ST HELENS
BOROUGH COUNCIL

To:
The Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Department of Health and Social Care
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Dear The RT Hon Yvette Cooper MP,

Ketamine: protecting young people, supporting families and creating hope

We are writing on behalf of St Helens Borough Council after a resolution of Full Council on 25 November 2026. Ketamine is destroying young lives in our borough and devastating the families trying to save them. The Council asked us to urge the Government to reclassify ketamine as a Class A drug, and to act early on the wider recommendations of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD). As the Home Office leads on drug classification, we are writing to you on that question in particular. We have written separately to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care about treatment and prevention.

Many of our councillors have been contacted directly by parents desperate for help for children struggling with ketamine. Some of those children, their parents tell us, are as young as 10. One of our councillors has been into families' homes, together with our Director of Public Health, to hear first-hand what is happening behind closed doors.

What those parents describe is harrowing. Children struggling to eat and to sleep. Severe bladder damage, incontinence and debilitating pain. Young people who have had to wear nappies because they can no longer control their bladder. Mothers and fathers watching their children being destroyed in front of them, frightened, desperate and often not knowing where to turn for help. For these families this is not a concern or a statistic. It is a nightmare they are living every single day.

What parents tell us is borne out by the evidence. Between September 2024 and May 2025, a cross-party task group of our Children and Young People Services Scrutiny Committee examined ketamine use among young people. It worked with schools, health services, Merseyside Police and our young people's drug and alcohol service, which also gathered testimony from young people and their families on the task group's behalf. It heard that an estimated 50 to 60 young people and young adults were already in contact with local services with symptoms affecting the bladder and urinary tract, most of them aged just 17 to 19, and that our safeguarding services had recorded children as young as 11 and 12 using the drug. The task group concluded that ketamine should be reclassified as a Class A drug, and the Council's Cabinet approved its response to the review in September 2025.

This is not only a health crisis. It is the exploitation of children. Merseyside Police told the review that more young people were both dealing and taking ketamine, and the task group was concerned that a small number of children as young as 12 were being targeted by dealers. Our Youth Justice Service reported that 16 young people had been referred over concerns about exploitation, and told the review it was concerned about the strong link between ketamine possession and exploitation. One family described how their child had become ensnared in County Lines, controlled by criminal gangs, with a substantial debt placed on them that they were being forced to work off. The review also heard reports that ketamine was being sold much more cheaply here than elsewhere in the region. These children are being groomed and exploited, and the review was clear that they are victims.

The national picture mirrors what we see locally. According to the Office for National Statistics, ketamine was mentioned on 115 death certificates registered in England and Wales in 2025, compared with 60 in 2024 and 7 in 2015. The ACMD's own report shows that the number of people in England starting treatment for problematic ketamine use rose more than twelvefold, from 426 in 2014/15 to 5,365 in 2024/25. Class B status has not stopped that harm from growing.
We recognise and respect the work of the ACMD, whose updated review was published on 28 January 2026. Its recommendation that ketamine remain Class B was, by its own account, a majority view and not a unanimous one, and the final decision rests with Ministers. Ten months on, the Government has yet to give its response. Families in St Helens cannot wait any longer. Every month without a decision is another month in which children are being harmed, and we urge you to reach a decision without further delay.

The Council believes Class A status would better reflect the harm being done to children in St Helens. It would send a clear message to young people who too often see ketamine as cheap and low risk. It would also mean that the dealers and County Lines gangs who sell ketamine to children, and exploit them to sell it, face penalties that match the harm they cause, with the maximum sentence for supply rising from 14 years to life imprisonment. We note the concern, raised with the ACMD by health and social care professionals, that reclassification could add to stigma and deter people from seeking help. Our aim is tougher action against those who supply, alongside more treatment for those harmed, and we have asked the Health Secretary to match any change in classification with investment in prevention and treatment.

Whatever decision is reached on classification, we would ask the Home Office to act early on the ACMD's recommendations on enforcement, in particular:

· Disrupting supply, by evaluating intelligence gathering on ketamine supply chains and holding talks with the governments of the countries that supply most of it (Recommendation 4);

· Giving police the tools to act, including multi-drug field testing kits, building law enforcement capability to use them and, working with the Department for Transport, roadside drug testing that covers ketamine (Recommendation 5);

· Extending drug testing on arrest to include ketamine, with people whose use is problematic directed to support services (Recommendation 6);
· Asking police forces to record ketamine-related charges, convictions and out of court resolutions, so the scale of offending is properly understood (Recommendation 7).

For our part, the Council has asked Merseyside Police and the Police and Crime Commissioner to prioritise disrupting ketamine supply networks in the borough, including through more intelligence-led operations and support for local neighbourhood teams. We have also asked for a report to scrutiny within three months on what our 2025 action plan has delivered, followed by a refreshed plan with named leads and dates. Clear national backing, through classification, testing and supply chain intelligence, would make a real difference to that work on the ground.

We would be grateful for a reply setting out the Government's position on classification and its timetable for responding to the ACMD's recommendations. We would also welcome the chance to meet you or your officials, together with parents from St Helens, so that you can hear directly from the families living through this.

Thank you for considering this letter. We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Cllr Dr R. George Woodward
Leader of St Helens Borough Council

Councillor Eileen Fleming
Cabinet Member for Adult Social Care and Health