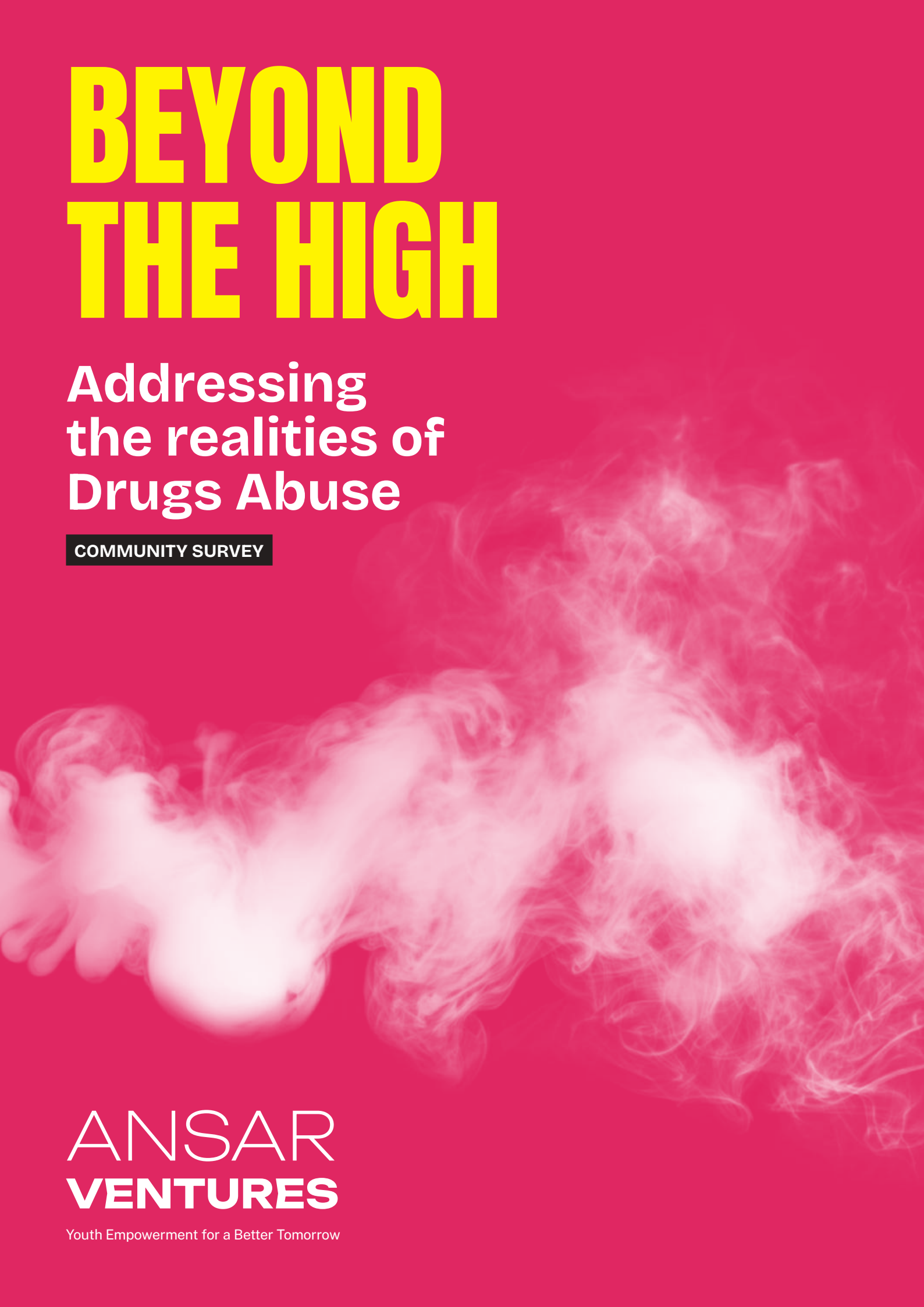
BEYOND THE HIGH

Addressing the realities of Drugs Abuse

COMMUNITY SURVEY



ANSAR
VENTURES

Youth Empowerment for a Better Tomorrow



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FOREWORD

by Mark Fowler

Luton is a town defined by its resilience, diversity, and aspiration. At its heart are young people – passionate, thoughtful, and determined to make a difference. This report, produced by a group of young people from our town, is a powerful testament to that spirit. It addresses one of the most pressing and complex challenges facing our communities today: the impact of drugs on individuals, families, and neighbourhoods.

Rather than shying away from the issue, these young people have chosen to confront it head-on. They have looked at the realities on the ground, spoken with honesty and insight, and called for action.

It urges us to understand the root causes and to address them with evidence-based solutions. It means investing in early intervention, mental health, youth services, family support and education – and doing this alongside our young people and with the whole community.

This work powerfully aligns with Luton's ambition to be a Child Friendly Town – a place where every young person feels safe, supported, and empowered to thrive. The voices and leadership of young people are essential to that vision.

What makes this report so important is not just the issues it raises – but who is raising them. Our young people are not bystanders. They are leaders. They are challenging harmful assumptions and showing us what genuine community-led development looks like. They remind us that the solutions to our problems must always come from within our own communities – if we are willing to listen and genuinely work with them.

As Chief Executive, I am incredibly proud to endorse this report. It reflects the spirit of our shared ambitions for Luton 2040 – a town where everyone can thrive, where no one lives in poverty, and where young people are central to shaping our collective future. Its findings and recommendations are a significant reference point for shaping our work across our community safety partnership to collectively tackle exploitation and the harms of drug abuse.

To the authors of this report: thank you. You have done more than just write a document. You have sparked a movement – and I, along with colleagues across the Council and our partners, stand ready to work with you to build a safer, healthier, and more hopeful Luton for all.



Mark Fowler
Chief Executive
Luton Borough Council

FOREWORD

by John Tizard

Ansar and this report make an important contribution to raising awareness about the dangers of illegal drugs. I am pleased to write this forward to this important report, “Beyond the High” based on a community survey, it is very relevant and challenges all of us with some powerful recommendations. It deserves to be widely shared and read.

I very much commend the way in which Ansar empowers young people to lead on addressing this and other critical issues facing society and our communities.

I had the privilege to contribute to a conference organised by Ansar and curated by some very impressive young people. The conference sent a very powerful message to everyone with an interest in the drug crisis.

