PERCEPTIONS OF FACTORS THAT PROMOTE AND PROTECT AGAINST THE MISUSE OF ALCOHOL AMONGST YOUNG PEOPLE AND YOUNG ADULTS

Final Report

Prepared for the Health Education Board for Scotland on behalf of The Scottish Advisory Committee on Alcohol Misuse

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

1. Alcohol consumption among young people and young adults has aroused considerable concern, both in terms of the amounts consumed and the patterns of drinking. In Scotland, the 16-24 year old age group is most likely to be drinking in excess of weekly recommended limits (HEBS 2000). However, little is known about the place of alcohol in the context of their lifestyles and the factors which promote alcohol misuse and protect against it.

2. The Scottish Executive is developing a National Plan for Action on Alcohol Misuse, advised by the Scottish Advisory Committee on Alcohol Misuse (SACAM). On behalf of SACAM, the Health Education Board for Scotland (HEBS) commissioned the Centre for Social Marketing at the University of Strathclyde to undertake qualitative research exploring alcohol use and misuse among young people. The findings were presented to SACAM as part of a deliberative expert seminar which was held in November 2000 to identify factors in Scottish society that promote and protect against alcohol abuse. This summary sets out the main findings from the study and identifies areas for future action.

Research Aims and Methods

3. The main aims of the research were to:

   • Explore the place and experience of alcohol use in the context of young people’s lifestyles (15-24 years old) and identify their perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages of alcohol use.

   • Identify factors which promote alcohol misuse and factors which protect against it.

   • Provide SACAM members with an insight into young people’s feelings in their own words about factors which influence their patterns of alcohol consumption.

4. Qualitative research was undertaken using a focus group methodology. Eight focus groups were recruited, each with 5-8 participants drawn from the general public. To ensure a broad range of experience, pre-determined criteria were met in terms of age, gender, socio-economic groups and location. In addition, all had drunk above the recommended limits in the previous six months.
Summary of Findings

5. Drinking alcohol and intoxication are pervasive behaviours among young people and are perceived as the norm in the context of leisure activities.

6. Drinking experience is seen by young people to follow a ‘natural’ progression over time, which is widely accepted and recognised. This starts in the early teens and increases over the next few years, but young people expect to reduce consumption and emerge ‘unscathed’ as other responsibilities develop.

7. Drinking and drinking-related activities were for personal pleasure. Attitudes and behaviour could be described as ‘hedonistic’, reflecting few social limitations and considerable disposable income and time. However, for many, hedonism was ‘bounded’ by a range of interlocking limitations and demands such as work, study, sports and children.

8. There is a strategic element in young people’s drinking, reflecting the balance between hedonistic consumption and recognition of other demands:
   - Binge drinking is confined to one or two days a week, structured around other priorities in life, and daily drinking is rare.
   - A ‘good night out’ aims for intoxication and ‘buzz’, rather than intense drunkenness. Consumption is staged to achieve this throughout the night and across various venues. Value for money is also a key factor in this expensive process.

9. Young people spontaneously draw parallels with illicit drug taking behaviours, and are aware of the opportunity to choose from a broad psychoactive repertoire. Alcohol, however, tends to be seen as a ‘safer’ option on many levels.

10. Influences supporting and encouraging alcohol use are powerful and widespread:
   - At a personal level, alcohol fits with young people’s needs and aspirations. It is regarded as the main and sometimes only leisure option, and products and marketing reflect these needs.
   - In the immediate environment, peer activity and social norms support drinking and intoxication, and active marketing and retailing strategies positively encourage and enable the process.
   - In the wider environment, perceived general population norms and marketing activity generate a sense of acceptability and encouragement.

11. Influences that potentially moderate consumption and behaviour are much weaker:
   - At a personal level, a range of potential problems and risks can be identified by young people, but these are seen as transitory difficulties and often irrelevant, and indeed can be part of the fun. Young people adopt relatively sophisticated
safety strategies, but these are designed to enable them to continue drinking rather than to reduce their intake.

- In the immediate environment, potential moderating influences include parents, schools, mass media health promotion, and law enforcement, but these have a relatively weak impact. Main limitations on behaviour come from changes in external circumstances, such as having children, more demanding jobs or greater demands on income.

- In the wider social environment, censure is seen to only relate to more extreme consequences of drinking, such as a police record, unplanned teen pregnancy and addiction.

12. Personal safety strategies can easily fail, and tend to make young people feel safer than they are.

Areas for Action

13. At a personal level: challenge current behaviour, facilitate critical assessment of marketing activities and generate attractive non-alcohol alternative activities.

14. Within the intermediate environment: create safer situations, facilitate protective strategies, control promotional and retail activities which encourage excessive drinking, and provide education and support for parents and those working with young people in encouraging appropriate strategies.

15. In the wider environment: explore and challenge marketing activities and review existing controls, especially in the context of new and sophisticated routes of communication and product development. Challenge public acceptance of drunkenness.
1. INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Executive is developing an alcohol strategy, advised by the Scottish Advisory Committee on Alcohol Misuse (SACAM). To help inform this, a deliberative expert seminar took place in November 2000 to identify factors in Scottish society that promote and protect against alcohol abuse. In particular, the seminar was intended to identify key prevention issues and help prioritise areas for action.

Alcohol consumption among young people and young adults was identified as an area of concern. To help inform the seminar about alcohol use and misuse by young drinkers, the Health Education Board for Scotland (HEBS) commissioned qualitative research on behalf of SACAM.

This document reports the findings from the study. Following a background discussion of key issues from current literature (2), the research aims and objectives are outlined (3), together with the method and sample (4). This is followed by the findings in four specific sections: how young people drink (5) and the factors influencing young people’s drinking, addressing personal characteristics (6), immediate environment (7), and the wider environment (8). The final section of the document contains conclusions and action points.
2. WHAT’S THE PROBLEM?

The consumption of alcohol is a normative experience among young people with considerable potential for misuse. This presents a substantial challenge to those wishing to implement approaches that protect against misuse and promote safe drinking.

Prevalence and Consumption Patterns

The vast majority of research on alcohol and young people is centred on the 11-16 years age range. For this group it is possible to construct a reasonable picture of drinking behaviours. Older teenagers and those in their early twenties have been somewhat neglected by researchers, despite the fact that surveys have shown that the 16-24 year old age group are those most likely to be drinking in excess of the government’s weekly limits (HEBS 2000).

A 1998 study of smoking, drinking and drug use among young teenagers in Scotland found that 14% of the 12-15 year olds surveyed claimed to drink at least once a week (Goddard & Higgins 1999). Of those who drank in the past week, the survey found that boys had drunk on average 12.8 units for that week, while girls had drunk an average of 7.8 units. An insight into the drinking behaviour of 16-24 year olds is provided by the Scottish Health Survey for 1995 (Dong & Erens 1997). The results show that 60% of the 16-24 year old men reportedly drank at least once a week (with 24% drinking on three or more days of the week), while 51% of the 16-24 year old women surveyed reportedly drank weekly (with 11% drinking on three or more occasions). The survey also found that 37% of the 16-24 year old males drank over the recommended level of 21 units of alcohol a week, compared with 18% of the 16-24 year old females who exceeded the safe limit for women of 14 units per week.

Research has suggested that the types of drinks consumed or preferred by young people vary with age as do motives for drinking. Hughes et al (1997), in a study of 12-17 year olds in the West of Scotland, found that 12-13 year olds used alcohol as a result of curiosity and a desire to experience the adult world, and tended to experiment with any alcohol available to them. Fourteen to fifteen year olds drank to get drunk, to test out their limits and to have fun. They opted for drinks which were strong, cheap and pleasant tasting - features synonymous with ‘designer drinks’ such as white ciders and fortified fruit wines. The 16-17 year olds in the study emphasised a desire to emulate the maturity and experience of adult drinkers, and opted for drinks which they hoped would portray this image, such as bottled beers and spirits. For the 16-24 year olds surveyed for the 1995 Scottish Health Survey (Dong & Erens 1997) the vast majority of the alcohol consumed by males consisted of beer, lager, stout or cider (73%). For the females a more varied pattern emerged, with beer, lager, stout and cider comprising 37% of the volume consumed, spirits accounting for 36% and wine 23%.

The age-related progression observed in patterns of alcohol consumption has also been found to apply to the location of alcohol consumption. For the youngest drinkers, the major source of alcohol is the home, but as they progress through their teenage years, their place of drinking shifts, initially to parties, then clubs and discos, and finally to pubs. A considerable proportion of young underage drinkers also drink outdoors in streets and parks (Institute of Alcohol Studies 1999).
Problems Linked with Alcohol Consumption

Whilst drinking may be seen as normative and socialised behaviour, intoxication in young people can be linked to road traffic accidents, crime, fights, suicide and risk-taking and accidental injuries and deaths (Alcohol Concern 1998). For example, in 1994, nearly one third of pedestrians killed aged 16-19 had been drinking (Department of Transport 1995), and the peak age for convictions for drunkenness is 18 years (Home Office 1995). In addition, a national study found nearly 12% of young men aged 16-19 showed signs of dependence, as did about 7% of women in this age group (Meltzer et al 1995). A recent telephone survey of 1,000 females in their twenties reported many risk behaviours linked with a good night out: for example, when intoxicated 50% had reported walking home alone, 19% had driven a car when intoxicated, 15% had got into a fight and 10% had taken drugs. Additionally, 30% had had unprotected sex, and 13% had made an emergency visit to the doctors, either for the morning after pill or suspected STD (Company Magazine, 2000).

