

# Young people and alcohol: meanings, practices and contexts

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## Contents

Introduction .....	4
Background .....	4
The Study .....	6
Design and methods .....	6
Sites and settings .....	7
Respondents .....	7
Topics addressed.....	8
Methods of data collection .....	8
Data analysis .....	9
Findings .....	9
Perceptions of the local areas in which young people lived.....	9
Professionals' perspectives .....	9
Young people's perspectives .....	10
Patterns of alcohol use .....	13
Professionals' perspectives.....	13
Young people's perspectives .....	14
Negative consequences of consuming alcohol.....	22
Professionals' perspectives.....	22
Young people's perspectives .....	23
Managing and limiting alcohol consumption.....	28
Professionals' perspectives.....	28
Young people's perspectives .....	30
Summary and implications.....	36
Summary .....	36
Implications.....	37
References .....	41

## Introduction

This report is one of a number of publications prepared for the DCSF funded project *Young people and alcohol: meanings, practices and contexts*, conducted between February, 2008 and February, 2009. The project consisted of two main elements – a set of three reviews and a fieldwork study. The reviews focused on the alcohol-related risks facing young people (Templeton, 2009), the reported effects of national and local programmes on problems arising from alcohol use by young people (Tyler, 2009), and the effectiveness of national policies to reduce alcohol-related harm among young people (Mistral, 2009). The fieldwork study sought to develop new understandings of the ways in which young people between the ages of 11 and 19, particularly young people at high risk for poor outcomes, understood the place of alcohol in their lives.

This report is divided into four main sections. We first summarise the reported patterns of alcohol consumption among young people, factors associated with young people's use of alcohol and emerging responses to such use. We then provide an outline of the steps involved in carrying out the study. Next, we report the key findings from the fieldwork and conclude with a series of potential implications regarding the reduction of alcohol use (and alcohol-related harms) among young people.

## Background

The use of alcohol among young people – particularly those aged under 18 years, and those aged 18-24 who drink in excess – is an ongoing concern for policy-makers, health professionals and the public, both because of the serious implications for young people's health of early onset drinking and the excessive use of alcohol, and because of the social implications, which may include alcohol-influenced anti-social and other risk-taking behaviours (DH, 2007; Newburn & Shiner, 2001).<sup>1</sup>

Overall, alcohol consumption among young people appears to have fallen in recent years. However, for those young people who do drink, the amount and frequency of consumption has increased. There are noticeable trends with regard to increasing amounts of alcohol consumed in single drinking 'sessions', increased consumption amongst younger young people, increases in unsupervised drinking in public places and also a rise in violent/criminal/anti-social behaviour associated with alcohol consumption (Templeton, 2009). There is mixed evidence as to whether boys or girls are drinking at higher levels (Templeton, 2009). However, whatever their gender, it appears that the earlier a young a person starts to drink alcohol, the more likely it is she or he will become alcohol dependent by 20 years of age (Foxcroft, 2003).

There is increasing evidence that certain groups of young people may be particularly vulnerable with regard to alcohol use. These include young people who truant or who are excluded from school (Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs; 2006); young women who regularly drink to intoxication (binge drink); young men (and on occasions young women) who drink to intoxication and become anti-social and/or violent (Social Exclusion Unit, 2005; de Visser & Smith, 2007; Wells, 2001).

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<sup>1</sup> See also: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/about-us/news/teen-drinking> Accessed February 2009.

Although concern has been expressed about the relatively hazardous patterns of alcohol consumption among young people in England compared to some Southern European countries (Bullock & Room, 2006), it appears that drinking patterns among young people across Europe are becoming more similar. This is said to be due, in part, to a move away from nationally based youth cultures to the increasing use of, and participation in the night-time economy of clubs and bars. In England, at least, this has been linked to urban regeneration and the development of sophisticated leisure economies (Griffin et al, 2007).

There appears to be a range of reasons and motivations that influence alcohol consumption among young people. Some young people appear to view the consumption of alcohol as central to a sense of themselves and to enjoying leisure time drinking with friends (Templeton, 2009). For some young people, alcohol use appears to be one important aspect of socialising and growing up, with drinking alcohol being constituted and managed as a potential source of pleasure (Szmigin et al, 2008).