I saw how Ansar draws on its values to drive change; how it communicates powerful messages; how it motivates people to contribute to the public good; and how it can facilitate social action. This report is further evidence of Ansar’s great contribution to local well-being.

It should be read by everyone in Bedfordshire who has a political or professional interest in the misuse of drugs and eliminating this scourge.

We have to tackle both demand and supply of illicit drugs. We must recognise that so much crime from anti-social behaviour to retail crime to serious organised crime is all too often driven by drug related activity. Illegal drugs make all our communities and neighbourhoods less safe and do lasting damaging.

We must also acknowledge the health and social impact of illegal drug dealing and abuse. We must persuade all public bodies to play their role in making our communities safer whilst supporting and dealing with individuals as appropriate.

Our response to illegal drugs requires a range of actions from public education to public health to the provision of services for drug takers to local and international police enforcement.

This report sets out in a compelling way how this might be achieved. Its recommendations are comprehensive and welcome. They should be taken seriously by all of us with responsibilities for addressing illegal drugs in every necessary way.

Read this report and act.



John Tizard
Police and Crime Commissioner
Bedfordshire



INTRODUCTION

Ansar Ventures is a youth development programme dedicated to nurturing character, resilience, and skills in young people. It was born out of a moment of profound community grief following the tragic loss of a local young person to knife crime. What began as a response to that pain has since grown into a vehicle for hope, empowerment, and change.

In the wake of this tragedy, residents and leaders came together with urgency and purpose. Their collective concern for the rising challenges faced by young people - particularly around drugs, mental health, and safety - led to the formation of the Ansar Ventures programme. This year-long initiative provides young people in Luton with a platform to lead, create and advocate through themed social projects chosen by the community.

This report forms part of the first thematic strand: Drug Awareness. It is one of four key outputs designed and delivered by the youth themselves. These outputs include:

- A Drugs Awareness Conference,
- Creative media including posters and graphics,
- Social media campaigns, and
- This Community Survey Report.

The survey provided young people with an evidence-backed voice, enabling them to engage local decision-makers, contribute to local policy, and raise awareness. Findings from the survey were presented at Luton's first youth-led Drugs Awareness Conference in December 2024, and now form the basis of this publication. Responses to key questions from the survey questionnaire, verbatim quotes and case studies have been included in this report.

Aims of this Report

The aims of this report are twofold:

1. To influence strategic change by presenting clear, community-sourced data to local stakeholders, including the council and health partners, so they can better shape drug prevention strategies.

2. To empower youth leadership by giving participants tangible evidence of their impact - showing that their voices matter and their actions can lead to real-world change.

Survey Process and Youth Leadership

The survey was co-designed by the youth participants of Ansar Ventures and refined through consultation with the Drugs Commissioning team at Luton Borough Council as well as the local service provider for drugs advice, support and treatment. With support from schools, community influencers, and family networks, the team achieved a remarkable response rate, gathering over 550 completed surveys. The quality and scale of this effort are a testament to the leadership, outreach, and commitment of the young people involved.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community Voices on Drug Use in Luton: Key Insights & Action Points

In October 2024, Ansar Ventures conducted a community-wide survey to better understand local perceptions of drug use, its impact, and how it can be addressed. With over 500 valid responses — the majority from young people aged 11 to 14 — the findings highlight significant concern about the scale and impact of drug misuse in Luton, particularly as experienced and observed by youth themselves.

Key Concerns

90% of respondents agree that drug use is a serious problem. Addiction and mental health were cited as the top risks, highlighting the emotional and physical toll of substance abuse. Peer pressure and escapism — driven by stress, boredom, or anxiety — were identified as common reasons why young people turn to drugs.

Access and Awareness

Street dealers, friends, and social media were the most reported ways people access drugs, pointing to the growing role of encrypted digital platforms. Alarmingly, 88% of respondents overestimated local drug prevalence, showing that fear and misinformation continue to drive anxiety about community safety.

Barriers to Help

Many individuals feel unsure about where to get support or fear being judged, with only limited awareness of local services. Stigma and long wait times remain key obstacles, especially for young people. Respondents also expressed strong support for more mental health services, youth-led outreach, and safe spaces.

What the Community Wants

The call for change was clear. Residents want a multi-layered approach that combines:

- Strengthening community education and support systems
- Expanding educational campaigns
- Providing accessible Mental Health and Counselling services
- Targeted support for vulnerable groups
- Training and awareness for families and community leaders
- Enhanced Police Patrols and Covert Operations
- Collaborative Policy Making
- Public Awareness Campaigns on Drug Legalisation
- Focus on Social Media Regulation

Conclusion

This report underscores a need for urgent, community-led action that reduces stigma, improves access to services, and prevents future harm. By listening to those most affected and implementing the recommendations outlined, stakeholders can help build a safer, more informed, and more resilient Luton.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are based on the findings from the community survey shedding light on the growing issue of drug abuse in Luton. The data highlights critical concerns, including the high prevalence of drug misuse, its impact on mental health, and the increasing access to drugs through both traditional and digital channels.

In response to these alarming trends, the following recommendations aim to address the root causes of drug abuse through a combination of education, mental health support, law enforcement, and policy reform. By implementing these strategies, we can mitigate the risks associated with drug misuse, reduce the stigma surrounding addiction, and ultimately foster a safer and healthier community for all.

1. Strengthening community education and support systems

The findings from the survey clearly show that drug use is perceived as a serious issue, with 90% of respondents acknowledging it as a major concern. Furthermore, the data indicates that addiction (24%) and mental health challenges (20%) are the biggest risks associated with drug use, underlining the profound impact that drugs have on individuals' well-being. These results highlight the urgent need for multi-faceted approaches to reduce drug abuse, primarily through community-driven education and support systems.

2. Expanding educational campaigns

A critical step in combating drug abuse is the implementation of large-scale educational campaigns aimed at informing the public, particularly youth, about the dangers of drug use. The survey results reveal that peer pressure and social validation are among the strongest motivators behind youth drug use. To address this, schools, community centres, and local youth clubs should play a central role in providing education on drug use and its long-term consequences. These educational programs should focus not only on the dangers of drug use but also on how to resist peer pressure and make healthier lifestyle choices. Engaging young people early on can reduce the likelihood of them turning to drugs to fit in or escape societal pressures.

