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## Talking Point: Do young people think drugs should be decriminalised?

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Drugs campaigners have suggested that drugs should be decriminalised. Start a discussion with young people about whether this would lead to more responsible drug use.

The former president of the Royal College of Physicians made the headlines this month with his controversial comments about favouring the **decriminalisation of illicit drugs**. Drugs policy campaigners vocalised their support and claimed that such a move would help youth workers deal with young people's drug use more effectively.

Start a discussion with young people about drug use. How do young people feel about drugs? **Is it cool to take drugs?** Why do some people do it? Ask young people if they'd like to share any experiences they've had with drugs: good or bad. Do they feel pressured into taking them? How much do young people know about the risks of drug taking? Do people ever really know what is in the drugs they take? Are some people more likely to be affected or influenced by drugs than others? Do only certain types of people take drugs?

In 2001, Portugal abolished all criminal penalties for drug possession in order to try to improve its drug problem. People who were caught in possession of drugs were given access to a psychologist and a social worker rather than being sent to prison. A report published last year by the Cato Institute showed that illegal drug use among teenagers in Portugal had declined and **drug-related deaths had fallen** by more than half. Discuss whether this approach might work in the UK. Should people who take drugs be treated as patients rather than criminals? Should they be helped rather than locked up? What if help is refused? Should drug addicts then be denied state benefits or threatened with prison?

What do young people think the effect of decriminalising drugs would be? Will it encourage people to take them? Would it send out the wrong message? Might it become more acceptable to take drugs? Would people think they **weren't harmful if they were legal**? What impact might decriminalisation have on crime?

Despite the government banning the legal high mephedrone, it was recently reported that a new legal high called ivory wave is causing concern. Accident and emergency staff have been sent an alert about the drug after dozens of users were **hospitalised across the UK**. A temporary ban on all legal drugs is now being proposed.

Do young people believe there should be an outright ban on legal highs? Do bans stop people from buying them? Do they drive the drugs trade further underground and make it more dangerous? Do bans have a **good or bad effect** on society?

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