A range of studies highlight that it is not only young people's knowledge and beliefs about alcohol that affects use, but also wider contextual influences, such as the nature and quality of parenting received, and ongoing personal and community relationships (Coleman & Carter, 2005).

Furthermore, young people's drinking varies with regard to context (Newburn & Shiner, 2001). Alcohol use is patterned with regard to, among other things, a young person's age, the settings in which alcohol is consumed, the social meanings which alcohol consumption carries, and with whom drinking takes place (Templeton, 2009).

In responding to alcohol use among young people, draft guidance on the consumption of alcohol by children and young people from the Chief Medical Officers of England, Wales and Northern Ireland states that an 'alcohol-free' childhood is the healthiest and best option (Donaldson, 2009). If they consume alcohol at all, children should not do so until the age of 15 years. And between 15-17 years of age, young people should only consume alcohol under the guidance of a parent (or carer) or in a supervised environment. However, the Guidance also notes that targeted support should be available to families and accessible and affordable local alternatives to the consumption of alcohol must be made available to young people.

However, given that alcohol use appears to be rather embedded among certain groups of young people, there is potential in considering a range of measures to reduce alcohol consumption which are responsive to young people's different lifestyles, backgrounds and circumstances (DH, 2007). Some of these measures may have a national focus and may include increasing the cost of alcohol or increasing the legal age at which alcohol can be purchased (Mistral, 2009). Others include the creation of safer local drinking environments, through changing and enforcing licensing regulations or through the re-design of bars and clubs to include more seating, lower noise levels and/or food. Yet other measures aim to provide support to those who wish to stop or reduce drinking and who respond to calls for more relevant forms of health education in schools (Newburn & Shiner, 2001; Tyler, 2009).

Although there is limited evidence of consistent and long-term effects of alcohol education in schools, there are signs that the quality of drug education which includes education about alcohol, has been improving (Ofsted, 2005). Moreover, the evidence base for promising prevention and education programmes, such as the Strengthening Families Program (initially developed in the USA)

is gaining ground (Foxcroft, 2003; Coombes et al 2009). This particular programme aims to enable young people and their parents to address alcohol use as part of a wider approach to strengthening family and social relationships.<sup>2</sup>

Increasing attention is also being given to protective factors and processes that may influence whether and in what ways young people experience alcohol-related problems. These protective factors can be understood as individual (related to self-esteem, for example, or self-efficacy), familial (such as caring parenting styles) and environmental (such as engagement with diversionary youth work activities) in character (Templeton, 2009). Four key types of protective processes have been identified, those that: reduce the exposure to, or impact of, risk; reduce 'chain reactions' to negative experience (for example, preventing alcohol misuse which consequently leads to addiction and criminal activity); promote achievement and self-esteem; and provide positive relationships and new experiences (McCarthy et al 2004). Programmes such as 'Positive Futures', for example, offer sports, arts and activity-based opportunities through which young people can develop a degree of resilience to alcohol-related risks they may encounter (Talbot & Crabbe, 2008).

## ***The Study***

The *Young People and Alcohol: Meanings, Practices and Contexts* study sought to build on a number of ways that young people's use of alcohol is understood. In particular, it aimed to develop new understandings of the ways in which young people between the ages of 11 and 19, particularly those at high risk for poor outcomes, understood the place of alcohol in their lives. We sought to examine how young people themselves viewed the use and misuse of alcohol and how alcohol use related to personal, social, familial and cultural factors. The following research questions guided the work that took place,

1. What do young people see as the place of alcohol in their lives (especially in relation to lifestyles, family relationships and friendships)?
2. What do young people report to be their patterns of alcohol use?
3. With regard to the impact on their lives and relationships, what do young people perceive to be the 'problematic' use of alcohol?
4. What implications might these findings have for minimising alcohol-related harm among young people?

