

REPORT TO: Halton Health and Wellbeing Board

DATE: 14th January 2026

REPORTING OFFICER: Director of Public Health

PORTFOLIO: Health and Wellbeing

SUBJECT: Update on Halton's Partnership Response to Rising Ketamine Use

WARD(S): All Wards

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To inform the Health and Wellbeing Board about the rise in Ketamine use and associated harms in Halton, and to update members on the coordinated partnership response since November 2024.
- 1.2 To provide assurance that the response remains proportionate, evidence-led and aligned to Halton's priorities for young people, adults, and communities.

2.0 RECOMMENDED: That

- 1) the report be noted; and
- 2) the Board provides feedback regarding any further actions required to provide assurance that Halton's Partnership response to rising Ketamine use is appropriate and proportionate.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

3.1 What is Ketamine and Why Is It a Concern?

Ketamine is a dissociative anaesthetic with legitimate clinical uses but increasing recreational misuse. It can cause:

- cognitive decline and dependency,
- impaired perception leading to accidents
- acute harm and dissociative state requiring emergency care, and, particularly with increasing frequency of use,
- severe bladder damage, including ulcerative cystitis, with symptoms including severe pain and incontinence
- gastric and hepatic damage with symptoms including severe pain

Nationally, Ketamine use has risen, contributing to increased harms; these shifting patterns are thought to be driven by low cost, wide availability, and limited awareness of Ketamine-related risks, alongside risk factors such as neurodiversity, anxiety and/or depressions, adverse childhood experiences, care experience and persistent school non-attendance, which may further heighten the likelihood of harmful use.

3.2 Local Context

Halton's Combatting Drugs Partnership (CDP) has identified Ketamine as an emerging and rapidly escalating issue in Halton. The partnership held a Ketamine-specific workshop in November 2024 at which Partners reported:

- sharp increases in young people presenting with Ketamine-related harms,
- rising exclusions linked to Ketamine use, and
- widening safeguarding concerns
- rising numbers of school exclusions related to Ketamine use in school time
- concerns raised by parents of young people to teachers and other professionals regarding potential Ketamine use
- increasing criminal activity related to the supply and distribution of Ketamine, linked mainly to use by young people and younger adults

This led directly to a recommendation to establish a dedicated multi-agency coordination structure. In March 2025, the Ketamine Task and Finish Group was established in response to the recommendation of the CDP. The CDP has provided continuous oversight of the Task and Finish Group and continues to guide its actions.

3.3 Cheshire Police have been actively responding to a significant rise in Ketamine use and supply affecting young people in Halton, through Operation Yellow Darting. Officers from specialist units have been working with The Bridge School, conducting targeted operations and raids that have led to multiple arrests of those suspected of supplying the Class B drug. The police have also been working with schools to raise awareness of the serious physical harms of Ketamine by delivering sessions in schools for young people. They continue to encourage public reporting of drug supply, and engage with families and communities to protect vulnerable youths.

3.4 The Ketamine Task & Finish Group was created to deliver a structured, whole-system response. Its agreed aims were to improve:

1. Evidence and intelligence gathering,

2. Coordinated interventions, and
3. Multi-agency collaboration.

Membership includes Public Health, Education, Police, NHS, Youth Services, CGL, and safeguarding teams. The group reports to several senior meetings and boards including the Combatting Drugs Partnership, Contextual Safeguarding Strategic Group and Safer Halton Partnership.

3.5 The most recent Task & Finish Group meetings show considerable progress and clearer system alignment against its 6P action plan:

Prepare

- A one-page quarterly situation summary is now in development, incorporating treatment numbers, school exclusions, ambulance callouts, and hospital admissions.
- GP training delivered for Runcorn PCN; Widnes PCN planned next.
- Lived experience is being integrated into training and public events.
- Ketamine awareness is now embedded in school safeguarding training for 2025/26.

Prevent

- New communication resources (posters, leaflets, videos, parent letters) have been developed.
- KS3 Ambassador Event planned for early 2026, with young people co-creating prevention messages.
- School nurses are routinely recording MECC Ketamine conversations, strengthening early identification.
- School exclusions related to Ketamine have fallen significantly since September 2025.