Promotion of Alcohol

It can be argued that many factors contribute to the promotion of alcohol to young people, including parents, peer groups and the popular media. However, one of the areas which has seen considerable growth in the past decade is the commercial promotion of alcohol to younger sectors of the market. The significance of the impact of alcohol supply on consumption was recognised by the World Health Organisation in sponsoring the first Supply Side Initiative Conference in 1999, at which the CSM was invited to present a paper (Jackson et al 2000). ‘Recent years have seen a growth in the value youth culture attaches to brand labels and symbols and a move away from the healthy living ethos. The alcohol industry’s response to these trends has been to design alcoholic beverages that appeal to young people, using well-informed and precisely targeted marketing strategies’ (Jackson et al 2000). This was followed by the WHO Ministerial Conference on Young People and Alcohol which focussed on the development of a European strategy, including the control of promotion of alcohol to young people through regulations on alcohol advertising and alcohol-related health communications in the mass media.

The importance of young people’s consumerist and hedonistic approach to drinking in post-modern society is highlighted by Brain (2000). He describes the trend among a significant sector of contemporary youth to ‘pick and mix’ from a psychoactive repertoire and highlights the efforts of the alcohol industry to ensure their place in this process by ‘re-commodifying’ alcohol products; for example, creating new products, increasing strengths, promoting products as lifestyle markers, and expanding the range of venues. Brain characterises the drinking patterns of many young people as a search for hedonistic pleasure, but emphasises that this is often ‘bounded’ by complex interacting structures such as education, work, family and organised leisure. For others less influenced by these structures, alcohol consumption is also desirable but is more likely to be characterised by ‘unbounded’ hedonism.

Safe Drinking Advice and Unit Measures

Current provision of education and advice to this age group is centred on school based initiatives, but these vary in approach and extent and demonstrate little conclusive evidence of success (Alcohol Concern 1998). Initiatives directed at those who have left school are
even more limited, apart from mass media interventions reaching the public at large. In addition, this age group has limited contact with health services and is unlikely to be exposed to opportunistic advice in this context. Many may not recognise they have a problem linked to drinking, but for those that do, specific services for this age group are similarly limited.

The core of safe drinking advice focuses on adults and units of consumption - daily limits of 2-3 units for women and 3-4 units for men (DoH 1995). No safe limits have been set for young people. Their bodies vary greatly in size and are developing at different rates, making this an almost impossible task (Alcohol Concern 1997). Additionally when considered in the context of current alcohol consumption, judging one’s alcohol intake in terms of units can be complex, making it difficult for parents or educators to advise young people. The increasingly diverse range of alcohol products in the marketplace has meant that the traditional benchmarks for judging the units of alcohol in a drink (eg. _ pint of beer or one glass of wine = 1 unit) are virtually obsolete (Kenny 2000).

One response to the prevalent ignorance of beverage alcohol content has been the suggestion that all drinks should be labelled with their unit content (The Portman Group 1997). In 1999 several large drinks companies launched a new labelling scheme designed to display the units of alcohol contained in bottles and cans. However, it is important to understand how young people might use this advice, especially if it could be counter-productive, for example, facilitating selection of the most potent products (The Portman Group 1997).

Range of Influences

Finally, it is important to conceptualise not just one influence but a range of interacting behavioural determinants of drinking as indicated in Figure 1 (MacFadyen et al 1998).

Figure 1
Conclusion

The issues highlighted above underline the need for in-depth consumer research to identify factors promoting and preventing alcohol misuse among young people. Research of this nature could lead to a deeper understanding of the priorities of modern youth and the role of alcohol within the context of current youth culture. An understanding of the importance of relevant lifestyle choices and the perceived pros and cons of alcohol-related behaviour would be an important asset for future alcohol strategies.
3. RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aims of the research were to:

- Explore the place of alcohol use in the context of young people’s lifestyles (15-24 year olds) and identify their perceptions of the benefits and disadvantages of alcohol use.

- Identify factors which promote alcohol misuse and factors which protect against it.

- Provide SACAM members with an insight into young people’s feelings in their own words about factors which influence their patterns of alcohol consumption.

More specifically, the research aimed to:

- Provide insight into current patterns of alcohol consumption among young people, including the circumstances and types of drinking.

- Explore the perceived benefits and disadvantages of alcohol use, in the context of general lifestyle priorities, including alternative substance use.

- Determine young people’s perceptions of different patterns of drinking and key factors identified in their descriptions, including exploration of concepts such as ‘sensible use’ and ‘harmful use’, and ‘misuse’ of alcohol.

- Explore young people’s awareness and understanding of sensible drinking messages (including knowledge about units and ABV).

- Determine young people’s perceptions of factors that promote harmful drinking patterns, for example, peer attitudes, availability, income, media etc.

- Determine young people’s perceptions of factors that minimise and protect against harmful drinking, such as peer and parental attitudes, availability and restrictions on access, income etc.

- Determine any personal or peer strategies for reducing potential harm from drinking.
4. METHOD AND SAMPLE

Method

Qualitative research was undertaken using a focus group methodology. Focus groups are informal discussions, moderated by an experienced researcher, bringing together respondents who are carefully selected to meet the desired criteria. The focus groups lasted approximately one and a half hours and were conducted in an informal venue convenient for the respondents. With respondents’ consent, interviews were recorded on audio-tape for transcription and thematic analysis. A topic guide was developed to ensure key research issues were covered (Appendix). This reflected the research objectives outlined above and issues identified from the literature. However, the moderator also encouraged open discussion and the expression of respondents’ ideas using their own terms.

The groups commenced with an indirect approach, typically generating discussion on what ‘people your age’ and ‘living round here’ do in their free time. For example, asking respondents to describe a night out, from ‘preparation’ to the ‘morning after’, generated illuminating discussion on a range of areas of interest, such as location, companions, types of drinks and drinking behaviour, and factors which promote and protect against alcohol misuse. As the group interviews progressed, further projective techniques were employed to stimulate discussion whilst avoiding direct questioning. Prompts used at appropriate stages included: examples of a range of alcohol products; scenarios of drink-related situations; and a range of relevant health education materials.

Sample

The sample was designed both to incorporate as broad a coverage of experience and perceptions as possible within the study parameters, and to ensure that focus groups were as homogeneous as possible in terms of their socio-demographic profile in order to enhance open discussion. The following quota variables were included; age, gender, socio-economic group and geographical location (Figure 2). In addition, all respondents were recruited as having consumed at least the recommended limit in one session over the past 6 months: ie. 3 units for females and 4 units for males.

| Group | Age | Gender | Socio-economic Group | Location
|-------|-----|--------|----------------------|--------
| 1     | 15-16 | Male | BC1 | Rural |
| 2     | 15-16 | Female | C2D | Urban |
| 3     | 17-19 | Male | DE | Urban |
| 4     | 17-19 | Male | BC1 / Full-time Education | Urban |
| 5     | 17-19 | Female | C2D | Rural |
| 6     | 20-24 | Female | DE | Rural |
| 7     | 20-24 | Male | C2D | Rural |
| 8     | 20-24 | Mixed | BC1 | Urban |

1 'Rural' incorporates rural / small town outwith the Central Belt
2 This group comprises full-time students living away from the parental home for most of the year
A sample of 5 to 8 respondents per group was drawn from the general public, resulting in a total of 55 respondents.

The sample was recruited door-to-door by professional market research recruiters, using a short recruitment questionnaire to ensure respondents fulfilled the age, gender and socio-economic group requirements and had appropriate levels of drinking experience. Recruiters followed standard Market Research Society recruitment guidelines.
FINDINGS

It was clear that drinking alcohol and drinking-related activities have a key position as part of young people’s lifestyles. Drinking alcohol was mentioned spontaneously across all the groups in the context of ‘free time’ activities and ‘going out’ and many respondents felt they had few alternative leisure activities.

The findings first give insight into how young people drink (5). This is followed by a more detailed examination of the factors which influence their drinking, both encouraging and moderating. These relate to three levels of interacting behavioural determinants: personal characteristics (6), the immediate environment (7) and the wider social context (8) (MacFadyen et al 1998).
5. HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE DRINK?

The discussions with the young people produced vivid descriptions of their behaviour in relation to drinking alcohol. The range of experiences is outlined here, focusing on drinking careers and drinking patterns, in order to set the scene before identifying key influences on these behaviours in the following sections.

Drinking Careers

The study sample covered only a ten year age span but there was a considerable range of behaviours identified. Respondents were all aware of the stages outlined below and looked back at their previous experiences and anticipated future changes in behaviour broadly within this structure. Thus, alcohol consumption is a common experience, and a ‘natural’ progression is apparent - “everybody goes through it” - although not consciously seen as a ‘rite of passage’. Importantly, they saw themselves emerging from this behaviour, with the unspoken assumption that they would be unscathed and able to cut down.