## **Design and methods**

A flexible research design was used to collect qualitative information regarding the perceptions and patterns of young people's consumption of alcohol in three sites in England.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Parents' here includes all significant adult caregivers in the home.

## ***Sites and settings***

Data collection took place in three areas of contrasting economic and social deprivation between October, 2008 and January 2009. The sites selected were: an outer London borough (site 1), a seaside location in the North East of England (site 2), and a town in the South West of England with nearby rural communities (site 3).

Sites were chosen not only for their geographical location but also because they provided access to settings of low socio-economic status. Such areas of high deprivation have been identified as environments in which alcohol-related problems among young people can arise.<sup>3</sup> In order to ensure that there would be access to young people who used alcohol problematically, settings were selected where work was underway to address young people's health and wellbeing generally, and, more specifically, their use of alcohol.

In each of the three sites, interviews took place with young people across a range of settings. These included, youth centres, mobile youth work units (such as converted buses and trucks), alternative education facilities such as pupil referral units, and in specialist drug and alcohol services for young people. In two sites, specific attempts were made to interview young people in parks in which youth workers indicated that young people consumed alcohol.

## ***Respondents***

In each site, two to three services were identified through which access to young people was made. Contact was made with youth services (including outreach, detached and centre-based) as well as alternatives to mainstream education provision (such as PRUs). These different services provided either informal or more formal educational programmes or activities for young people excluded from mainstream education provision, and/or who were at risk of entering the criminal justice system, and/or which supported young people who misused alcohol or other drugs.

Across the three sites, a total of 82 young people were interviewed: sixty one young men (74%) and 21 young women (26%). Professional respondents noted that this proportion reflected in broad terms the gender of young people accessing youth services locally. The ethnic backgrounds of young people interviewed also reflected that of the local communities in which the study took place. Almost all young people identified as White British (80; 96%) with one Pakistani British and one Black African. Forty young people (49%) attended mainstream schools, 26 (32%) attended PRUs, 8 (10%) colleges of further education, two (2%) were employed and six (7%) were not in education, employment or training.

In each site we also interviewed four or five professionals (including youth workers, specialist alcohol and substance misuse workers and Teenage Pregnancy Coordinators who could provide contextual information about young people's use of alcohol in their local area.

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<sup>3</sup> DH (2007). *Safe. Sensible. Social. The Next Steps in the National Alcohol Strategy*. London, Department of Health.

## Topics addressed

Prior to each interview, potential respondents were informed of the nature of the study, its purpose and the sorts of questions that would be asked. Verbal consent was obtained from young people before the interview occurred. Permission was sought for the interviews to be audio-recorded. Participants were informed that they need not answer any question if they did not wish to and could withdraw from the interview at any point without providing an explanation.

Three broad themes guided the interviews:

- background contextual factors related to alcohol consumption – such as, what leads up to drinking taking place;
- contemporaneous ‘contextual’ factors related to alcohol consumption – such as, who people drink with, where they drink, perceptions of what counts as excessive drinking and the role this plays in patterns of socialising, whether particular individuals or groups of young people drink more than others and how decisions are made about when to stop drinking alcohol;
- consequences of consuming alcohol to excess – such as the effects respondents’ consider alcohol consumption has had on themselves and others, what they think and how they feel about it, whether and what statements are made about their future drinking.

At the beginning of each discussion, young people were first asked what they liked or disliked about their local area. They were then asked about their perceptions of alcohol use among the community in general and among young people more specifically. Following this introductory discussion, they were then invited to talk about alcohol, their patterns of drinking, what they liked and disliked about their own use of alcohol (including regrets related to alcohol use) and whether more could be done to minimise alcohol-related harm among young people.

Within these broad themes, young people could, if they wished, highlight issues of particular relevance to them. For example, the use of drugs other than alcohol was not an original initial area of enquiry, but was highlighted by a number of young people as being of relevance to them. The flexibility of the study design enabled members of the study team to draw out unprompted descriptions and explanations about factors associated with alcohol consumption.

## Methods of data collection

Young people were interviewed by means of guided discussions. A series of questions were memorised by those conducting the fieldwork to enable discussion to take place in a relatively informal way.

