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Government drugs policy does not work, says report

- Rethink urged over danger of tobacco and alcohol
- Classification system has 'no rational basis at all'

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Government drug policy is failing and drinking and smoking should be considered as dangerous as many illegal substances, according to a report published yesterday.

The two-year study headed by academics, drugs workers, journalists and a senior police officer called for a radical rethink of government drugs policy. It said addiction should be treated as a health and social problem, not as a crime issue.

Drugs laws are driven by "moral panic" according to Anthony King, chairman of the report, who said: "There is a real problem about politicians taking sensible decisions in a field as politically hazardous as this. There is a need to inject into the debate a degree of calm rationality - less foaming at the mouth and more thinking."

The report states that the current classification system is "crude, ineffective, riddled with anomalies and open to political manipulation".

At the heart of the study - published by the RSA commission on illegal drugs - is the proposal of a health and social approach to drug addiction. "Drugs policy outcomes should be judged in terms of harms reduced rather than drugs seized or offenders prosecuted," it states. "The idea of a drugs-free world, or even a drugs-free Britain, is almost certainly a chimera."

It also suggests that the drug classification system should be replaced by an "index of harms" which would include alcohol and tobacco. The harm index would be similar to one produced for the Commons science and technology committee, which measures alcohol as more dangerous than amphetamines and LSD.

The thinktank's study called for an overhaul of drug education policy, which it said is often "inconsistent, irrelevant, disorganised" and "delivered by people without adequate training". It suggested drugs education should be introduced at primary school. It also supports a recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation recommendation to introduce a pilot scheme of "drug

consumption rooms" - so-called shooting galleries - where drug addicts could inject heroin in a supervised environment.

The report says the Misuse of Drugs Act should be replaced with a more comprehensive misuse of substances act, which would take into account the harm caused by legal drugs such as alcohol and tobacco.

It states: "Far more people drink and smoke than use drugs. Tobacco causes far more deaths than either alcohol or drugs, and alcohol causes twice as many deaths as drugs."

The report suggests the Home Office should be stripped of its current lead role in drugs policy, which should move to the Department for Communities and Local Government. This would create a more coherent local drugs strategy.

The Home Office said it did not accept some of the study's central proposals. A spokeswoman said: "Drug use is a major cause of crime and as such the Home Office should continue to coordinate national drug strategy." She said current education provision provided "an effective framework, relevant to each school and its pupils" and added that there were no plans to include alcohol and tobacco in the same framework as illegal substances.

The recommendations were widely welcomed by drugs charities. Martin Barnes, chief executive of Drugscope, said: "The report marks a watershed in political and public debate on the future of drugs policy."

How drugs compare

Heroin Used by less than 1% of the adult population but accounts for a large proportion of problematic use. Most users are white, but Pakistani communities dominate market in the north of England. Many Pakistani and Bangladeshi youths begin drug use with heroin, bypassing cannabis and alcohol.

Cocaine One in 20 people between 16-24 used cocaine in the past year, according to the British Crime Survey for 2005-06. The risk of a heart attack is claimed to rise 24-fold in the hour immediately following use.

Crack There are twice as many crack users as heroin users among vulnerable groups such as young people in care or on the streets.

Ecstasy The clubbers' drug of choice for more than 20 years. Considered by some scientists to be relatively safe, at least in short-term effects. However, what is sold as ecstasy can often contain amphetamine, ephedrine, or ketamine and the mixture can be lethal.

Cannabis Around 60% of cannabis consumed in Britain is now cultivated here, and has become more potent in recent years. Vietnamese criminal networks are said to be heavily

involved in London.

Alcohol There are between 250,000 and 350,000 problematic drug users in England and Wales; 8.2 million are considered to have an 'alcohol use disorder'. A quarter of all adults in Britain, and 47% of 18-24-year-old men, are binge drinkers.

Tobacco Costs the NHS up to £1.7bn a year compared with £0.5m for illegal drugs. In 2004 there were 106,000 smoking related deaths.

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