“We won’t be drinking like this forever.”
(Female, 15-16, C2D)

“I’m a student just now and I think I drink more because I’ve not got work in the morning. I think as you get older and you’ve got kids and things, you won’t be able to go out and get plastered and feel how you do, because you’ll have to get up. I think it’ll change. I hope it does.”
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

Pre-15 Year Olds

The study focused on 15-24 year olds but respondents frequently mentioned the drinking experiences of this younger age group. They recalled their own past experiences with a mix of humour and concern in hindsight for the risks they had run. Older respondents especially, also expressed concerns about the continuing of this behaviour among young teens and the attached risks, including perceived links with drug taking.

“I suppose I’m more disciplined, and before it was just young drunken stupid stuff. When you’re out in [home town] there’s nothing to do. It’s easy just to go down the Meadows and drink. That was it.”
(Female, 17-19, C2D)

Respondents frequently reported drinking at the age of 11 or 12 and by 13 and 14 years had been accustomed to drinking regularly, although not daily. Drinking mostly took place away from adult influences in parks, down by the shore or in the woods. Drinks were purchased in off-licences by one of the group, often the oldest looking, or by a passer-by. It was felt to be common knowledge which shops would sell drink to under-age purchasers.
“At school you hear other people talking about it - school dances. Then they're too young to go into the pubs so they ask somebody to go in and buy their drink so they're hanging about outside.”

(Male, 17-19, DE)

“Stand next to people in a shop, ‘Hey big man, go and get us a carry out’.”

“Go round the back of a hall I suppose, in the park or something like that.”

(Male, 20-24, C2D)

Some took the opportunity to drink in private houses when their parents were away. In addition, parents were described as purchasing drinks for moderate home drinking (Section 7 Family Influences).

Drink choice was determined by need for low cost and the need for quick and effective drunkenness. Most commonly mentioned were strong ciders and wines, but vodka was also used by this age group because it could be readily mixed with a bottled soft drink to disguise their illegal behaviour and mask the unpleasant taste. However, almost “anything” was acceptable and drinks were frequently mixed depending on what was available.

15-16 Years

By this age, respondents felt they were “too old” to be drinking in the parks, although they continued to drink in private houses, either at planned parties, or in more impromptu sessions. Again, parents would often be out of the house on these occasions, and it was recognised that some parents might be ‘cooler’ and more accepting of their drinking.

Importantly by this age, most had gained access to licensed premises. The girls especially, regularly went to clubs at the weekend, often weekly or at least fortnightly. Their opportunities were probably enhanced by living in an urban area, with better transport facilities and choices of venue. However, they perceived little difficulty in gaining entrance, although it required some ‘screwing up’ of courage. Amongst the older groups, it was also widely held that young people had ready access to clubs, especially girls (Section 7 Commercial Activity).

Among the male respondents in this age group who lived in a smaller town, there was a distinction in behaviour between 15 and 16 year olds. The 16 year olds had all been to clubs, although not on a regular basis. They felt it was easier for girls to have access, but were also inhibited by needing to travel to the nearest big town. In addition, this middle class group did not drink regularly during term time or if they had other commitments, such as sports, although they did have parties in the holiday period. The younger boys (15 year olds) were less inclined to drink to drunkenness, although they had all drunk in moderation, perhaps again reflecting more middle class values in this group and a perceived range of alternative activities.
Access to pubs was seen as more difficult for this age group than for clubs, and perhaps a less attractive option. However, it was known that specific pubs were less rigid in enforcing the age limit, in spite of occasional police clampdowns.

Most commonly mentioned drinks among this age group were:

- Vodka, usually Smirnoff, especially among girls. This was mainly mixed with Red Bull energy drink, but also with Coke or orange juice. Vodka was the preferred spirit because it was unlikely to leave a smell on the breath - important for coming home to parents - and was less likely to give a hangover. In addition it could be readily mixed and ‘hidden’ in other drinks and was tasteless.

- Wine, usually cheaper sparkling white wines such as Lambrini.

- Premium pre-mixed drinks, especially Bacardi Breezer but also Smirnoff Ice.

- Bottled beers such as Budweiser and lagers were most commonly mentioned among the boys.

- Shots such as Aftershock were drunk in clubs and occasionally bought in bottles in order to ‘sell’ drinks at a party (a bottle cost just under £25.00).

> “I was going to say when I started off drinking we didn’t have things you have now, like Aftershock and these sorts of things. People do shots more. A lot of my younger friends go out and do dares and do shots.”
> “It is more a group thing.”
> (Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

Respondents’ reported alcohol consumption ‘the last time they had a lot to drink’ ranged from 4-14 units.

### 17-19 Year Olds

This age group had limited demands on their leisure time and an increasing disposable income. Among this age group, access to licensed premises was taken for granted (including for those underage) and pubs and clubs were visited regularly. At home, drinking was not confined to parties but was diversifying into other recreational situations such as watching videos or sports programmes with friends.

> “It’s no longer the case of going out for your first pint when you’re 18. It’s not heard of now.”
> “You’re bored of it by then. Too many hangovers - I don’t want to go out.”
> (Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

A similar range of drinks were described as with the younger group, although when drinking in pubs, males were more likely to drink draught lager or beer as well as bottled.
The range of reported units consumed ‘the last time they had a lot to drink’ was higher than the younger groups - between 4 and 24 units.

20-24 Year Olds

Among this age group more varied patterns started to emerge. Many continued to have few demands on their leisure time or finances and tended to drink increasingly often and in a wider range of situations. Among the more middle class urban group a phase of ‘heavy’ more continuous drinking developed, often combined with weekend binge drinking. In particular, drinking with meals became relatively common, either in restaurants or at home, and during the week ‘quiet nights’ became increasingly attractive, including drinking at home or visits to local pubs.

However, for some responsibilities and demands limited their drinks consumption. Most notably, among one group of 20-25 year old women in the DE socio-economic groups, four respondents had children under 5 and childcare demands and financial constraints limited their intake. Thus, while having a drink was still a key activity, a ‘Saturday night out’ might be a few bottles of Bacardi Breezer at a friend’s house rather than the night’s pubbing and clubbing of a few years earlier, or of a single working woman of similar age.

“Well I’m married now so it doesn’t matter. We’re just a boring old married couple now. Nothing exciting happens now.”

(Female, 20-24, DE)

Other responsibilities which might impact on consumption in this age group included having to fund their ‘own house’ or having more responsible jobs for which they had to be more alert.

“I stay myself so I’ve got to keep the house and all that and keep myself right so I can’t really afford to go out drinking every night.”

(Male, 20-24, C2D)

“This time last year I wouldn’t have thought twice about going out on a school night [school teacher] but as you get further in your job and you get more responsibility, you do feel there’s no way I can do that and do a whole days work. It’s definitely a change of lifestyle.”

(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

Even among those who had less external demands, there was a feeling that as they got older they were less able to physically cope with continued drinking at heavy levels, for example, they reported experiencing longer hangovers, or they felt increasing recognition of risk situations they put themselves in while drinking.

Overall, there continued to be a wide range of consumption among this age group as with 17-19 year olds, with between 5 and 24 units reported as consumed the ‘last time they had a lot of drink’. 
Main Drinking Patterns

A range of alcohol-related behaviours were identified. Drinking to excess once or twice a week was common, but drinking daily was unusual, as was drinking during the day or alone.

‘A good night out’ was the predominant pattern, usually on a weekly basis. The aim was hedonistic intoxication rather than serious drunkenness. A relatively strategic element was apparent, balancing the desire to get drunk and have fun with limited financial resources and the need for self-preservation.

“Atmosphere.”
“Cheap drink.”
“Having a laugh.”
“Friends to dance with.”
“Alcohol.”
“As cheap a night as possible.”

(Female, 17-19, C2DE)

“Atmosphere.”
“I think a good night out is just a night that isn’t planned, just go with the flow and if it’s good it’s good. You cannae really make it.”
“I think to go out with your mates it’s usually a good night.”
“Good atmosphere, a Chinese meal at the end of the night and a good spew up after it.”

(Male, 20-24, C2D)

Figure 3 shows the pattern that was common across a range of ages and socio-economic groupings:

Figure 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Good Night Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Preliminary drinking in houses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- getting ready, meeting the group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- ‘it’s cheaper’ eg. cheap wine or cans of lager.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➔ Drinking in pubs (less usual for under 17 year olds).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- meeting point or arrive in a group (cheaper than clubs)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- happy hours, promotions eg. two-for-one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- males might choose draught or bottled beers/lagers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- girls drink wine or premixed drinks, cocktails.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➔ Drinking in clubs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- extends the ‘night out’ but can’t be too drunk to get past bouncers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- slower rate because of cost but likely to get more intoxicated (topping up effect).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- bottles more likely (less spillage / less risk of contamination - spiking).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- spirits / shots / shooters / pre-mixes eg. vodka and Red Bull, Aftershock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>➔ Getting home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- use of taxis and need for snacks (needing to reserve money).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“A few beers in the house then meet up at the pub an’ then when the pub shuts or maybe a hour before the pub shuts [go to a club] and depending go home masel or no’ home yerself.”
(Male, 17-19, DE)

“Aye, probably, go to a couple of pubs first.”
“Save yourself a bit of money in the club later on.”
“It’s dearer, it’s dearer for drink in the nightclubs.”
“Best to get drunk before you arrive or something.”
(Male, 20-24, C2D)

“If I’m going out with my boyfriend, we’ll have a couple of Aftershocks before we go out.”
(Female, 17-19, C2D)

“‘I’ll just have a couple while I’m getting ready,’ and then you forget about the couple you’ve had. Then when you go out, you have a couple more and you think ‘I’ve only had two, I shouldn’t be like this’. Then you keep going. Then you go back and see the empty bottles and you’re like ‘Oops’ “
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

A range of other drinking patterns were experienced, although less frequently, with greater or lesser degree of risk.