Interviews were held with individual young people, pairs of friends, small groups (of around three to five) and larger groups (up to nine young people). The type of interview (individual, paired, small or large group) employed was guided by the preferences of young people themselves and/or logistical factors such as available time and the space in which we could interview young people. Interviews lasted between 20 and 60 minutes.

Where consent was given, interviews were audio-recorded. However on two occasions young people did not provide consent – the reason given being that it made the interview too similar to

those that they had been involved in with the police. Where consent for audio-recording was not provided, young people agreed that written notes could instead be made of the interview.

At one site, professionals stated that interviews with them could not be audio-recorded – this being against the policy of their local authority employer. Consent was given for written notes to be made of interviews.

## **Data analysis**

Interviews were transcribed and notes of interviews written-up.

Data were analysed by means of successive approximation. Applying this method, members of the study team used the research questions to guide initial readings of the interview data. A series of preliminary themes were agreed between members of the team (such as, young people's access to alcohol, or occasions when alcohol was consumed). These themes were used to guide readings of the transcripts and written notes. Successive readings identified a range of issues that were related to each theme (such as from where alcohol was bought, who bought it and whether young people were asked for age identification). This enabled an approximate representation to be developed of the meanings and practices of young people's use of alcohol across themes and study sites.

## **Findings**

In this section we outline the themes and issues that arose from interviews with young people. However, in order to provide some contextual information to young people's accounts we also highlight a number of points raised by professional respondents. The findings cover four broad themes:

- Perceptions of the local areas in which young people live and socialise
- Patterns of alcohol use - including types of alcoholic drinks consumed, access to alcohol, enjoyment of alcohol, and use of alcohol and other drugs
- Perceived negative consequences of alcohol use, and
- Managing and limiting alcohol consumption

### ***Perceptions of the local areas in which young people lived***

#### **Professionals' perspectives**

Professionals interviewed indicated that the areas in which young people lived often contributed to young people's vulnerability in general and more specifically to alcohol use. Poverty was often cited as a contributory factor, as was a community culture of alcohol use generally and illicit drug use in particular. Young people were often reported to have had problems engaging with mainstream schooling. In one site, detached youth workers reported that knife crime was 'common' and gun use not exceptional.

Professionals often spoke about the challenging family backgrounds in which young people had grown up. For example, some families were reported to use alcohol and other drugs regularly – with some parents reported to have drug-related convictions. In addition, all professionals spoke about the difficulties that parents in the local communities experienced in providing care and guidance to

their children. In some families, this was related to domestic violence; in others, to single parenthood and poverty. One female worker highlighted the 'lack of respect' that was shown to her (compared to her male colleague) and to women more generally. She felt this to be one reason why some single mothers might have difficult relationships with their children.

## **Young people's perspectives**

Young people also noted the challenging local environment in which they lived. Although a few young people valued aspects of their local environment – such as having friends nearby, local shops and amenities – more often than not they highlighted aspects of their local area that they disliked. This included it being a 'rough' area, having houses or other buildings in states of disrepair or having been demolished, and witnessing and experiencing violence.

One young man, for example, while mentioning that he lived in 'quite a nice area', noted that his neighbourhood had been portrayed negatively in the media and that there was local violence associated with gangs or 'crews'.

*M A lot of people think it's not a nice place, it's a bit rough, but I wouldn't say it's really bad. Like, there are fires, fireworks in letterboxes, drinking, violence, but no stabbings. Have you heard of the [name] Crew, they start fights. They're about 12 to 25 [years old] some of them. We got a lot of stick from Channel 4 with that 'Location, location, location' as they said it was one of the worst places to live, a really rough area. But I don't think it's that bad. It's a bit rough, you got [names two places where he thinks it is rough] but you also got around here, it's quite a nice area. (Young man, 14, site 2).*

Having 'nothing to do' was a recurring theme in young people's accounts of their local area. Two young women indicated that, although there was a local youth club, the predominantly male users left them with little choice about where they could socialise together.

