

Dear Parents/Carers

We are writing this letter jointly, as Headteachers of all the Windsor and Maidenhead secondary schools, as we are concerned by the behaviour of some of the young people in our community as well as the rise in the use of drugs by young people and the carrying and potential danger of knives in the local area.

As you are aware the police, local authority and schools in the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead are committed to working together to protect our young people from the risks of knife crime, drugs and associated crimes. In order to support this, Headteachers of all the secondary schools as well as representatives from the police and local authority met to discuss key concerns which may affect the wellbeing of the young people in our care and to consider how to better work with parents/carers. We also want to provide clarity for parents/carers in relation to actions, which may be undertaken by schools in relation to incidents involving drugs, alcohol and knives.

Many areas within Windsor and Maidenhead as well as the wider catchment areas can be described as affluent. Peer pressure is usually the main reason that young people get involved with smoking, alcohol and drug use. We are also within easy reach of central London as a result of excellent transport services which means that the young people we serve are also subject to wider influences such as "County Lines". County Lines is a term used when drug gangs from big cities expand their operations to smaller towns, often exploiting children and vulnerable young people to sell drugs.

Alcohol use

It is an offence to supply alcohol to someone under 18. The exception to this is if they are aged 16 or over, are dining in licensed premises and are accompanied by an adult. This still only permits the consumption of beer, cider or wine. Anyone found guilty of alcohol supply may face a court appearance, a fine or imprisonment. Parents are now the main providers of alcohol for this age group (60%). Giving alcohol to your children's friends (who are under the age of 18) in your house is not an offence, neither is buying alcohol for your own child if they are aged under 18, but you should act responsibly when allowing your children and their friends to drink in your home and you should consider strict parental supervision. If a child attending any of the schools within RBWM, was either in possession or under the influence of alcohol, it is likely to lead to a permanent exclusion.

Drug use

The starting point for most drug use is smoking tobacco. There can be lots of pressure from friends to smoke. Smoking is highly addictive and can cause serious health problems, including cancer. You must be over 18 to

buy cigarettes in the UK. If the police find a child under the age of 16 in possession of cigarettes, they have the right to confiscate them. It is illegal:

- for shops to sell cigarettes to anyone under the age of 18
- for an adult to buy cigarettes for anyone under the age of 18
- to have, give or sell cannabis to anyone. If caught with cannabis a young person could get a warning, a formal caution, or be arrested – or even be sent to prison
- to smoke in a car with a child.

If a child attending any of the schools within RBWM, was found in possession or smoking tobacco sanctions range from community service to fixed term exclusion. In persistent cases this can lead to permanent exclusion. Support is available through the NHS to stop smoking.

As stated previously peer pressure is usually the main reason that young people get involved in drug use and, after alcohol, cannabis in its various forms, including the vaping of THC (the active chemical component of cannabis oil) is the main drug used, though it often serves as an entry-level drug, providing a gateway to other, more dangerous drugs, over time. Additionally, there has been an alarming growth in the use of other drugs by young people including ketamine and cocaine.

Drug classifications

Under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, illegal drugs are placed into one of three classes - A, B or C. This is broadly based on the harm they cause, either to the user, or to society when they are misused. The class into which a drug is placed affects the maximum penalty for an offence involving the drug. For example, Class A drugs attract the most severe penalty as they are considered likely to cause the most serious harm. Drugs controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Act are illegal to possess, produce, sell or give away.

Cannabis

Cannabis (also known as marijuana, weed, pot, dope or grass) is the most widely used illegal drug in the UK.

The effects of cannabis vary from person to person:

- you may feel chilled out, relaxed and happy
- some people get the giggles or become more talkative
- hunger pangs ("the munchies") are common
- colours may look more intense and music may sound better
- time may feel like it's slowing down

Cannabis can have other effects too:

- if you're not used to it, you may feel faint or sick
- it can make you sleepy and lethargic
- it can affect memory
- it makes some people feel confused, anxious or paranoid
- it can cause panic attacks and hallucinations – this is more common with stronger forms of cannabis such as skunk or sinsemilla
- it interferes with your ability to drive safely

Regular use of cannabis can make you demotivated and uninterested in other things going on in your life, such as education or work. Long-term use can affect your ability to learn and concentrate and if you mix cannabis with tobacco to smoke it, you risk getting tobacco-related lung diseases, such as lung cancer and chronic pulmonary obstructive disease (COPD).

The risk of harm from cannabis, including the risk of schizophrenia (Mental Health), is higher if you start using it regularly in your teens. One reason for this is that, during the teenage years, the brain is still growing and forming its connections, and cannabis interferes with this process*.

*taken from NHS <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/cannabis-the-facts/>

What is THC?

Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the main psychoactive compound in marijuana/cannabis so is a class B drug. THC bought illegally is always unsafe, especially because it can also have unknown additives within the vape chemical. Some of these are capable of inducing extreme suicidal actions and psychotic episodes, even after just a few puffs. Some of the additives have been shown to induce psychotic episodes in up to 85% of those who took the substance.

THC is usually taken in a vape pen, which is becoming increasingly commonplace with young people. It is almost odourless which means it is unlikely to be detected and gives an instant high. This increases its popularity as it is unlikely to be detected. THC oil is illegal and should not be used in e-cigarettes. As with cannabis and ketamine, its use can result in a criminal record.

Ketamine

Ketamine is a very powerful anaesthetic that can cause serious harm. Taking ketamine can be fatal, particularly if it is mixed with other drugs. It has many physical and mental health risks. It is used as a hallucinogen, and commonly taken by sniffing (snorting) the powder, swallowed in a cigarette paper parcel (bombing), rubbed under the tongue (dabbing) or by injecting into the bloodstream. It is a class B drug which means it's illegal to have for yourself, give away or sell.

Recreational drug use

As young people grow up, they begin to socialise more with each other outside of school. One of the key ways in which young people begin to experiment with drugs is when invited to private parties in students' homes. The rise in attendance at music festivals can also be a concern. Music festivals are increasingly seen as a dangerous place for young people, when it comes to exposure to drugs, which is now commonplace at such events. Nitrous oxide (laughing gas) is also increasingly used in canister form and has been widely available at summer festivals. When mixed with alcohol it is extremely dangerous. Crime at festivals is now a major problem for police and parents/carers need to think hard about the age at which they allow their children to attend festivals. If you do allow your children to go, we'd urge you to have a frank and open conversation about drugs and the likelihood of crime scenarios.

Escalation and consequences

32% of people between the ages of 16 and 24 become frequent users after having experienced cannabis for the first time. The maximum prison sentence just for possession of a Class B drug is 5 years. Giving or supplying drugs to someone else, even friends, can result in up to a 14 year prison sentence and/or an unlimited fine.

The impact of social media

The rise in the use of social media has had a significant impact on the availability of drugs to young people. Most young people have at least one social media account – be it Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp or any of the other sites currently available. By signing up to any of these platforms young people automatically have access to a local market place and can receive constant updates on what is available locally and pricing.

As you aware, we live in a cashless society and purchase is simply one or two clicks. Purchases can be made through apps or money transfer, delivery within minutes to any point. Pricing of most illegal drugs, including Class A drugs, is within the scope of the normal average UK pocket money for a teenager.

Peer pressure is also a significant contributor - seeing one person within your “friendship group” commit to buying a drug, soon followed by another, normalises the activity and dehumanises a profound and high risk decision, making the spread of drug activity within a peer group more likely and harder to resist as an individual.

Knife crime

In addition to concerns over drugs we are seeing an increase in knife crime among our young people. Much of this is associated with wider criminal activity with clear links to drug supply and use. The possible consequences of knife crime are clear, and we would urge parents/carers to act on any suspicions or concerns that you may have.

Thames Valley have been actively engaging with the schools and the public as part of Operation Sceptre which included a knife amnesty that ran during Spring 2019 when over 200 knives were handed in, funding an education programme of the County Lines theatre production for schools, as well as increasing their presence outside schools. On occasions, schools may make use of a knife wand to check for objects which may be of concern. It is important that young people are aware of the implications of carrying knives in public.

It is illegal to:

- sell a knife to anyone under 18, unless it has a folding blade 3 inches long (7.62 cm) or less
- carry a knife in public without good reason, unless it has a folding blade with a cutting edge 3 inches long or less
- carry, buy or sell any type of banned knife
- use any knife in a threatening way (even a legal knife)

If a child attending any of the schools within RBWM, is found in possession of a knife, it is likely to lead to a permanent exclusion.

All of the local schools in the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead take an extremely strong approach to drug misuse and parents are asked to keep in close touch with their respective school if they have any concerns of this sort. We need to work together to educate the young people to resist and not become caught up in this insidious problem.

Given the Police advice and guidance about what would appear to be an increasingly worrying national picture, we feel it would be useful if all parents were to sit down with their children and discuss these issues relating to drugs, tobacco, alcohol and knives.

Should you require any support for a child you are concerned about or are thinking about your own drug use, please contact the following services:

Resilience Alcohol and Drug Service

[https://www3.rbwm.gov.uk/publichealth/info/10/alcohol and drugs/15/resilience drug and alcohol service](https://www3.rbwm.gov.uk/publichealth/info/10/alcohol%20and%20drugs/15/resilience%20drug%20and%20alcohol%20service)

RBWM Drug and Alcohol Team

- DAAT Telephone: 01628 796362
- Email: daat@rbwm.gov.uk

We hope that this information is beneficial and that we can work together to support the young people we serve to make informed decisions about the correct actions to take.

Yours sincerely

Supported by the Headteachers of the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.