“A quiet sociable drink with friends” was less frequently described but became gradually more common with age. The intention was not to get drunk but to use alcohol to relax and facilitate quiet conversation. This would more often be during the week and might be in a local pub rather than the town centre, or at home, perhaps watching a video or having a meal. Drinks in this context included beers and premium pre-mixed brands and a relatively sophisticated range of wines.

“I drink more in the house. I’ll get a bottle of wine and have the first glass with my dinner and then sit with friends or whatever. It’s more in the house now than it is clubbing.”
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

Parties in people’s houses were also mentioned. Among those underage, these were more common among more middle class respondents, perhaps reflecting parents’ agreeing to facilitate safer drinking venues compared with ‘outdoors’. Otherwise, parties were more common in the older age band.

“Ah always tend to wake up in some state. When I wake up and everybody’s all lying about like that man and your house is all pure wrecked like that, no chance - and then they’re all away by the time you wake up in the mornin’. You’ve no money left, there’s no drink left, you’ve nae hoose left. You’ve nae nothing’.”
(Male, 17-19, DE)
Drinking games with friends were occasionally described. These tended to encourage faster drinking and greater intoxication such as races and challenges, or games experienced while on holidays abroad.

“There were wee plastic fishes and if the reps put one in your drink you had to down it. You just came back from the bar with a full glass and you were like, ‘There’s a fish in it’. It’s really annoying and you get really drunk. The reps are just trying to make you have a good time.”

(Female, 17-19, C2D)

“Keeping going” all weekend was also mentioned. For most this was an unusual occurrence, but slightly more likely among those who were underage and students. It also tended to be linked with the use of illicit drugs.

Taking alcohol with illicit drugs was relatively frequently and spontaneously mentioned in the context of discussing drinking. A variety of contexts were reported such as: adding drugs to drinks by ‘others’ for a joke or to make girls more vulnerable (Section 6 ‘spiking’); choosing to mix alcohol and drugs to enhance effect; taking drugs when already drunk and “willing to try anything”; and “chilling out” with friends after a night out.

“It’s easier to get alcohol ‘cos it’s legal.”

(Male, 17-19, DE)

“It’s usually after club parties. There’s usually a joint going round, and folk just start to chill out.”

(Female, 17-19, C2D)
6. WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE YOUNG PEOPLE’S DRINKING? 
PERSONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Discussions with young people enabled insight into their perceptions of both the benefits of drinking and the potential problems and risks, together with protective strategies they employed.

Benefits of Drinking Alcohol

Alcohol appeared to fit extremely positively with the needs and aspirations of young people - particularly to have fun and to be included in peer groups and activities. To a certain degree it was also regarded as a solution to their worries, especially regarding social interactions, and a cure for adolescent troubles.

- Importantly, drinking alcohol generated fun which was a central aim, and reduced inhibitions and enabled enjoyment.

- It promoted confidence, not only in meeting members of the opposite sex, but also in other potentially embarrassing situations such as dancing, or entering new social environments. Even a quiet talk with friends was also enhanced by alcohol.

- It provided relaxation, 'switching off’ and a reward for hard work.

- It licensed childishness, providing the ultimate excuse for bad behaviour, a welcome break from being ‘grown-up’ all the time.

“To relax. It’s a laugh … it gives you confidence … just happier.”
(Female, 15-16, C2D)

“Passing out, pissed basically intit?”
“Naw - we enjoy it.”
“Boosts your confidence as well.”
“Forget about all your problems.”
“You feel good.”
(Male, 17-19, DE)

“I’d say it was, definitely [giving confidence a benefit]. Dutch courage.”
“Talking to members of the opposite gender.”
“Social skills - a lot of people don’t have.”
“It’s giving you confidence to speak to people you don’t know. If you fancied somebody you might get the confidence to go up and chat to them.”
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)
“Just to relax you.”
“You know the weekend is starting so…”
“It gives you that boost after a hard week. It gives you that boost to stay out all night.”
“If you’ve had a bad day on the Friday [you can think], ‘Oh well, a couple of hours in the pub’.”
“It’s just socialising really.”
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

Alcohol-related activities and environments were key to being sociable and meeting people, both new acquaintances and old friends. Across the range of licensed outlets, private houses and ‘outdoor’ locations, drinking tended to be seen as the main and often only leisure option.

“It’s just nothing happening apart frae drink an’ alcohol or drink or going tae a club.”
“No it’s a’ there is to do though - d’ye no’ think for sort of our age?”
“I’d say there isn’t a lot of opportunity for - anything really in Glasgow apart from sports-wise.”
(Male, 17-19, DE)

“In Glasgow intit if you’re caught out in the street - breaking the law. So you’ve really got to be indoors.”
“If you stay in the house - don’t meet anybody.”
“If you go to the pubs you socialise wi’ folk, you know what I mean?”
(Male, 17-19, DE)

Drinking alcohol had a number of perceived advantages compared with illicit drug taking, which was often seen as a parallel leisure alternative. Alcohol was seen as a physically safer product, with less risk of contamination. It was legal to purchase and consume alcohol in the general population, and so police prosecution was seen as unlikely unless linked with problem behaviour. Potential repercussions from police intervention related to underage drinking had little impact in affecting behaviour. Because alcohol was more widely accepted socially, being known to consume it did not have the same social consequences as illicit drug taking. Finally, the risk of addiction was seen to be negligible in comparison with illicit drug taking.

“I think drugs and alcohol are probably just as dangerous as each other. It’s just because alcohol is legal, it’s not seen as such a big issue. Whereas drugs are illegal, so they’re dangerous. Alcohol is legal, so it isn’t. It’s the same with smoking. Because it’s legal it’s accepted and people don’t’ see the dangers and what it will do to them in many years time.”
(Female, 17-19, C2D)
“Any drugs like ecky’s, speed, hash, they kind of one’s like you would cope, that I wouldnae mind right ... I’ve never tried it but [with heroin] you end up wanting more and more and more, till the end, a pure junkie and your eyes sink into your skull and you start getting scabs all over you and you just die ... One of his mates started taking heroin and a year later he was dead. Just because he got hooked on it. It’s as quick as that.”

(Male, 20-24, C2DE)

Finally, sharing peer discussions and activities was enhanced by knowing about alcohol products - their relative strengths, tastes and perceived effectiveness in intoxication – and by being knowledgeable about TV commercials and other promotions.

**Perceived Problems and Risks Related to Alcohol Consumption**

Young people could compile a formidable list of things that might go wrong when drinking alcohol, although they tended not to acknowledge these alcohol-related risks on a personal basis. What might objectively be seen as risks, tended to be seen as transitory difficulties and even part of the fun and targets to aim for. In other words, any potential negative factors were far outweighed by the benefits of drinking. More serious consequences such as addiction or liver damage, while acknowledged, were rationalised away as future risks for “other people, not me” or accepted fatalistically.

**Routine and Accepted Consequences**

Some aspects were seen as routine and accepted:

**Short-term physical effects** such as vomiting and hangovers were accepted as routine and part of the process of drinking and did not act as deterrents. Indeed, they enhanced stories reviewing past nights out and paradoxically some said vomiting was part of the fun. Girls frequently described “holding back each others’ hair” when they were being sick as being part of the group support dynamic. Young people were more likely to sympathise with sufferers rather than condemn them. Even extreme consequences which required medical attention did not act as a long-term deterrent, such as ‘poisoning’ requiring a stomach pump, head injury and coma following falls, and broken limbs.

“I just went out and did the same thing next weekend.”

(Female, 20-24, DE)

“Making a fool of yourself” could also be seen as part of the fun and a benefit, with alcohol providing an excuse for outrageous behaviour, although a minority highlighted this as a cause of unwelcome embarrassment.

**High financial costs** were reported (£30–£50 for a night out) but were accepted because drinking was the main social activity.
“Sometimes you go to the pub and spend about £30, then other times you spend about £50.”

“Ah but if you walked out with your wages in your pocket one night I guarantee you’d have it spent by the one night if you’ve got it all in your pocket. You kind of set yourself to money every weekend - then you’ll no’ go wrang, but you don’t.”

“You try and have one good night out at the weekend and you’re probably shipped in for the rest of the week anyway.”

“If you’ve got the money you’ll spend it.”

(Male, 17-19, DE)

“The money you can spend on it’s unbelievable.”