*W1 There's nothing to do around here at all.*

*W2 There's the youth club – but more lads go and that puts me off*

*W1 So the only thing is when this bus comes*

*W2 Yeah, or when the school's got a thing going on. But the park that used to be around here it's not no more, it got trashed, there was a shelter and they won't put another one up. (Two young women, 13/14, site 2).*

A perceived trend towards fewer and fewer places and areas in which to socialise safely was highlighted further by these same young women – who also noted an association between alcohol consumption and violence among young people from neighbouring localities.

*R What things should be around here?*

*W2 Anything really. Just anything. Like a park. And there used to be a fair that came, but that's not on anymore 'cos everyone used to get drunk and fight and everyone got into trouble. But they're not allowed to come anymore. There was fighting and stabbing.*

*R When was the last fair?*

W2 *About two year ago. They won't come any more 'cos they get threatened when people won't let them on the ride or anything.*

R *Was that people around here?*

W1 *No, like people coming from [names of neighbouring localities]. People outside of the area. But mostly [name of place] people. But the fair was still on in [name of place] but not up here. But they still have things going on there, like getting violent. (Two young women, 13/14, site 2).*

Many other young people also stated that there were few places to meet with friends – and even those which did exist could be too costly for them to access.

M2 *There's bowling and cinema and that's shit.*

M3 *That's all there is around here.*

M2 *Cinema is seven pound ten. My Dad's good if he gives me 30p. (Three young men, 13/14, site 1).*

A number of young people stated that, among other things, having nothing to do and 'boredom' contributed to the consumption of alcohol. As this young women noted,

F *Good things? I dunno – there aren't many good things really, nothing really happens. Well – the drink and stuff like that... when people have fights and things like that but – nothing, like there's no, like, things for kids to do round here and, with the drink, everyone just seems to have a drink on a Friday and that's it really. (Young woman, 16, site 3).*

A group of young people also perceived there to be an association between having 'nothing to do', alcohol use and smoking.

R *What's it like around here?*

M *It sucks.*

M *Shit.*

M *Quite boring.*

M *It's like after school there is nothing to do so that's why people drink and smoke and that.*

M *There so many things that we would like to do, such as football.*

M *And fishing.*

M *It's hard when there's not a lot to do, then drink gives you something to focus on.*

M *Yeah, something to do. (Group, 6 young men, 3 young women, 15/16, site 1).*

As the young men in the above group noted, opportunities to take part in sports might provide a focus in their lives other than alcohol use. Across the three study sites, a number of young men, in particular, stated that there were opportunities to play football or other team sports (such as rugby) either as a club activity or more informally. In one study site a girls' football team had been set up, and in another an Astroturf pitch meant that football could be played throughout much of the year. One young man noted that, with the youth clubs not being very good, it was important to 'make your own fun'.

*R* What's it like living around here?

*M* I don't know any different, but yeah it's good I like it.

*R* Are there things to do?

*M* Well, you make things to do, like, they don't say here's somewhere for you to go and here's something for you to do. There's nowt there. The youth clubs aren't very good. You just make your own fun.

*R* Like what?

*M* I do rugby three nights a week and I also do the cadets but I don't let on to my mates about that. (Young man, 16, site 2).

The sense that youth clubs could provide a greater range of activities appeared to be common among young people. Two young women noted that girls' as well as boys' preferences should be taken into account.

*F* Mountain biking, go-carting and quad biking for the boys and maybe dance classes and singing for the girls. Well, with the types of music we want to sing. So, we should have a say in how activities are run. (Two young women, 15, site 2).

A common theme noted by many young people was that alcohol – and sometimes drug use, was a more or less common practice in their local areas. As one young man commented,

*M* Life around here basically, revolves around alcohol and drugs basically (...) I don't know about young people but adults, yeah, you see them drinking [at the local square] and that, but you take no notice of it. I've seen them all my life and I've seen my mum drink on a Friday and Saturday evening – her mates come round or she goes out or whatever. (Young man, 16, site 3).

Another young man of 13 noted that while he was working on his morning paper round, it was not unusual for him to see adults purchasing and consuming alcohol.