Additionally, education should be tailored to address the psychological, social, and emotional drivers behind drug use. Programs should include topics like stress management, emotional resilience, and healthy coping strategies. Mental health issues were flagged by 20% of respondents as a key concern linked to drug use, so integrating mental health education into drug prevention initiatives can help individuals develop healthier ways of managing their emotions and stress. Schools and community centres should work with mental health professionals to offer youth-friendly resources, such as workshops, peer support groups, and counselling services that foster emotional well-being.

3. Providing accessible Mental Health and Counselling services

The survey results emphasise the importance of mental health in drug use patterns. Stress, mental health struggles, and lack of support are significant reasons for drug use, with escapism (stress relief, boredom, etc.) being a primary motivator. To address this, mental health services need to be more readily accessible and integrated into the community fabric.

Funding should be allocated to enhance mental health support systems within local communities, ensuring that vulnerable individuals can receive timely and effective help.

Community-based mental health programs should be designed to reach those most at risk, particularly in high-risk areas where drug abuse is prevalent. Peer-led support groups, one-on-one counselling, and



school-based mental health initiatives can provide the emotional support people need to manage their challenges in healthier ways. Expanding mental health services support those at risk of drug use and reduce the stigma surrounding mental health struggles, making it easier for individuals to seek help without fear of judgment.

4. Targeted support for vulnerable groups

The survey highlights the need for targeted interventions for high-risk groups, such as youth in areas with high drug-related crime and those from underprivileged backgrounds. Young people, particularly those from marginalised communities, are often more susceptible to drug abuse due to a combination of peer pressure, lack of opportunities, and socioeconomic challenges. Government initiatives should focus on providing these groups with the resources and support they need to avoid falling into drug use patterns e.g. local youth programs, access to recreational activities and job opportunities that offer an alternative to drug-related activities.

In addition, it is important to provide resources for families and caregivers to support young individuals in making healthier choices. Many survey respondents noted the importance of family dynamics in preventing drug abuse. By offering parenting programs, family counselling, and support groups, the government can equip families with the tools they need to guide their children and young adults away from drug use and toward positive personal and social development.

5. Training and awareness for families and community leaders

The role of family dynamics in drug use cannot be overlooked, as strained relationships are often cited as one of the negative causes of drug abuse. Community leaders, including religious leaders, should be trained to recognise signs of drug use and provide supportive environments for individuals struggling with addiction. Religious and community leaders play a vital role in shaping societal attitudes toward drug use, and their involvement in prevention and rehabilitation efforts can foster more inclusive and empathetic communities.

In addition to addressing drug use through legal and health interventions, improving community leaders' understanding of the issue and their role in fostering prevention is key. These leaders can then become advocates for drug prevention in their communities, using their influence to spread awareness and reduce the stigma associated with addiction.

6. Enhanced Police Patrols and Covert Operations

The survey indicates that drug access is facilitated through street dealers, friends, and increasingly, social media. To counteract this, law enforcement agencies should increase their presence in high-risk areas through targeted police patrols and covert operations. These operations should aim to disrupt drug distribution networks, particularly those that leverage digital platforms such as social media to connect dealers with users. Covert surveillance, undercover officers, and intelligence-sharing across police departments can help disrupt these illicit networks and reduce the availability of illegal substances in the community.

Additionally, increasing police presence in high-risk neighborhoods can reassure the public that drug-related activities are being taken seriously. Community policing initiatives, where law enforcement officers build trust with local communities through regular engagement, can help create a safer environment while working to break down barriers of mistrust between police and the communities they serve.

7. Collaborative Policy Making

Policymakers must work closely with community representatives, law enforcement, and public health experts to develop evidence-based policies that address both the supply and demand for illegal drugs. Stricter sentencing for drug dealers, combined with rehabilitation programs for those caught in the cycle of addiction, would provide a comprehensive approach to tackling drug abuse. Creating rehabilitation programs within the prison system and investing in post-incarceration support can ensure that individuals who serve their time have the opportunity for recovery and reintegration into society.

8. Public Awareness Campaigns on Drug Legalisation

The survey results show a divided opinion on the potential legalisation of drugs, with most respondents strongly opposed to it. This highlights the need for public education initiatives that can help clarify the implications of drug legalisation, both in terms of public health and societal impacts. It is crucial to continue the dialogue on this topic, ensuring that all perspectives are heard while maintaining a focus on harm reduction strategies.

Governments can take the lead in educating the public about the potential risks of legalisation, such as increased drug misuse, challenges with enforcement, and public health concerns. Offering evidence-based insights into the pros and cons of legalisation can help foster more informed discussions that lead to well-balanced and thoughtful drug policies.

9. Focus on Social Media Regulation

Social media platforms have become a growing means of drug access, with many individuals turning to encrypted networks and online communication to purchase drugs. Given the anonymity and widespread reach of these platforms, governments must collaborate with tech companies to regulate online content and prevent drug-related transactions. Creating laws that hold platforms accountable for illegal activity, along with efforts to raise awareness about the dangers of online drug transactions, will help curb this growing problem.

By addressing these policy areas, the government can create a more robust framework for tackling the drug abuse crisis while ensuring that both enforcement and support systems are effectively integrated.

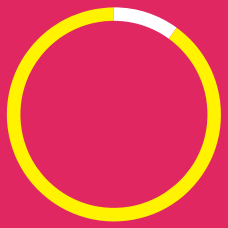
METHODOLOGY

The engagement process involved a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative survey data and qualitative insights from community dialogue.

The primary survey was conducted online in October 2024, receiving 550 initial responses, of which 507 were retained after data cleaning to remove incomplete or duplicate entries. The survey included both closed and open-ended questions, exploring perceptions, personal experiences, and community concerns related to the issue.

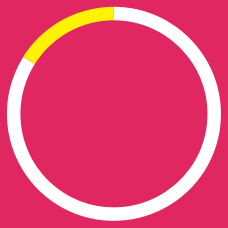
In addition to the survey, the methodology included: Youth engagement sessions delivered in partnership with schools between October and December 2024. Focus group conversations held at community centres and youth hubs. Targeted outreach through digital platforms to maximise inclusivity.

This approach enabled a wide demographic reach, with particular focus on young people and residents in high-risk wards. Data cleaning involved heuristic and imputation techniques to preserve statistical integrity while addressing missing responses. The integration of both quantitative and qualitative data helped ensure a richer, more representative understanding of the issue.



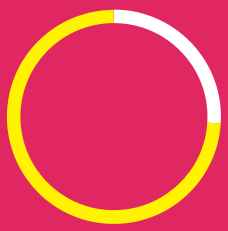
90%

feel people using illegal drugs is a serious problem



16%

acknowledged knowing someone close to them with a drug problem.