(Male, 20-24, C2DE)

**Problems Which Aroused Some Concerns**

There were some negative effects and behaviours about which concerns were expressed:

‘**Spiking’ drinks** was mentioned in all groups, and clearly believed to be widespread, based both on rumours and on personal experiences. Most serious was drugging by strangers or casual acquaintances in public locations in order to facilitate enticing girls to have sex (‘date rape’ drugs). This was viewed negatively by both males and females in the groups. In other situations, drinks might be ‘spiked’ with drugs or spirits to make individuals more intoxicated ‘for a laugh’. This was also more likely to be done by males to male peers, but could also involve women.

“If a guy got spiked it’d probably be more of a joke but you hear of people doing it to birds an’ that, don’t you? An’ they’re getting raped an’ that.”

“If you dae it to a lassie or something it’s to dae something to them. It’s no’ nice.”

(Male, 17-19, DE)

“I think they just put down their drinks, and then the next thing they know they were in hospital. It’s quite scary.”

(Female, 17-19, C2D)

**Fights** were widely felt to be common in relation to alcohol, especially, but not exclusively, among males.

“[Pub] is bad for fights. I saw someone being bottled there two or three weeks ago. There was a huge fight. Mind you there were fights all over Edinburgh that night. The police were all over the place. It was really scary.”

(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

**Unplanned and unprotected sex** was not readily recognised or spontaneously listed as a problem. However, when the issue was raised, many acknowledged they had been in situations which risked leading to unprotected sex. Going to pubs and clubs with the aim of
meeting members of the opposite sex and if possible having opportunistic sexual intercourse was a more overt aim among working class males, but it was indirectly acknowledged across genders and social class groups. However, younger girls, while keen to attend clubs, found the attention of older men alarming.

“Someone taking advantage of you. Some men are really pushy ... Sometimes you stand up to them, sometimes that just makes it worse ... Yes. Not just for the guys, but if people come up to you and say, ‘Do you want some of these tablets’, if you’re drunk then…”
(Female, 15-16, C2D)

“Because when you go out for a night you say, ‘Right, I’m not going to sleep with him’, but after a couple of drinks...”
“Your’re more vulnerable as well with a drink in you. You can be easily persuaded. You’re not as strong willed.”
(Female, 20-24, DE)

A general vulnerability related to drinking was acknowledged, in addition to specific risks of spiking, fights and unprotected sex, again mainly in retrospect. This included walking home alone or being tempted to accept lifts from strangers, and especially for girls, being out in scanty outfits and high heels, risking cold and reducing their ability to escape from problem situations.

“Sometimes you find yourself - you’re so drunk and even when you get out of a taxi or get off the bus and walk home, you just think, ‘If anyone tried anything I couldn’t fight them off.’ Sometimes it’s quite sobering and you just think - sometimes I’ve been quite drunk and I’ve thought, ‘No, I don’t think I’ll get to that anymore.’”
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

An impact on work or study was acknowledged in relation to heavy drinking incidents, either through hangovers or continued drinking, but most structured their drinking to fit in with their other responsibilities.

Potential Effects Perceived as Irrelevant

Some effects were seen as irrelevant or extremely remote, although acknowledged in the context of alcohol.

Involvement with the police although having potentially long term effects because of having a criminal record, tended to be described as humorous anecdotes rather than being a deterrent.

Long term health implications including addiction and death were acknowledged but seen to be personally irrelevant, potentially affecting ‘others’. These tended to reflect distant and fatalistic concerns about health risk behaviours in general.
“You only live once.”
“One of those headlines, if you don’t get cancer the person next to you will, that’s how dramatic the situation is wi’ cancer.”
“If you’re no’ smoking an’ you’re no’ drinking, you’re gontae die of heart disease, aren’t ye, wi’ sitting aboot too much.”
(Male, 17-19, DE)

**Protective Strategies**

A range of protective strategies was widely reported in response to perceived risks. Importantly, these were primarily designed to enable continued intoxication safely rather than modify excess drinking. They were felt to be ‘common sense’ and considerable faith was placed in them, in turn contributing to minimising perceptions of risk.

However, on further probing, it was recognised that things could still go wrong, and it was apparent young people felt safer than they actually were. The recognition of risk was acknowledged tangentially when older respondents reflected on risk situations which they had experienced, about which they had not worried “at the time”. Concern was expressed about younger people experiencing similar ‘risks’, especially younger family members.

**Strategies to Give Physical Protection**

Safety measures were adopted to provide physical protection which gave considerable confidence, although the discussions revealed important limitations.

**Going out in groups** and remaining together was widely endorsed as a protective strategy. Importantly, however, as the discussions progressed, it was acknowledged that it could be hard to keep track of each other as a group, especially in clubs or crowded pubs. For example, low lighting and a crowded environment were common, and groups could get separated with different dance partners, going into different dance areas or even going to the toilet. Both females and males claimed to try to keep in groups, in part for the synergy of group fun and support, but also for protection from unwelcome advances (mostly females) and fights (mostly males). However, older and more middle class respondents were more likely to split-up from their group, being more confident and more likely to have a range of acquaintances in what were often less threatening drinking environments.

“We go out in groups. We never leave anyone. If someone wants to go home we all go home, even if we don’t want to. I know lots of people don’t do that but we always said we would do that. Even though I maybe don’t want to go, I always do it.”
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

“You’re generally with your friends, so you know there’s somebody there [so don’t feel at risk or vulnerable].”
(Female, 17-19, C2D)
“There was a girl, she was younger than us. We took her out to a club. We left her there because she was away sleeping with somebody in the toilets. The taxi was there and we couldn’t find her so we just had to leave her.”

“Normally the crowd that goes out is the crowd that goes back.”

(Female, 20-24, DE)

“I’ve never been in a state where I don’t know what I’m doing. I always know what I’m doing. I would look after my pal.”

(Male, 20-24, C2D)

**Drinking from bottles** rather than glasses and not leaving drinks unattended were widely practised as a matter of course. The main aim was reducing the risk of spiking, especially in venues where there were strangers. However, this was also a more practical option in clubs or busy pubs when bottles reduced the risk of spilling.

“I’ve heard some people say get your drink in a bottle so you can keep your hand over it.”

(Female, 15-16, C2D)

“That’s the only time I have, like Breezers and things like that, if I’m going to a club. ’Cos with glasses it ends up down you, but a bottle is so much - fair enough it gets warmer ’cos it’s in your hand but …”

“They last longer - bottles. If you have a gin and tonic or a vodka, after 5 minutes, it’s gone.”

“There’s that thing about girls shouldn’t put their glasses down anyway, ’cos of people putting stuff in it.”

(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

**Keeping backup money** aside in a separate place from their main money, such as in a shoe, for the journey home was frequently mentioned. However, many admitted succumbing to the temptation to spend any extra cash as the night progressed.

“Ah dae that, that’s my plan [keep taxi money separate], that’s the only bit about planning when I go out man - it never happens dintit?”

(Male, 17-19, DE)

**Using taxis** to get home safely was a common strategy, but taxis could often be hard to find and expensive and it was acknowledged they might still have to walk home, increasing the risk, especially if they were alone.

**Maintaining telephone contact**, mainly via ubiquitous mobile ‘phones, was often mentioned, especially to ensure friends had reached home safely. However, it was admitted that if there was no answer it was difficult to know what, if anything, had gone wrong or what action could be taken.
“My mate phoned up at 3 o’clock in the morning the other day just to make sure I was home.”
(Male, 17-19, DE)

“I’ve had my legs cut off, but thanks for the call. I’m fine.”
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

Taking care of friends who became ill was taken for granted. However, examples were given of some members of a group “running off” if someone passed out, especially in younger age groups. In cases of collapse there was widespread understanding of the need to keep the airway open, especially with vomiting. However, keeping people sitting up was more frequently mentioned than lying them in the recovery position, although this may in part reflect perceived additional risks from lying on dirty crowded floors.

“Just make sure that they didn’t lie down. I had to tell someone once because she was lying on her back and she was going to choke.”
(Female, 15-16, C2D)

“There was someone, she was younger than me, she collapsed when she was drunk, I was really, really worried and a friend said just leave her and I couldn’t believe they were just going to leave her there.”
(Female, 15-16, C2D)

Strategies to Limit Consumption

Many respondents reported strategies to limit consumption on a ‘night out’, either to avoid excessive drunkenness or to keep costs within limits. However, these often collapsed in the face of temptation.

Limiting the money taken for a night out was intended to limit consumption, but there was always a temptation to borrow from friends or use cash outlets.

“You set yourself a limit of money you’re going to spend and you say you’re not going to spend any more, and then you see the cash machine and you say ‘I’ll just get another 10’ and then you think ‘I’ll get another 10 because I need money tomorrow as well’. Then you get a taxi and a kebab and you end up spending 3 times as much as you thought you would, but you get a kebab out of it so…..”
(Male, 17-19, BC1)

‘Pacing’ consumption by alternating with soft drinks was recognised as a sensible approach, but these could be as expensive as alcohol and often seen as an unacceptable option. Often soft drinks were unavailable or of poor quality.
“I used to work in a bar and it was £1.20 for a draught coke, which is watered down anyway. So why not pay an extra 20p and get a vodka and coke.”