*M* Older people are always drinking. I do my paper round at like six in the morning and the shop opens at half six and you see them like getting some carling cans or something and

*drinking them on the way back.... There's only about one or two (at that time) but later on in the day when I come back from here, there's a big group of them.*(Young man, 13, site 3).

During a conversation with a group of young people, one young woman mentioned that there were a number of influences on young people to drink. She not only noted that adults routinely drank, but also talked about a time when she had participated in a drinking competition arranged at a holiday camp.

*F We've been told that we're in the wrong for drinking but look at the people that we're meant to be looking up to. It's people that are putting the influence on us to drink (...) I went out you know to [name of holiday resort] and you know like when you have to get up on stage for a competition, and I had to go up, and there was this bird and she was right up herself. I had to down a pint quickly so I was like, there was me, and no one else jumped up and she had everything on the table, like beer, vodka, gin, and I had to down this drink and I won these tickets to a trip, like really expensive, and she liked looked at me and I stopped half-way through and I was gagging and it was going to come up and you're not allowed to sick it up. She was like 'go on, do it, do it' and I launched a glass at her and knocked the smirk off her face and I was well proud of myself and then I walked out and been sick.* (Group, six young men, three young women, 15/16, site 1).

## ***Patterns of alcohol use***

### **Professionals' perspectives**

Professionals noted that alcohol use was common among young people with whom they worked and that young people had relatively easy access to alcoholic drinks (as well as to drugs such as cannabis, ecstasy and amphetamines). However, professionals also highlighted that, on the whole, most young people used alcohol relatively unproblematically, at least in the shorter term. Alcohol was consumed, particularly, at weekends on Friday and Saturday nights rather than throughout the week. Although one professional expressed concern about the level of alcohol use among some young people, she recognised that,

*P Young people place quite a high priority on alcohol as part of their socialising. What they describe to us is that it makes them feel relaxed, they feel happier, they feel less stressed, it takes their worries away, they just have a better time. They enjoy it they really look forward to it (...)They're going to get their cider and the wine, and the vodka drinks and they all go off and get drunk and have a great time. They just love it.* (Site 2).

And a group of youth workers noted,

*P They [young people] want somewhere to go and to have a sense of 'togetherness'. They can get bored and want something to do and this has to be accessible to them*

*geographically and financially. Alcohol is cheap enough to help meet some of these needs.*  
(Site 1).

Only a minority of young people were thought by professional respondents to use alcohol problematically and in ways that might involve them with the police, lead to personal problems, to falling out with parents or result in violence. However, there was a level of concern among professionals regarding the age at which young people were using alcohol problematically. As one professional noted,

*P We know of 14 to 16 year olds who have issues with alcohol misuse. But we're also starting work with 11 year olds. It's becoming the norm, and that's awful for us to see as a project. By age 11 they have already started drinking and are part of a peer group who do so.*  
(Site 3).

## **Young people's perspectives**

When talking about their patterns of alcohol use, young people made a number of distinctions between the types and amounts of alcoholic drinks consumed, gaining access to alcohol, their enjoyment of alcohol with others, and their use of alcohol as well as other substances.

### **Types and amounts of alcoholic drinks consumed**

Across the three study sites, young people reported that they consumed similar types of alcoholic drinks. Among young women, these included vodka, cider, wines, perry and Malibu. Young men often referred to beer and various brands of lager.

*F I have vodka and Strongbow and things like that. If I had a choice it would be vodka, neat not mixed with anything.* (Young woman, , age 13).