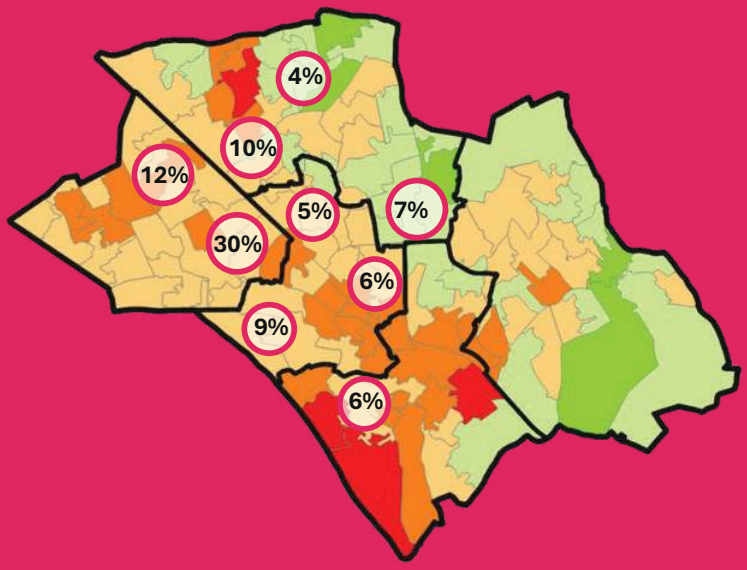


74%

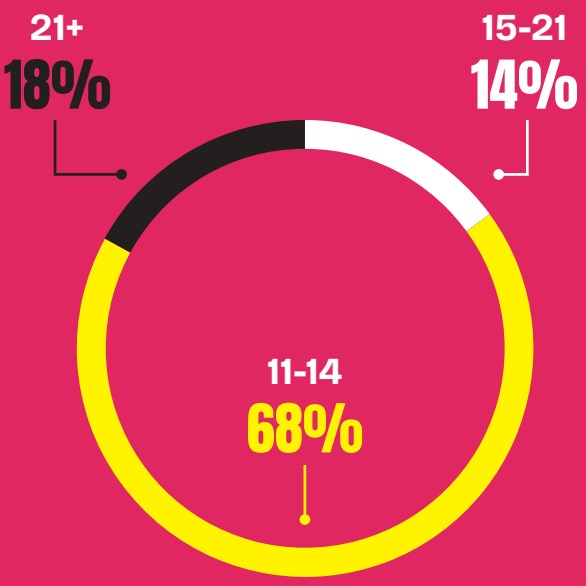
would like to help in programmes to reduce drugs abuse in the community

Profile

Areas with the highest response rates



Age range



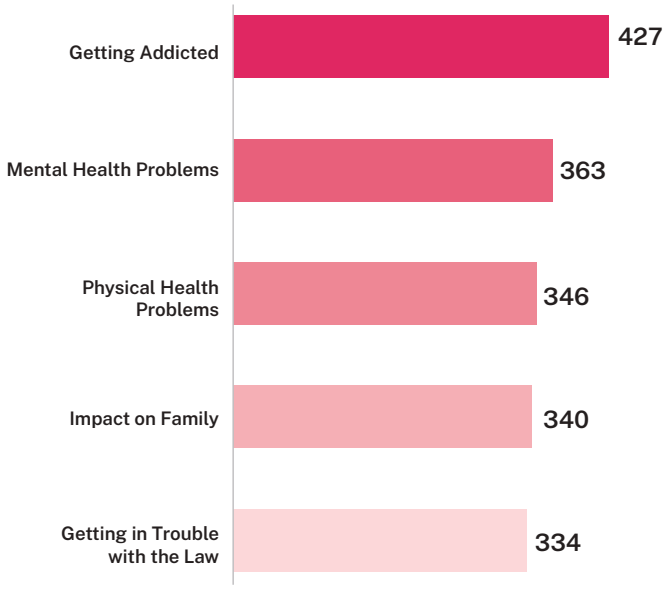
Question: What are the biggest risks of using drugs?

ADDICTION TOPS DRUG-USE CONCERNS

The survey highlights that 84% of respondents see getting addicted as the biggest risk of drug use, making it the most significant concern. Mental health problems come next, with 72% of participants identifying it as a key issue, showing the widespread understanding of the emotional toll drugs can take.

Physical health problems, noted by 68%, further underline the serious risks drugs pose to overall health and well-being.

"The scariest part about drugs isn't just the health problems – it's how easily you can lose control. One moment it's just trying it out, and the next you're stuck in a cycle. That's what really worries me – the addiction, and how it can mess up your mind, your body, and your family all at once."



Beyond the High: Drug use harms health, family, and society

Family and relationship impacts represent a significant concern, highlighting the ripple effect of drug use on loved ones, with strained relationships and emotional distress often emerging as key consequences.

Family members shared stories of watching loved ones change completely -becoming distant, angry, or emotionally shut down. Some respondents mentioned how drug use led to financial strain, arguments, and even the breakdown of marriages or trust between parents and children. One participant noted, "It wasn't just my cousin who was struggling with addiction — it was the whole family. We were constantly stressed, walking on eggshells, not knowing what version of him we'd get each day." Others expressed how the emotional burden impacted their mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and feelings of helplessness as they tried to support someone who did not want help.



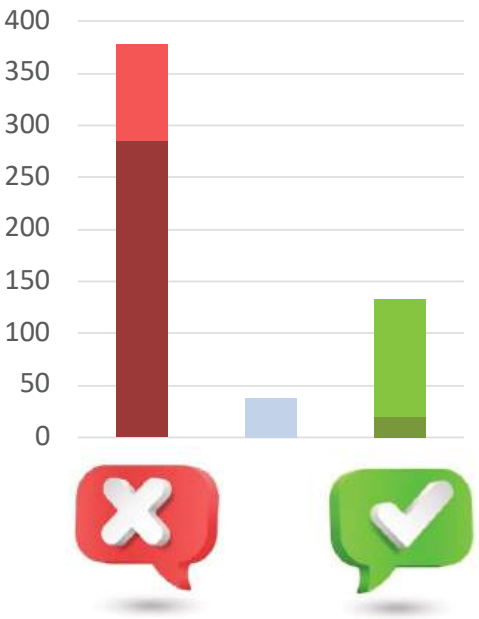
Question: What do you think about making drugs legal?