“Plus when you’re in that hot sticky environment, it’s very rarely cold is it? So by the time it’s sticky and it’s hot. It makes you thirstier. Drink I say. To hang with the soft drinks.”

(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

“I can’t remember the last time I was so drunk I can’t remember going home or anything like that. I get to the stage where I’ll maybe have – I don’t know, five will be the limit and then I’ll have a diet coke and I’ll say to myself, right I know what I’m doing. I can go home. He’s two and a half now [son], but he’s still getting up during the night and things like that, so I know that I need to be a bit alert.”

(Female, 20-24, DE)

Not mixing drinks was also seen as ‘sensible’, but on the other hand mixing could also be a way to achieve the desired level of intoxication.
7. WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE YOUNG PEOPLE’S DRINKING? IMMEDIATE ENVIRONMENT

The main influences encouraging drinking alcohol in the immediate environment were the social context and commercial activity. Potential moderating factors, such as the family, schools, mass media health and protection messages and legal implications had much weaker influences.

Social Context

Drinking was seen as a common activity – ‘everyone’ does it. It was very much a peer activity undertaken with friends and also a way of meeting new friends. Most social interaction, and indeed most leisure activities, were located in venues serving alcohol.

“About 75% of the people I know and am good friends with are people I actually met in clubs when I was 16 years old … So it was there that I met loads of people that I still hang out with, and probably will hang out with for the duration, ’cos we all click. And if it wasn’t for drink, that wouldn’t have happened.”

(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

There was widespread peer support of antisocial behaviour linked to drinking, with sympathy, amusement or admiration being more likely than criticism or ostracism.

In addition drinking was seen as a common adult behaviour. Young people had grown up seeing family and adult friends drinking and being drunk. Alcohol was an assumed part of celebrations and many had had their first drink at a family gathering. While there was some recognition of social disapproval of extreme drunkenness - it would, for example, be hidden from parents or at work - this tended to be dismissed in the context of personal enjoyment.

As outlined in Section 5, the balance between external social demands and pressures and personal needs and expectations for pleasure would vary over time. Thus, drinking might become limited by influences in the social context, such as competing demands on income, and other responsibilities or pressures linked to work and family, or alternative priorities for free time activities such as sports. A strategic balance was maintained across cost and intoxication levels, the duration of a session, and maintaining gaps between sessions to enable meeting other demands and responsibilities.

“I drive through in the morning to go horseriding, and I don’t go out on a Friday night ‘cos I know I’m driving in the morning.”

(Female, 17-19, C2DE)

“When I have a job, then I only go to the pub, maybe a couple of pints after work, but otherwise I’m just kind of a professional bum, out there everyday.”

(Male, 20-24, C2D)
“My priorities changed drastically ‘cos I have to get up at five in the morning [new job]. I work on Saturday as well so a Saturday night is my only time and I am dead shattered by the time I get in. So in all honesty, I haven’t had a drink in a fortnight … [Before] I drank all the time. It was crazy ‘cos I was skint. I was doing office jobs - temping - and it was just so easy. Just go and type your four numbers for eight hours and hungover or what not. I didn’t have any problems with it.”

(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

Commercial Activity

Within the positive social environment, young people’s attraction to drinking was greatly enhanced by commercial activity, both retail outlets and commercial product promotion.

Young people reported ready access to alcohol from a wide range of outlets, including off-licences and many varied venues such as pubs, clubs and restaurants. There was also limited mention of black market sources, especially among respondents from low income areas.

Across the groups, discussions revealed sophisticated and often cynical recognition of business priorities among retailers. This was most frequently mentioned in relation to drinking among those who were underage, with widespread recognition of willingness to serve them, including named off-licences, pubs and clubs. Off-licence purchase was felt to be relatively easy among current underagers and among those reminiscing about previous experiences. In addition, it was consistently maintained that underage girls were more readily admitted to clubs than their male peers and even those of legal drinking age. The understanding was that this was to attract adult males to the premises or simply to increase sales. Once past the door staff, they were rarely challenged.

“Aye, all sorts of young girls at the club because they can get in. The bouncers an’ that don’t knock back girls because they want the place filled wi’ lassies at the end of the day, don’t they?”

(Male, 17-19, DE)

“I’ve seen like, little girls in clubs and thought, ‘Good God’. But I’ve never seen little boys. A little boy looks like a little boy, whereas a little girl can do herself up.”

“Even 21 year old guys are still struggling to get in. I have friends who have to carry passports about with them, because they still didn’t get believed that they were 21.”

“They’re harsher with groups of boys as well. They split them up. If you go with a girl on your arm then that’s fine.”

(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)
“See if you’re 14 and you’ve got a big chest, you’ll get in past the bouncers. There’s not many young boys underage that get in.”

“It’s just money, to get the money.”

“If they go before 9 o’clock there’s no bouncers.”

(Female, 20-24, DE)

Local promotions such as Happy Hours or two-for-one offers were widely known, although more prominent in urban areas. Again they were recognised as being driven by the need for profit but were also seen as mutually beneficial to the purchaser as well as the seller, because drinking was expensive. Young people maintained such promotions did not affect their choice of venue, but agreed they would change their drink choice and drink more during a promotion period, and often for the rest of the night. Similarly, promotions in off-sales were attractive and often affected product choice as well as increasing consumption by encouraging increased purchase.

“Aye ’cos some things they don’t include in happy hours, so if you’re drinking something that they don’t include in a happy hour, and it started, maybe change over to the stuff that’s in the Happy Hour.”

(Male, 20-24, C2D)

“Oh definitely [drink more] if you’ve got three drinks in front of you, you’re going to drink them faster.”

“You’ll go up to the bar and buying, instead of one round, two rounds, so that you’ve still got a drink by the time you’re finished.”

“And then the next person whose round it is, they’ll buy two rounds as well.”

“I’d never go up and buy two glasses of wine if they were full price. If it’s Happy Hour I would do it.”

“If it’s not Happy Hour it might last you longer, but if you know it’s Happy Hour I just knock them back, ’cos I know it’s ‘buy one get one free’. And I think that one’s free.”

“You still spend the same amount of money in the night, but you’re getting a bargain, and everybody loves a bargain, don’t they? You just take advantage of it.”

(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

“At the university union it is really cheap. We spent £20 between two of us and we are both legless … They had all different offers on each floor. You got vodka for 50p at one point. They were just pouring in the shots. Beer was cheap. It was 70p for a pint of lager. It was really good.”

(Female, 17-19, C2D)

Examples of innovative product marketing were enthusiastically discussed. They clearly appealed to young people’s desire to have fun without constraint within their own cultures and on their own terms. Recent TV commercials contributed to bringing alcohol into everyday youth culture, such as the Budweiser beer ‘Wassup’ series (What’s up?), which
generated a universal catchphrase, and Lambrini wine - ‘Girls just wanna have fun’. Examples of access to commercial internet websites and e-mail communication of promotional messages were given (viral marketing). New products or variations were greeted with interest, for example at the time of the study, many were intrigued by Absinthe becoming more available and wanted to try it.

“How many kids are running about saying, ‘Wassup’ though.”

“Has anyone had the e-mails. I got this e-mail and it was all these old grannies and they’re saying, ‘Wassup’ It’s so funny. And they sit back at the end of it and say, ‘What are you doing?’ ‘Oh just having a Bud’.”

(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

“I think the guy or the woman who does the adverts are very very witty. There’s not been a bad Budweiser advert.”

“They know how to sell their product.”

“I think they’re really good at their advertising and I think it does make a difference.”

(Female, 17-19, C2D)

“If you go in the clubs on a Saturday night and everyone’s shouting it [Wassup].”

(Female, 15-16, C2D)

Family Influence

Parents were described as attempting to influence drinking behaviour in a number of ways: ranging from providing an environment conducive to exploring drinking, and encouragement of harm minimisation, to outright attempts to discipline and control young people’s drinking. In addition, family members and friends provided role models, but only to a limited extent. In practice, young people themselves were more likely to see their drinking as an independent activity, in isolation from their family. While recognising family influences to some extent, alcohol consumption and related social activities tended to occur in parallel to any parental interaction, rather than be strongly linked to it.

For this reason, the family was rarely an influential factor in moderating drinking and behaviour, and any formal control was tenuous. In addition, although most said their parents would drink, young people tended not to compare their behaviour with that of their parents, which often seemed to be irrelevant. Similarly, they did not comment on hypocrisy in any parental restrictions or express feelings of conscious rebellion in their drinking.