Protect

- Sixty-one adults are currently in Ketamine treatment; inpatient detox capacity is being used monthly.
- CYP services support forty-three young people, including twenty with Ketamine as their primary drug.

Pursue

- Operation Yellow Darting continues.

People

- Lived experience is being integrated into training and public events.

Partnerships

- VibeUK is conducting targeted outreach in hotspots, including work directly on bus routes.

- Youth workers, beat meetings and housing groups are now providing regular intelligence on hotspots.

3.5 **Overall Position**

From November 2024 to the present, Halton's Ketamine response has evolved from early concern to coordinated action and is now progressing towards embedded system change. The partnership now has:

- stronger intelligence
- improved communication pathways
- earlier identification of risk
- expanded treatment activity
- clearer safeguarding responses
- more targeted enforcement

This represents a marked improvement in system coordination, though work remains ongoing to embed sustainable prevention. The group is currently undertaking a stocktake of progress against the action plan to update the plan for 2026.

4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 The work aligns with national Combating Drugs Strategy expectations and local safeguarding duties.

4.2 The Six Ps Action Plan provides structure for ongoing delivery and assurance.

5.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 Partnership activity is funded within existing service budgets, with small grants supporting awareness events.

5.2 Demand and the comparatively high cost of Ketamine detox in young adults has significantly contributed to an additional pressure of £0.170m on public health budgets in 2025/26.

6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

6.1 **Improving Health, Promoting Wellbeing and Supporting Greater Independence:**

Partnership working aims to reduces drug-related harm and supports healthier behaviours.

6.2 **Building a Strong, Sustainable Local Economy:**

Tackling the Ketamine issue supports school attendance, attainment, and longer-term employability.

6.3 **Supporting Children, Young People and Families:**

The partnership response improves safeguarding, reduces exclusions, and promotes early help interventions.

6.4 **Tackling Inequality and Helping Those Who Are Most In Need:**
Responds to harms that disproportionately affect vulnerable young people.

6.5 **Working Towards a Greener Future:**
No direct implications.

6.6 **Valuing and Appreciating Halton and Our Community:**
The partnership improves awareness and resilience within neighbourhoods and schools.

6.7 **Resilient and Reliable Organisation:**
Strengthens cross-system governance and response capacity.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 Public Health Risk

Rising Ketamine use increases the likelihood of significant long-term health harms, including bladder damage, chronic pain conditions, cognitive impairment, dependency, and acute health crises. Increased demand on NHS and emergency care services is likely if trends are not reversed.

7.2 Safeguarding and Youth Vulnerability Risk

Young people are disproportionately affected, including those with neurodiversity, trauma histories, or persistent school absence. Without sustained intervention, Ketamine use may heighten vulnerability to exploitation, unsafe environments, and serious youth violence.

7.3 Educational Attainment and Exclusion Risk

Ketamine has been linked to behavioural incidents and permanent exclusions in Halton. Continued use without effective prevention threatens attendance, attainment, and educational stability for affected young people.

7.4 Criminal Exploitation and Supply Risk

Greater availability of Ketamine heightens the risk of organised supply activity, local dealing, and exploitation of vulnerable young people in drug distribution networks.

7.5 Long-Term System Cost Risk

Failure to control Ketamine-related harm may lead to escalating demand on health, safeguarding, enforcement, and education services, creating significant long-term costs for statutory partners.

7.6 These risks underline the importance of a sustained and coordinated multi-agency response to prevent worsening harms and protect young people, families, and communities.

Mitigation Through Partnership Working

The content of this paper provides details on the partnership work that is being undertaken in mitigation of the risks identified.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 Responds to harms that disproportionately affect vulnerable young people. It should also be noted that young women are making up a significant proportion of those harmed by Ketamine, which is not typical for substance misuse in younger people.

8.2 Work targets vulnerabilities linked to Ketamine use, including trauma, neurodiversity, and persistent school absence.

9.0 CLIMATE CHANGE IMPLICATIONS

9.1 None.

10.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None under the meaning of the Act.