OPPOSITION DOMINATES POLICY DEBATE

The survey results overwhelmingly show opposition to drug legalisation, with 73% of respondents being "strongly against" the idea. Concerns often centre around the potential for increased misuse, societal harm, and challenges in enforcement.
A smaller portion of participants are "somewhat against," reflecting hesitations but acknowledging some potential benefits. The strong resistance indicates widespread scepticism and highlights the need for public education about the implications of drug policy reform.

"Making drugs legal feels like opening the floodgates. It might make it easier to regulate, but the damage to our youth could be irreversible."

"I'm not totally against it, but I think we need stronger education and support systems before even thinking about legalisation."



Exploring the divided opinions on Drug Legalisation and Public Health

A minority of respondents expressed support, with some being "somewhat in favour" and fewer "strongly in favour." These individuals cite potential benefits such as controlled distribution, improved public health measures, and reduced crime. However, a significant proportion of participants remained "unsure," suggesting the need for further awareness campaigns and dialogues about drug policy. The divide illustrates the complexity of the issue and the importance of considering diverse perspectives in policymaking.

Top concerns about legalisation:

- Increased access for youth
- Normalisation of drug use
- Strain on families and communities
- Difficulty enforcing new regulations



Question: What do you think about punishments for taking/selling drugs?

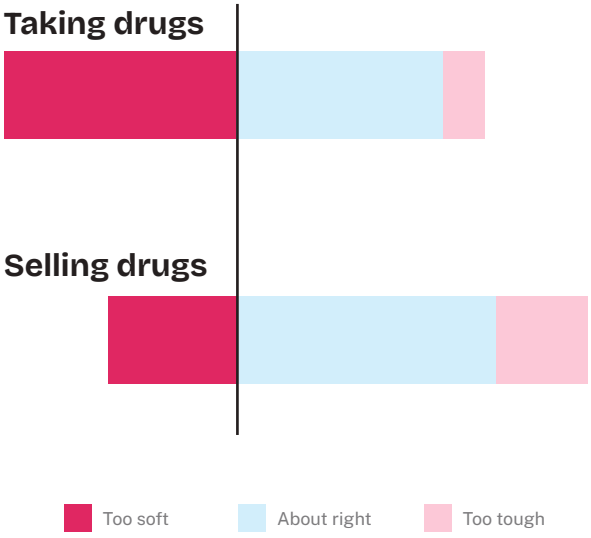
FEW BELIEVE PENALTIES ARE A DETERRENT

The research reflected public views on drug laws, with equal numbers believing they are either "too soft" or "about right." While many support current enforcement, a notable share feel laws on both taking and selling drugs need tightening. Few see the current approach as "too tough," especially for sellers.

In focus group engagements, there was limited belief that current penalties are effective deterrents, and strong public appetite for either tougher penalties or more rehabilitative justice.

These views reflect a complex public perception:
"It feels like people get a slap on the wrist for serious drug crimes. If the punishments don't match the damage drugs do to lives, how are we meant to stop it?

Yet others emphasised the need for balance:
"Without proper rehab and support, they just end up back in the same cycle."



Growing support for stricter justice

Interestingly, the survey highlights contrasting attitudes towards crime and punishment. While most feel current measures are insufficiently stringent, those who believe punishments are appropriate might value the fairness of the system. The relatively small number considering punishments "too tough" underscores broader public support for tougher penalties. This insight suggests a societal inclination toward stricter crime deterrents.

"People are tired of seeing the same faces back on the streets. If the justice system's too soft, it just fuels the cycle.

Stricter punishment might stop some, but without rehab and support, it's like locking the problem away without solving it."



Question: Why do you think young people use drugs?

PEER PRESSURE FUELS DRUG USE

Sentiment analysis of the survey highlights peer pressure as the most commonly cited reason for drug use, reflecting its powerful influence, particularly among young individuals. Social validation also emerged as a significant driver, as many individuals turn to drugs to feel accepted or to fit in socially.

The prominence of peer pressure and social validation as reasons for youth drug use points to an underlying need for belonging and identity formation during adolescence. This suggests that preventive interventions may be more effective when they focus on building self-confidence, critical thinking, and positive group identity rather than solely warning against drug use.



Escapism, stress and mental health challenges drive usage further

Escapism was another key theme, with respondents indicating they often use drugs to cope with stress, boredom, or challenges such as mental health struggles. The word cloud analysis reinforces this, highlighting factors like stress relief, lack of support, and curiosity. These insights reveal the complexity of motivations behind drug use, emphasising the need for holistic interventions, such as mental health support, community engagement, and education on healthier coping mechanisms.

"Sometimes it's not about wanting to get high — it's about wanting to feel something different from the stress and pressure we're already under. Drugs just seem like the quickest escape when everything else feels out of reach."

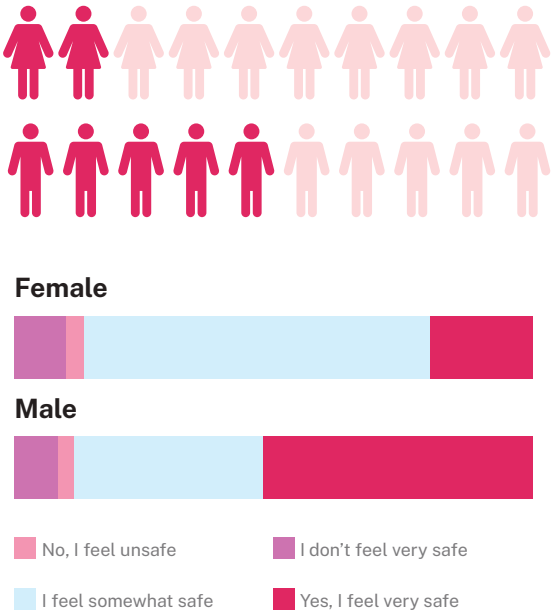


Question: Do you feel safe where you live?

BALANCED EDUCATION POLICIES

The data highlights distinct gender differences in perceptions of community safety. While a significant proportion of females report feeling unsafe or only somewhat safe, males show higher levels of confidence in their safety. This underscores the need for targeted interventions to address their concerns. Improving community safety measures and fostering inclusive environments can bridge this gender gap and enhance overall well-being.