*M3 I started with girls' drinks. Like Bacardi breezers and that.*

*M2 They taste nice ain't they, the taste is different.*

*R What are boy's drinks?*

*M3 Lager and that.*

*M2 Most girls drink Bacardi breezer and that. Like flavoured vodkas and that. Shots. You can buy them at an off licence.*

*R What made you change from those drinks to lager and Stella?*

*M3 You get used to it don't you?*

M2 *I got an older brother and that he drinks beers and that.*

M3 *If you forget to get it then you just drink what they got. You get used to it. (Three young men, 13/14, site 1).*

Some young people stated that they had drunk ‘amazing’ amounts of alcohol. A few young people, for example, reported that they might each drink a litre of vodka during a night out – with or without a range of mixers. A number of young men spoke about drinking 15 pints of beer as well as a bottle of wine each. Others spoke about sharing a few two-litre bottles of cider or a ‘crate or two of lager’. The older young people we spoke with tended to be those who indicated that they drank such quantities of alcohol. Other young people, such as some 13 and 14 years-olds we spoke with, stated that they might only drink a small amount, such as half a can of lager. A few young people stated that they did not currently consume alcohol at all, although had done so in the past.

Although young people often talked about the considerable amounts of alcohol they drank, they rarely viewed the actual amount consumed as problematic in and of itself. Rather, they spoke about other people’s problematic use – in particular those older people who were perceived to be ‘alchies’ or alcoholics. For example, after the following two young women had spoken about being involved in alcohol-related violence, as well as not enjoying having a hangover from consuming too much alcohol, they were asked about problematic drinking.

R *In your experience is drinking a problem among young people?*

W *Yeah, ‘cos if you drink when you’re young then you drink more and more when you’re older and you get like alcoholic don’t you?*

W2 *And you could die couldn’t you?*

W *You see people on the street, on the news, like they’ve killed people ‘cos they’re drunk. I think it’s terrible.*

R *Is there anyone you know that has gone to hospital?*

W2 *My brother has – he drinks too much. He drinks nearly every day.*

W *I know someone who has collapsed from drinking - they got on the floor and vomiting and moving around like that <shakes her body>.*

*(inaudible)*

R *Have you been concerned about yourselves ever about drinking too much?*

W *No, ‘cos I don’t drink only on special occasions.*

W2 *No. You think you drunk too much the day after. But when you’re drinking you’re just pouring it down and thinking ‘I’m alright, I’m alright’.*

## Access to alcoholic drinks

Young people themselves rarely reported any difficulties in accessing alcoholic drinks. Sometimes alcohol was purchased directly from a shop – more often than not from a local ‘corner’ shop rather than a supermarket. Purchasing alcohol from such a shop was made easier, young people reported, if a parent regularly bought alcohol or tobacco at that shop and so family members were known to the salesperson. A young person could simply say that the alcohol was for a parent or another older member of the family, such as a brother.

However, even when they were not known to the salesperson, some young people stated that they could find a way around the problem of having no age identification. As one young woman reported,

*F I got served when I was 12 once. Like [name of shop] – at my mate’s party like and all my brother’s mates was waiting to get a drink and they was telling me to go in there and they sent me in their ‘cos I had a dodgy haircut and I went in there and I put all this drink on the counter like four carrier bags and beer and vodka and that and I put it on the thing and the woman looked at me and she was like ‘You got any ID’ and I was like ‘I ain’t actually got any ID, none on me at the moment’ and she looked at her mate and her mate went ‘Well she’s hardly under the age is she’ and I went ‘Yes!’ (Young woman, 15, site 1).*

On other occasions, young people might ask an older relative, such as a brother, to purchase alcohol on their behalf. If an older relative was unavailable, then a passerby could be asked. Although this tactic was not always successful – as passersby sometimes refused – it was successful often enough for it to be a familiar method of gaining access to alcohol across the three study sites. One group of young men summarised the different ways they might gain access to alcohol.

*M3 I get served at the shop in [name of place].*

*M1 I can get served and I’m thirteen.*

*R Do they ask for ID?*

*M3 No ‘cos I know the person that works in there. I can go walking into a shop and get served.*

*R Do they serve anybody?*

*M3 No, they don’t serve anybody, they gotta know you.*

*M1 My mate is 17 but he don’t look 17 and he doesn’t get served but he goes into the shop to get fags and they say ‘is it for your mum’ and he says ‘yeah they’re for my mum’ and they serve him. His mum’s like, goes there a lot. He gets the same as his Mum smokes.*

*M3 At [name of shop] they ask you for ID. I got asked two weeks ago.*

*M2 If you can’t get served then just ask somebody.*

*M1 You get your fags and your beers and that and I ask someone who's out or I text my sister's boyfriend who's twenty and they get them for me and he just walks down. I don't need to get my hands dirty 'cos he does it all for me. (Three young men, 13/14/15, site 2).*

The cost of alcoholic drinks did not appear to be a major barrier to the purchase of alcohol. Many young people knew from where inexpensive alcoholic drinks could be bought and whether special offers were available. Some young people reported they and friends would contribute relatively small sums of money – such as a pound – towards the cost of drinks which they would then share among them.