From the young people’s perspective, the greatest overt parental attempts to influence behaviour were related to underage drinking, especially under 16 years. Harm minimisation approaches initiated by their parents were reported across all the groups, although not by all members. This was interpreted as parental acknowledgement that they were going to drink anyway. Parents would buy alcohol for their children to drink at home with the family or friends, although usually less strong products such as beer or lager or wine. This was seen as an attempt to reduce ‘outdoor’ drinking when they were more vulnerable, for example in situations such as asking passing adults to buy drink or mixing with drug pushers.
“My mother started wur carry outs … she thought there was nothing she could do about it so she might as well make sure we’re not doing anything stupid kind of thing. So she’d know what we were drinking … Her final effort … I would go out and drink anyway. I’d get it from somewhere. It was quite good, well in a way but, I mean I never turned into an alkey so, she’s not wrong for doing it or anything …”
(Male, 20-24, C2D)

“To be honest, if it was mine [my child], I’d rather she sat and drank with me than went out and lay about the streets and slept with everybody and ended up in the same situation that I ended up in [unplanned pregnancy] … If my mum had said, ‘Sit in and have a drink with me’, there would have been no point in going out and drinking.”
(Female, 20-24, DE)

“I remember one night we were going on holiday and like Mum and Dad were like, ‘Aw it’s alright you can have a few, you can have a beer son, you’re on your holiday’ and that. So I’d had a beer and then I’d had like it was a shot of vodka, and I got caught and Mum and Dad went mental.”
(Male, 15-16, BC1)

“My mum doesn’t mind me drinking a couple of bottles of Bacardi Breezer, she’d buy me that, but she doesn’t like me having the vodka, stuff like that. My mum lets me have a couple.”
(Female, 15-16, C2D)

This approach was welcomed but did not entirely replace the benefits of drinking with peers in their own space.

Additionally, when young people were going out, some parents were reported as trying to emphasise the importance of knowing where they were and regular ‘reporting-in’ rather than trying to exert control over their activities.

“When I started going out - going to the pub - I’d say I was going to the pub and they’d say, ‘Fine, I don’t care’. ‘Cos at least they know where I am and they know I’m not away somewhere drinking God knows what.”
(Female, 17-19, C2D)

Some parents, on the other hand, were reported as trying to control their children more actively, especially younger respondents. This might include grounding, repeated nagging and physical punishment. However, this appeared to have little effect if the young person was determined. Any benefits from deterring high levels of drinking have to be balanced against the risks of encouraging deception, with stricter parents being less likely to know accurately where their children were and who they were with. Indeed, deceiving parents,
example, by attempting to mask drunkenness or developing elaborate cover stories, could be part of the fun and was often looked back on as a positive experience.

“’Cos you were going and hiding. It was all for the buzz, going out and getting caught.”
(Female, 20-24, DE)

Although the older generation did not appear to be a strong influence on behaviour, family responsibilities when young people themselves became parents often led to considerable modification of behaviour.

The Influence of Schools

Only a minority reported experiencing any educational input about alcohol and drinking in school. There were isolated examples of health days mentioned, which included alcohol elements, and in some schools, individual social education teachers had addressed the issue in a meaningful way. The low prominence of alcohol education compared with drugs or tobacco education, reinforced the perception that alcohol consumption is not a problem issue.

Where the topic had been addressed, the young people responded favourably to approaches which acknowledged that they were going to drink, but which also raised issues they should think about. As the discussions progressed, respondents appeared increasingly receptive to receiving information about drinking and felt that schools were an appropriate setting, provided the tone was right. ‘Cool’ teachers or outside speakers who had had problems with drinking were acceptable, but talks from policemen were regarded with amusement - “Mr Plod”.

“Aye like, police coming to school and that, you don’t listen to them, you just …”
(Male, 20-24, C2D)

“Even at school, you just get taught about drugs. You don’t really get much talk an alcohol … it’s all focused on drugs. Before we got the drugs, it was all, ‘You shouldn’t drink anything. You shouldn’t take drugs, full stop, and you shouldn’t drink anything.’ You have to tell people to do it sensibly. At least then they’d make the decision for themselves.”
(Female, 17-19, C2D)

“I think schools have got to be really careful, ’cos sometimes it’s - you’re reaching that rebellious stage in your life. Well if someone’s telling you not to do this, then it’s going to put it in my head and I’m going to do it. That’s why I done it at school.”
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)
“The best people to come and lecture you on alcohol and stuff are - did we not have a recovering alcoholic come to the High School?”

“I think they're the best people to ever get in to talk about it. Teachers can go on and on but you don’t - they were young once and probably done the same thing, but I think people that have been through it are the best people.”

(Female, 17-19, C2D)

“I think if they’re going to be serious about doing like things like that they should make a bit more up-to-date videos [scornful voice] 'cos the ones we get are like early 80s.”

(Male, 15-16, BC1)

Impact of Mass Media Health and Protection Messages

Young people had little knowledge or internalisation of formal health promotion and protection messages in relation to alcohol use and misuse. There was some confusion about whether moderation or abstinence was the ‘official’ recommendation. Interestingly, however, many were aware of advice that drinking alcohol in moderation can have a beneficial health effect, without recognising that this applied to older age groups (men over 40 years old and post-menopausal women). This also tended to result in perceptions of mixed messages.

“I haven’t seen many adverts saying, ‘Don’t drink’ … There are smoking ones, but there’s not any for drinking.”

(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

“Alcohol’s actually good for you if you drink it like in small doses, like a few glasses of wine with your dinner and that.

(Male, 20-24, C2D)

“I think sometimes all these health things confuse you. One minute they’re saying drink is really bad for you, but if you drink two glasses of wine a day it’s good for you. And they said something about beer was good for you, not long ago. What one is it? It’s mixed messages for a start.”

(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

Young people were not actively looking for information, because drinking was an activity about which they felt confident. In the course of the discussions, however, respondents did express an interest in ‘new facts’ on drinking, such as the ill effects of binge drinking or the potential impact on sexual prowess. It appeared that acquiring additional information was equally beneficial to increasing their credibility as drinkers, as to avoiding alcohol misuse.

When shown the HEBS leaflet ‘Survival Guide to Drinking’ during the interview, young people’s favourable response also suggested a latent interest in education about alcohol use and misuse if presented appropriately. Indeed, a number of respondents requested a copy. The study did not allow full exploration, but the key positive features identified included: the
visual appearance of the cover and internal design, which generated positive identification with the material and an impression of “not preaching”; the bullet point presentation rather than “going on and on”; and the content, which was seen to give relevant information, providing both new facts and confirming current ‘common sense’ beliefs.

The main TV alcohol education commercial that was remembered was HEBS’s ‘Sara’. Whilst this was seen to reflect a realistic situation, the negative consequences portrayed were not felt to be serious deterrents. It appeared to have generated social discussion among peers, but in a joking way, rather than seriously “making you think”.

“Aye, in real life the bird would be just as bad as him, ‘Aye nae bother, c’mon’.”
(Male, 20-24, C2D)

“Everyone can relate to it ’cos one of their friends has done that as well.”
“It becomes a joke. It’s not a serious message that comes across.”
“It was a knockback. It wasn’t a major message ’cos he got a knockback. You get that when you’re sober. It’s just a bit of a joke.”
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

Another HEBS commercial (Split Decision) about the risks of heroin was mentioned spontaneously in most groups in this context. It was seen to highlight life choices and the consequences of substance abuse and was felt to be a productive approach which could be adopted in alcohol education.

“It shows you two different kinds of lifestyles.”
“’Cos everybody says that they widnae take it, right. But there is a lot of people. I’ll guarantee you there’s a lot of people … somebody that’s turned into a right smack heid man because they just took that first [hit].”
(Male, 17-19, DE)

“The one for heroin or cocaine or whatever it is a really powerful one. The first time I saw that I thought, ‘That is…’ I think that probably has been a successful campaign, so if they done that with alcohol.”
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

There were very low levels of awareness and specific knowledge about recommended units of consumption, apart from the recommended unit limits for drinking and driving. A small minority was aware of unit recommendations in relation to pregnancy and to dieting. Young people in the study were more likely to judge strength and effect of different drinks by their own experiences and those of others.

“Most folk know how much they can handle and what it would take to get them drunk.”
(Male, 20-24, C2D)
Importantly, when the recommendations were outlined by the moderator, they were seen to contradict the main aims of drinking and a night out, namely to get intoxicated and to be unrestricted by outside rules.

“If you’re talking about two Bacardi Breezers in one night, there’s no way you would drink just that.”
“If somebody asks, ‘How much did you have to drink last night?’, you don’t go, ‘I had two units of alcohol’.”
“Nobody is interested [in units].”
“By the time you’ve drunk two, you say, ‘Oh well, I might as well have another couple’.”
(Female, 20-24, DE)

“How could you go out and drink three glasses of wine on a night out?”
“You go to a club and you don’t know how many you’re drinking.”
“You’d get far too hot and you’d have to drink water and that would just be a waste of time. You’ve got to have a wee drink.”
(Mixed, 20-24, BC1)

“And a pint’s got two units. So I am only allowed two pints a day.”
“Aye see how high you’re going to get like that - yeah!”
“Ah but if you save them up you can have a lot of pints on Friday.”
(Male, 17-19, DE)

Law and Law Enforcement

In the context of underage access to alcohol, it was felt that the legal restrictions had minimal impact. In addition, local interventions such as Proof of Age and curfews were seen to have been ineffective. For example, ID cards could be borrowed from others or even might not be asked for, and those drinking outside would know where to hide to avoid curfews. On the other hand some older respondents felt that more active enforcement could enhance risky consumption behaviours, such as hidden drinking in parks.