"When I'm out late, even walking home from the bus stop doesn't feel safe. It's not about being paranoid - it's just the reality for a lot of women. We stay alert because we have to."



Safety Perception Gap: Knowledge Breeds Confidence, Fear Breeds Misconception

The data reveals a compelling link between accurate drug knowledge and perceptions of safety, with respondents consistently reporting higher levels of confidence. This underscores the importance of education and awareness in addressing misconceptions, reducing fear, and fostering more balanced perspectives on drug-related policies.

"At first, I thought drugs were everywhere in my area, but once we had those school workshops, I realised a lot of my fears were based on rumours, not facts. Knowing more helped me feel safer and more prepared."

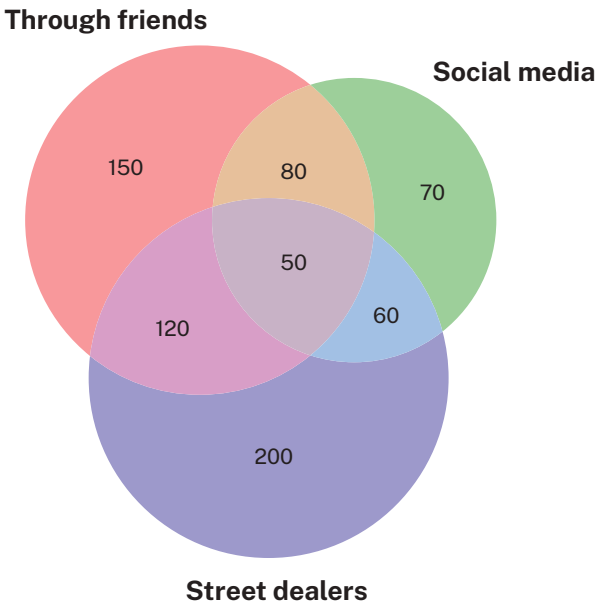


Question: How do you think people in Luton access drugs?

STREET DEALERS REMAIN DOMINANT

The survey responses indicate that the most common means of drug access in Luton involve street dealers, friends, and online platforms like social media. A significant number of respondents reported multiple sources, highlighting the interconnected nature of these channels. Street dealers were consistently noted as a primary access point, often in conjunction with social connections. This prevalence points to the ease of obtaining drugs through both informal networks and visible public avenues.

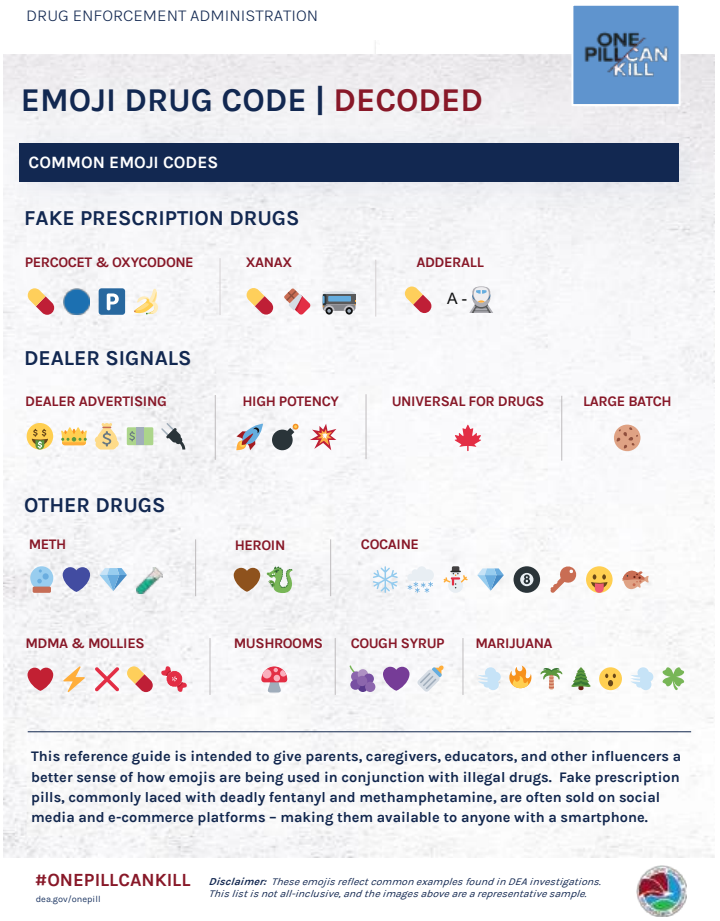
"It's not like people are searching for it online first — it usually starts with a mate who knows someone. Once that link's there, it spreads quickly through the area."



Social media plays a growing role in drug availability

Social media platforms also emerged as a key facilitator, making drug access more anonymous and widespread. Many responses revealed a growing trend of online communication, including QR codes and encrypted networks, as tools used by dealers. Friends play a significant role in bridging connections to these channels, emphasising the social aspect of drug circulation. The responses suggest that drug accessibility in Luton leverages both digital and traditional interpersonal networks.

"You don't even need to go out looking anymore — people just post stuff on their story with emojis or codes. If you know, you know. It's all right there on your phone."

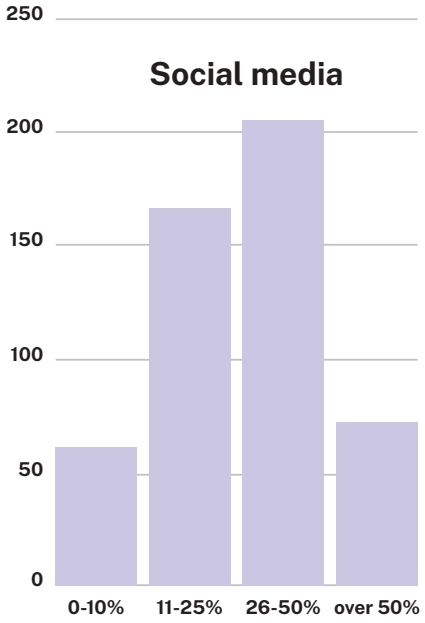


Question: Whats the prevalence of drug abuse?

MISPERCEPTIONS DRIVE SAFETY CONCERNS

Nearly 47% of respondents believe drug use in Bedfordshire is 26-50% prevalent, while statistics from Bedfordshire Police estimate 9% of adults aged 18 to 59 in the county are regular drug users. These figures reflect a strong perception of drug prevalence and related crime, indicating concerns about the community's safety and the perceived scale of drug-related activities. The responses highlight a significant overestimation of drug-related crimes and high drug use prevalence. Approximately 13% believe drug use exceeds 50%, and a substantial number expect annual drug crimes to surpass 3,500.

