high' policy towards NPS to include nitrous oxide as a condition of entry to the festival site.
- Consider providing onsite information and treatment services for both traditional illicit drugs and NPS.

- Refer anyone seeking information on the risks of taking traditional illicit drugs or NPS to the FRANK website (www.talktofrank.com) or the confidential helpline (0800 77 66 00).
- The Home Office FEWS project has worked with a number of festivals over the years. Your co-operation with these initiatives is extremely helpful in understanding the patterns of use and risk. If you would be interested in participating in further FEWS projects, please contact my officials on 020 7035 5338.

It is important of course to recognise all the activity that has been put in place by many of you in previous years and the close working relationship that many organisers have had with the police and other agencies. I ask that you continue to collaborate with the police and other partners.

Finally, you may be aware that the Government is developing proposals for a general ban on the distribution of NPS across the UK, similar to that introduced in Ireland. This will give law enforcement greater powers to tackle the availability of NPS. This decision followed an expert-led review whose report, together with the Government's response, is available to view and download at www.gov.uk. In the meantime, the Government and its agencies continue to support frontline action on NPS. We have recently published updated guidance to local authorities on taking action against 'head shops' selling NPS as well as a NPS resource pack for educators and practitioners to challenge drug taking amongst young people. Last year, Public Health England issued a NPS toolkit to help local authorities prevent and respond to the use of NPS in their local areas.

I appreciate your efforts and continued support in ensuring that the summer festival season is held with public safety at its heart.

I am copying this letter to your local authority and police force.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lynne Featherstone', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Rt Hon Lynne Featherstone MP
Minister of State