“If you try and put restrictions on them it will make them want to go out even more. You tell somebody not to do something and they’re going to want to do it.”
(Female, 20-24, DE)

Stories of police involvement ranged from taking intoxicated youngsters home, breaking up fights or arresting them, resulting in “a night in the cells”.

Police intervention was often seen as inconsistent and selective, provoking anger and frustration. For example, they might ‘turn a blind eye’ in some situations which respondents
felt were threatening and react ‘heavily’ in others, such as invoking ‘breach of the peace’ too readily, especially in less well off areas.

“I think they like to turn their back on things so they don’t have paperwork to do. My mum works in an off-licence, and if she has problems with folk she’ll phone the police. They have a direct button. But they won’t come for ages, and when they do they’re like, ‘Oh right is that it all finished then?’ They don’t want to write reports up. They don’t want to do their paperwork. You’ll see them driving up and down the street but they don’t do anything. They’ll see things but they just turn a blind eye to it.”

(Female, 17-19, C2D)

Young people did however acknowledge some of the difficulties faced by police, and recognised that alcohol can be linked to ‘trouble’ which was difficult to deal with. Among one group of working class males it was also recognised that the police taking intoxicated people into custody could be a positive intervention, ensuring their safety from fights or exposure until they sobered up.

“See how, but if you’re drunk and the police likely jail you - they could be doing you a favour because you don’t know what you would end up doing. If you’re in the cells and you’re in there at least – ’cos you hear about people getting drunk and dying ’cos of the cold and other things, whereas if you’re in the police cells...”

(Male, 17-19, DE)

In contrast to attitudes to the legal age limit, restrictions on drink driving were well known and generally respected.
8. WHAT FACTORS INFLUENCE YOUNG PEOPLE’S DRINKING?
THE WIDER ENVIRONMENT

Drinking was seen to be very much part of the social norm, portrayed on television, films and cartoons. Drunkenness was felt to be generally tolerated. The universal definition of a ‘good night out’ appeared to consider drunkenness as the principle objective. Access to alcohol was seen to be easy and outlets for alcohol pervasive.

“If you walk down a busy street there’s more places selling alcohol.”
“Right down where I stay there’s this pub a few metres along, pub, pub, kebab shop, pub, kebab shop.”
“It’s built for it.”
(Male, 17-19, DE)

Mass media advertising and promotions were reported to be widespread and appeared exciting and attractive. They clearly appealed to young people. Their prevalence tended to endorse young people in their behaviour.

Young people had the impression that only extreme consequences would be censured by society or have lasting consequences. These would include having a police record as a result of drink-related behaviour; unplanned teenage pregnancy; addiction; and inability to work or to maintain themselves financially because of drinking.
9. CONCLUSIONS AND ACTION POINTS

Summary and Conclusions

• Drinking alcohol and intoxication are pervasive behaviours among young people and are perceived as the norm.

• Drinking experiences follow a ‘natural’ progression over time, which is widely accepted and recognised, including the expectation to reduce consumption as other responsibilities develop.

• There is a strategic element in young people’s drinking:
  - Binge drinking is confined to one or two days a week, structured around other priorities in life, and daily drinking is rare.
  - A ‘good night out’ aims for intoxication and ‘buzz’, rather than intense drunkenness. Consumption is staged to achieve this throughout the night and across various venues. Value for money is also a key factor in this expensive process.

• Parallels are drawn with illicit drug taking behaviours, with alcohol tending to be seen as a ‘safer’ option on many levels.

• Influences supporting and encouraging use are powerful and widespread.
  - At a personal level, alcohol fits with young people’s needs and aspirations, it is the main and sometimes only leisure option, and products and marketing reflect these needs.
  - In the immediate environment, peer activity and social norms support drinking and intoxication, and active marketing and retailing strategies positively encourage and enable the process.
  - In the wider environment, perceived general population norms and marketing activity generate a sense of acceptability and encouragement.

• Influences that potentially moderate behaviour are much weaker:
  - At a personal level, a range of potential problems and risks can be identified by young people, but these are seen as transitory difficulties, and often irrelevant, and indeed can be part of the fun.
  - Young people adopt relatively sophisticated safety strategies, but these are designed to enable them to continue drinking rather than to reduce their intake.
  - In the immediate environment, potential moderating influences include parents, schools, mass media health promotion, and law enforcement, but these have a relatively weak impact. Main limitations on behaviour come from changes in
external circumstances, such as having children, more demanding jobs or greater demands on income.

- In the wider social environment, censure is seen to only relate to more extreme consequences of drinking, such as a police record, unplanned teen pregnancy and addiction.

- Personal safety strategies can easily fail, and tend to make young people feel safer than they are.

**Bounded Hedonism?**

Overall, young people’s drinking and drinking-related activities were for personal pleasure and mainly to get drunk. As such, their behaviour could be described as hedonistic. However, a range of interlocking limitations were acknowledged and a continuum can be identified between bounded and unbounded hedonism, the two extremes highlighted by Brain (2000).

On the one hand, this was a group who acknowledged few social limitations or external demands, especially on their valued leisure time. Most appeared to have considerable disposable income and were prepared to spend it on hedonistic activities, alcohol-related activities often being foremost. As well as disposable income, many had considerable segments of disposable time, with few demands and responsibilities.

On the other hand, young people recognised the need to be capable for day-time activities that were important to them, such as work, study and sports. Such influences were often the main limitation on behaviour and excessive drinking would be planned round about them. In the sample, virtually all respondents were in education or had work commitments or looked after young families. However, those with less demanding jobs were relatively more likely to report going to work still drunk or hungover and less capable.

Overall, the balance between hedonistic leisure and recognition of other social demands led to strategic drinking, with short periods of high consumption and intoxication limited by external demands and resulting periods of abstinence. From this, one could extrapolate that those with fewer external demands from society such as the unemployed or with few family commitments may tend to have less reason to limit their drinking.

**Areas for Action**

- At a personal level, challenge current behaviour, for example, through schools education and mass media (paying attention to appropriate tone, sources and routes of communication):
  - Encourage re-assessment of risks by raising awareness of the long term consequences of what are often seen as transitory problems.
  - Build on existing preservation strategies, encouraging recognition of vulnerability.
- Generate and promote attractive alternatives to excess consumption.
- Give insight into marketing activities, encouraging critical assessment.

- Within the intermediate environment, create safer situations and enhance existing moderating factors:
  - Control risk situations, such as underage access to alcohol and drinking venues, avoiding exacerbation of hidden drinking.
  - Facilitate protective strategies, for example, reducing the cost of soft drink alternatives and ensuring good quality non-alcohol products.
  - Control promotional activity, such as Happy Hours and two-for-one offers.
  - Educate and support parents and those working with young people in encouraging appropriate strategies.

- In the wider environment, explore and challenge marketing activities and social acceptance:
  - Monitor marketing activity in relation to young people, especially in the context of new and sophisticated routes of communication and product development.
  - Consider existing approaches to control of marketing in all its complexities, and whether voluntary codes and self-regulation is adequate.
  - Challenge public acceptance of drunkenness.
REFERENCES

Alcohol Concern (1997). Young People and Alcohol - Information Unit Factsheet. www.alcoholconcern.org.uk


Focus Group Topic Guide

- **Set the tone for the discussion**
  - Explain the purpose behind the research methodology.
  - Explain the purpose of the research and clarify the topics for discussion.
  - Confirm moderator role in this.
  - Offer reassurance about confidentiality.
  - Provide opportunity to ask questions.

- **General lifestyle - exploration of leisure-time activities for their age group locally:**
  - How they spend their time during the week / weekend.
    - who with, where they go, what do they do etc.
  - Description of a ‘typical night out’.
  - Place of alcohol and other ‘risk’ consumptions in activities.

- **Ideas about drinking alcohol and their age group:**
  - Early experiences and motives for starting. / how learn
  - Changes over time. / what drink, why drink, purpose, image etc
  - How much they drink, alcohol products and drinking patterns, locations./ typical
  - Intoxication from drinking and its relevance.
  - Who and how many people around them drink in the same way.
  - Access to alcohol.
  - What age start drinking spirits
  - Any rituals
  - Energy drinks- where do they fit in?

- **Perceptions of benefits / what’s good about drinking**
  - High / fun.
  - Social interaction.
  - Accessibility.
  - Less legal risks than other activities.

- **What’s bad about it? Perceptions of risk and negative consequences from drinking:**
  - Physical / health risk - short term, long term.
  - Enhancing other risks, eg. unplanned sex, accidents, fights etc.
  - Work / study implications.
  - Relationship implications.
  - Financial implications.

- **Personal strategies for limiting risk**
  - consumption
  - risks minimising
  - planning ahead (consumption, how to get home)

- **Perceptions of linked (potential risk) behaviours and place of alcohol:**
  - Smoking.
  - Drugs.
• Factors influencing alcohol moderation:
  - Peer pressure / acceptable behaviour.
  - Legal consequences – vandalism, fights etc.
  - Availability - point of sale policies and staff approach.
  - Parents / family / school.

• Perceived needs in relation to alcohol consumption (if any):
  - Understanding of why it might be seen as a ‘problem’.
  - Risk minimisation education, information.
  - Awareness of alcohol control / health promotion interventions and response.
  - Response to booklets