"You hear so many stories online and on the streets, it feels like everyone's doing it. I don't even know what's true anymore, but it definitely makes the area feel unsafe."



Fear vs Facts: 88% Overestimate Local Drug Use

Many responses significantly overestimate the number of cuckooed houses in Luton with some responses exceeding 450, reflecting heightened perceptions of the issue's severity, against the actual figure ~180 according to Bedfordshire Police. This highlights community concerns about drug-related activities and a lack of awareness about the actual scale. The results underscore the need for better communication and education to align perceptions with reality and address public anxiety.

"You hear rumours and see stuff online — it makes it feel like there's a trap house on every corner. Even if it's not true, it's hard not to feel paranoid."



Question: What makes it hard for people to get help for drug problems?

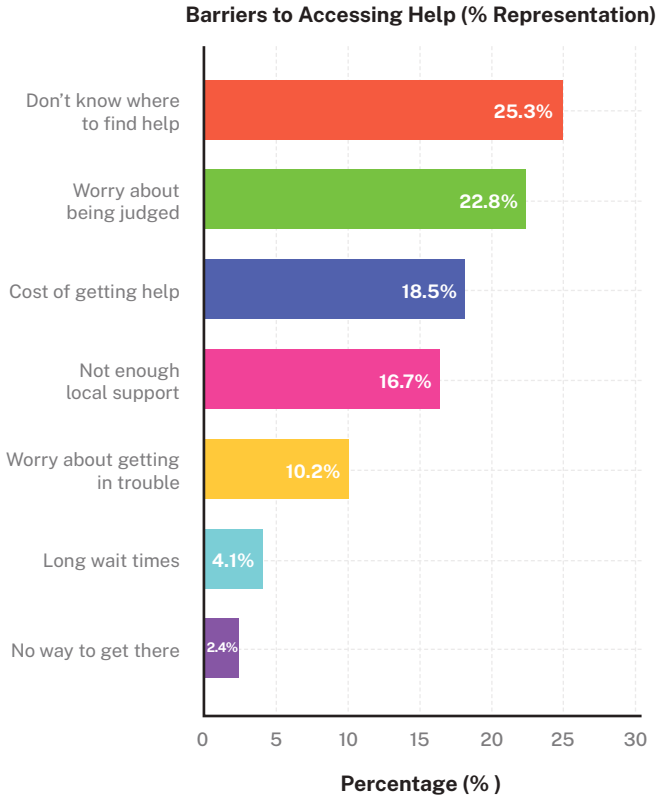
SUPPORT GAPS WORSEN DRUG CRISIS

Survey responses reveal that individuals face numerous barriers to seeking help for drug-related issues. The most cited challenges include a lack of awareness about where to find help, fears of judgment, and insufficient local support services.

Additional factors like the cost of treatment, long wait times, and concerns about legal repercussions further deter people. Many respondents also highlighted feelings of helplessness and fear of being ostracised, particularly among youth influenced by peer pressure.

Case Study: "Stuck in Silence"
Jake, 18, started using drugs occasionally to cope with stress and fit in with friends. When things got out of hand, he wanted help — but didn't know where to go and feared being judged.

He stayed quiet for months until a youth worker at his local community centre reached out. With the right support, Jake began accessing counselling and is now working towards recovery.



Overcoming judgment & improving drug support resources

Stigma and poor access to services often prevent people from seeking help for drug-related issues. Fear of being judged by peers, family, or professionals leads many to stay silent until things spiral out of control.

To break this cycle, we must tackle both the shame and the system. Community-driven awareness campaigns, open conversations, and education can reduce stigma, while improving access to non-judgmental, culturally sensitive services ensures people know where to turn.

Sharing real recovery stories and training professionals to respond with compassion are key to building a support system that empowers individuals to seek help without fear.



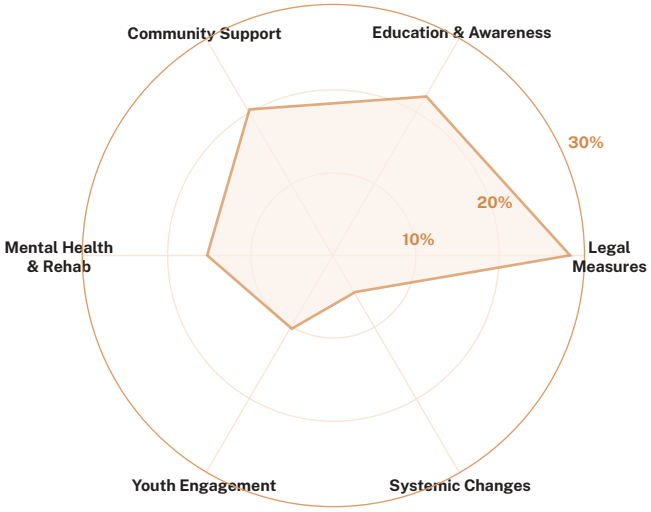
Question: What can be done to help reduce drug use in Luton?

ADDRESSING STIGMA SAVES LIVES

Survey respondents highlight a multifaceted approach to tackling drug use in Luton. Key suggestions include harsher legal consequences for drug dealers and users, increased police patrols, and the use of covert operations
to disrupt drug supply chains. Community-driven solutions such as awareness campaigns in schools, youth clubs, and workshops are emphasised to educate and deter potential users. Addressing systemic issues, such as unemployment and lack of recreational facilities, is seen as vital in reducing vulnerability to drug use.

Case Study: "Fear and uncertainty"
Zara, 20, started using cannabis and prescription pills during a difficult period at college. She feared being labelled and didn't know where to get help. A drop-in session at her local youth centre changed everything. With peer mentoring and access to free counselling, Zara slowly turned her life around. Today, she's training as a youth outreach worker. ***"I didn't need to be punished. I needed to be heard,"*** she says.

Proposed strategies to reduce drug use in Luton



Community driven solutions to reduce substance abuse

Participants also stress the importance of mental health support and rehabilitation services. Suggestions include establishing free counselling centres, providing job opportunities to dissuade drug dealing, and leveraging trusted community figures, such as faith leaders, to promote awareness. Respondents highlight the need for empathy-driven interventions, such as anonymous support systems and non-judgmental outreach efforts, to reduce stigma and encourage individuals to seek help.

