As the internet takes a more central position in Britain’s drug landscape, through the sale of legal highs and proliferation in sites specialising in drugs, more people are turning to unofficial websites as a source of information on psychoactive substances.

Mike Power reports

“Taking drugs is illegal. Talking about them isn’t,” intoned an advert for Talk To Frank, the official government drug information service upon its launch in 2003. The service, famous for its Pablo the Drug Mule Dog and Brain Warehouse TV campaigns, claims it has received a growing number of email and phone enquiries since its inception.

The idea of a non-judgmental, honest and accessible information source was a good one; its execution, however, alienated some drug users.

“Someone I’m very close to rang Talk to Frank when they were having a panic attack after overdoing a few substances and booze,” said one poster on the ‘drugs’ forum of urban75, a busy bulletin board based in Brixton, London. “Frank told them they were very stupid and that mixing drugs and alcohol can lead to brain damage and death. Really cool thing to say to someone who’s having a panic attack.”

Websites such as urban75 – which provide an online arena for people to gather to discuss drug effects, experiences and safety – are reporting growing numbers of people seeking advice on drugs.

On mephedrone alone, urban75, described in Parliament by Lib Dem MP Martin Horwood as a “disconcertingly well-informed website”, has fielded more than 120,000 page views and around 10,000 individual posts.

Urban75 is part of a huge site where users with names such as FridgeMagnet, Clint Iguna, Rollem and Kained&Able chat online about topics as wide-ranging as computer technology, general gossip, cookery and gardening, philosophy and photography.

The site’s founder and editor, Mike Slocombe, set up its static, harm reduction-focussed drug information pages in response to the death of Leah Betts on November 16, 1995. The teenager became a grim poster girl for her generation, dying after taking an ecstasy pill – and drinking seven pints of water in 90 minutes.

She panicked at a party at her parents’ home after taking the drug, believing incorrect media reports that users of the drug should drink lots of water. Her death by water intoxication was a brutal illustration of the dangers of drug use – and inaccurate, or partially true public health information campaigns.

“Had she known what to do, she’d be alive today,” Slocombe tells Druglink. “Leah Betts was the start of it, we were trying to correct stuff the media was putting out. Some of it was counterproductive, preposterous scare stories.”

The site’s drug information pages, where detailed information is offered on many substances, are hugely popular, with over 60,000 unique page views in December 2009 alone, as drug users worldwide sought information on substances such as GBL, amphetamines, ecstasy, LSD and cannabis.

Users can also post messages in threads that develop into often-complex online discussions. “People are going to do drugs no matter what the government think,” says Slocombe. “On urban75, we give honest advice, like an older brother who’s been there, done that. And we don’t deny that drugs can be great fun as well.”

It’s this approach that Slocombe says sets the site apart from official services.

“Talk To Frank does its thing, but it’s hamstrung by the fact it’s funded by the government, there’s things they can’t say. Look at the Professor David Nutt case: an argument was made for reclassification of cannabis and Ecstasy based on the harm they cause, and he was ignored. Politically, it’s suicide for any politician to rally for the cause of...”
Druglink_Mar-Apr_2010 AW.indd   7

He's also clear on why official services can only ever fail to achieve their goals. “Bluelight gets the information across in a more credible way. The Frank ads are a joke. It has a very authoritarian stance. They present the information in a way that claims there's no other truth than what they say. People don’t accept that these days. Frank attempts to be funny, and it doesn't come off as real, it just seems forced. People don’t take Frank seriously, it's the official tone that's the problem,” he says.

But a Talk to Frank spokesperson says the site has been successful in striking a chord with young drug users. “Independent research shows that 81 per cent of 11-18 year olds trust the site to provide them with balanced, reliable information. Interactions with Frank continue to grow each year and young people tell us that they value the help that Frank provides.”

Bluelight's sister site, Pillreports, is a searchable database of tablets sold worldwide as ecstasy. Fred, a 30-year-old London-based artist, told Druglink he uses the site to make sure his dealer is selling genuine MDMA tablets, rather than the inferior piperazines that have predominated in the UK black market for over a year. “Before seeing Pillreports, I never knew what a Marquis reagent test was. Now, I use the test kit [which uses drops of a chemical that turns black on contact with MDMA] on all pills. If the reagent doesn’t go black, then I throw them away – or don’t buy them.”

Twenty years after the rise of Acid House demonstrated that an entire generation of young people were enthusiastically ignoring government advice and consuming drugs in unprecedented quantities, a growing supply of harm reduction advice is now available.

Sites like Urban75, Erowid and Bluelight are not the only credible alternatives to Talk to Frank. Several drug charities, such as Release, Addaction and DrugScope have their own well-read and independent information sources, which aim to inform users – and other interested parties – without condemning them.

It may not be politically palatable, but today, drug users know more about their topic than the government, and to many people, alternative sites seem better equipped to handle health problems than official helplines.

As with many complex issues, the more information we have, and the more sources of advice can be tapped into and weighed-up, the better informed we can be.