

COUNTY COUNCIL MEETING – 23 JULY 2020

Question to the Leader of the Council

By Kyle Robinson

Question

Can the Leader of the Council please set out what Strategy the County Council has in place to help tackle the plague of misuse of Nitrous Oxide in communities across Staffordshire? Specifically, what strategy and action has been taken by the County Council's Trading Standards department in relation to this issue and will he commit to writing to all Staffordshire MPs to press the Government for tougher action on dealing with this problem?

Reply

Firstly I thought it would be useful to provide Council members with some background information on Nitrous Oxide.

Nitrous oxide (N₂O) is a colourless sweet-tasting gas often referred to as 'laughing gas' and it has several legitimate uses in medicine and dentistry. It is also used as a fuel additive and as a component of rocket fuel, and is sold as an aerosol spray propellant within whipped cream canisters.

Products include small canisters in large packs, each enough for a recreational dose, and paraphernalia such as 'creamers' or 'crackers'. These dispense the gas from canisters into balloons, which are used to inhale the gas. Nitrous Oxide is covered under Psychoactive Substances Act 2016,

The act bans psychoactive substances, known as 'legal highs', in the UK and prevents the supply of previously unregulated and frequently harmful substances for human consumption.

This Act also includes controls on a number of other products including solvent-based glues, any kind of aerosols and nail varnish/nail varnish remover. Retailers need to pay particular attention to the potential for abuse of nitrous oxide, especially where customers seek to buy in bulk or large volumes involving nitrous oxide..

Trading Standards work closely with the Police and following the implementation of the new act in 2016 did a lot of work removing "Legal Highs" and providing advice and guidance to retailers to ensure they took the necessary precautions. Initially when the act was introduced trading standards committed a large amount of resource to education and advice to retailers over a period of several months. However more recently we have received no intelligence regarding matters relating to Nitrous oxide and, as with any enforcement, trading standards act on intelligence received to base any response accordingly.

Our Police partners also inform us that they also have no intelligence of any specific problems currently regarding nitrous oxide, advising that empty canisters have been

seen discarded on the side of the road, but that there is no impact on crime reports. Should intelligence or complaints be received into trading standards this will be investigated, in conjunction with the police, as each partner has specific powers within the Act and enforcement is most effective with joint working.

The Staffordshire Safer & Stronger Communities Strategy Group acts as the countywide strategy group for community safety and is responsible for producing a Community Safety Agreement based on the priority areas highlighted in the County Community Safety Strategic Assessment. The latest strategic assessment was produced earlier this year and the SSSCSG is currently updating its Community Safety Agreement with the current priority areas highlighted in the strategic assessment. This recent strategic assessment has not highlighted Nitrous Oxide as an area of concern and therefore no specific actions are currently identified for the partnership. Districts and Boroughs may have this area highlighted as an issue within the Strategic assessment for their own Local Authority area and may have developed plans to address at local level.