Top 5 Solutions Proposed by Respondents:

- Free counselling centres
- Increasing awareness in schools & faith centres
- More safe youth spaces
- Integrate counselling and careers support via agency partnerships.
- Anonymous support options



CONCLUSION



This report provides a compelling, data-driven reflection of the community's experiences, fears, and hopes regarding drug use in Luton. Through a multi-pronged approach that included over 500 survey responses, focus group discussions, and community-led engagements, this report presents not only a statistical portrait of public perception but also a deeper narrative rooted in lived experience.

The key findings — ranging from the overwhelming concern (90%) about drug use to the widespread misunderstanding of its actual prevalence — highlight both the urgency of the issue and the need for informed responses. The survey revealed strong links between substance misuse and mental health challenges, peer pressure, and a lack of accessible support services. While many respondents acknowledged knowing someone struggling with addiction, significant barriers to seeking help — including stigma, lack of information, and fear of judgment — remain persistent challenges.

More importantly, the insights reflect a community that is not only alert to these issues but eager for change. There is clear support for a comprehensive response that prioritises education, mental health support, family engagement, law enforcement, and community-led prevention initiatives. Respondents repeatedly called for safe youth spaces, better outreach in schools and faith centres, and trusted figures to guide awareness efforts.

This report is not just a snapshot of concern — it is a call to action. It shows that communities, when empowered and included, are ready to be part of the solution. The youth who co-designed this project have demonstrated the power of agency: collecting insights, presenting findings, and advocating for policy change in public forums.

Looking ahead, the data gathered should not sit in isolation. We urge policymakers, educators, service providers, and community leaders to build upon this foundation with concrete investments in prevention, treatment, and long-term resilience.

We must address misconceptions with education, support those struggling with compassion, and co-create safer pathways for Luton's young people.

In amplifying youth voices, Beyond the High is more than a report — it is a community-led blueprint for change. Its impact now depends on how seriously we act upon its findings. The young people of Luton have spoken. It's time to listen — and to lead.

APPENDIX: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project would not have been possible without the generosity and support of many individuals and organisations. We are especially grateful to the participants of our confidential focus groups and interviews, conducted primarily during spring 2025.





While most remain anonymous to protect their privacy, we sincerely thank them for sharing their time, experiences, and insights, which were vital in shaping our understanding of this space.

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Special thanks go to the venues who generously hosted our in-person focus groups and the Drugs Conference, including:

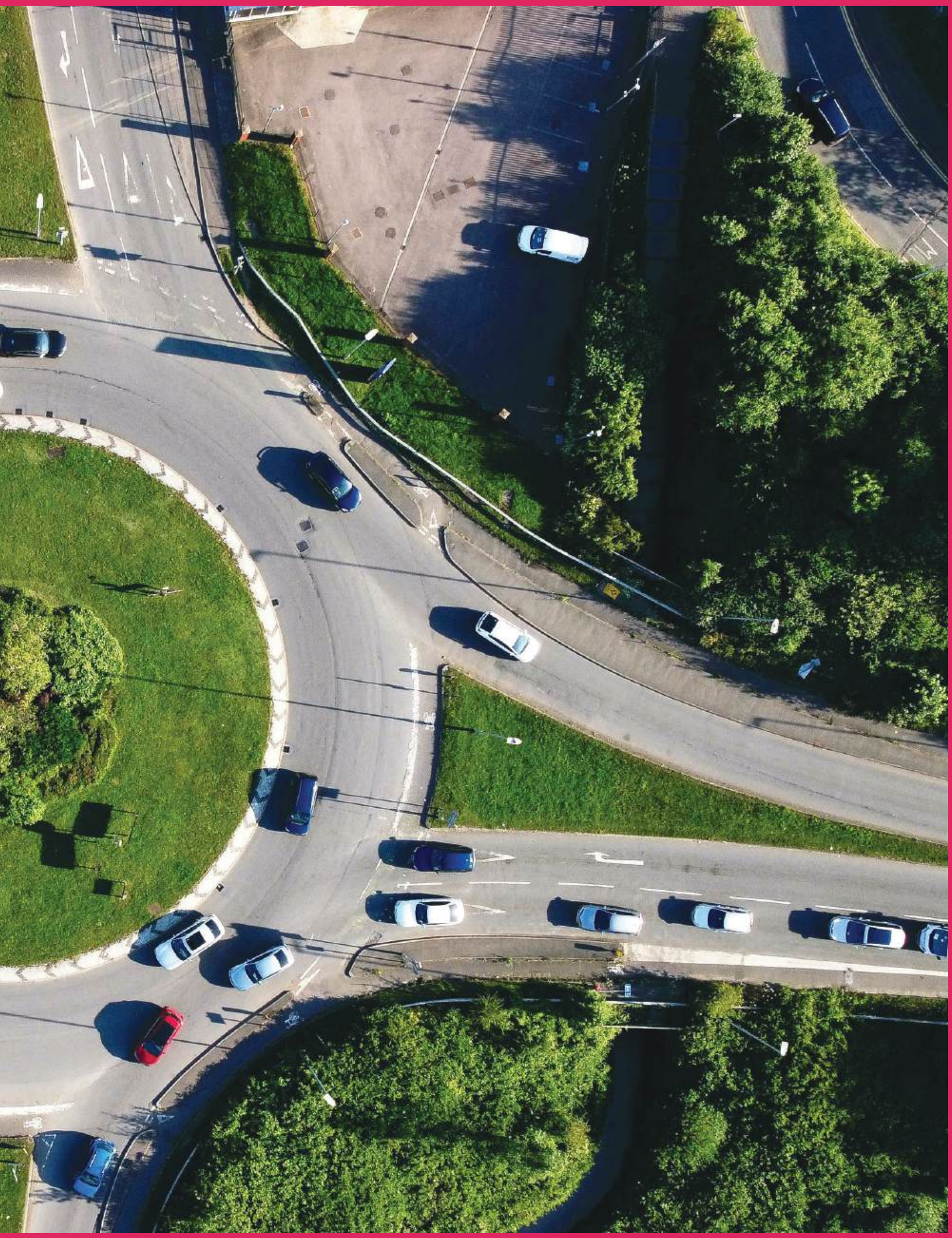
- Barnfield College
- UKIM Madinah Masjid
- Challney High School for Boys

Abdul Ghafoor
Programme Director

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