### **Enjoying alcohol with others**

For those young people who drank alcohol, they too stated that the consumption of alcohol was, chiefly, associated with spending enjoyable times with friends. There was an association between when, where and what type of alcohol was drunk, how much was drunk and who they drank with.

Young people often stated that they had first 'tried' alcohol at home. For a few young people, alcohol was said to be routinely consumed at home. A small number of young people spoke about family members with alcohol- or other drug-related problems. More common, however, was that alcohol was first consumed on 'special' occasions, such as at a party for a birthday, Christmas or New Year.

*F I was about 13 at a New Year's Eve party and at first mum said 'NO', but then her friend said 'Oh, just let her have a little bit ' so I was allowed. (Young woman, 14, site 3).*

*F I was about 10 (laughs). It was at home, I was having family problems at home and people were bringing alcohol round and it was tempting because everyone else was drinking – so I thought I might as well try it. (Young woman, 14, site 3).*

*F In Year 8, it was vodka, Brandy and loads of other stuff at my mate's party. (Young woman, 13, site 3).*

'Special occasions' were often times when alcohol was drunk with the knowledge of a young person's parent, most usually a mother.

*M My mum drinks, like everyone in our family does, but not loads and loads regularly but just glasses of wine on occasions*

*R What sort of occasions?*

*M Like family get togethers, having a meal. Like everyone's drinking on New Year's Eve. Right. And my auntie's 50<sup>th</sup>, my cousins got me and my brother some vodka. I'd had some but I drank loads of coke and I felt sick so I didn't have any, but my brother got drunk, younger brother, but he looks older. When we were coming out of our auntie's house we were by the*

*golf club and [name of brother] was still drunk and playing computer games but really bad at it. And we were walking to the car and he was running around and falling over.*

*R What did your mum do then?*

*M She was like a bit off it herself. (Young man, 16, site 2)*

However, while some young people reported that a parent might sometimes allow them an alcoholic drink, other young people stated that their parents did not knowingly allow them to consume alcohol.

*R1 Do you ever drink?*

*M1 New Year and Christmas and on my birthday and that's about it. I have about two bottles. Of [name of alcopop]. Like orange, lemonade and stuff like.*

*R1 Is that something you're allowed to drink at home?*

*M1 My Mum buys it for my birthday presents.*

*M2 Not for me, my Mum is quite strict about that.*

*R1 So you drink alcohol for special occasions, is that the same for most of your friends?*

*M1 Some of them yes. But some drink all the time. (Two young men, 14, site 2)*

Although young people often stated that they first consumed alcohol in their home with parents, they often made a distinction between their first drink or taste of alcohol, and when they started consuming alcohol 'properly' with friends.

*R When did you first start drinking alcohol?*

*M1 I started, properly, when I was about 12 or 13, when I first started going out with my mates and getting pissed.*

*R Was that the first time you had alcohol?*

*M1 No, first time was when I was about 7.*

*M2 Same age for me. (Two young men, 15, site 1).*

While 'special occasions' might be times when some young people would consume alcohol with family members, weekends and particularly Friday and Saturday nights, were times when they would usually drink with friends.

*R How often would you drink?*

M2 *Friday and Saturday. I just started drinking, but sometimes on special occasions, but the last three weekends I started drinking Friday and Saturday.*

R *What made you start drinking?*

M2 *Just with my mates, hanging about, they were pissed, it's not very much otherwise. (Three young men, 13, 14, 15, site 1).*

Regardless of the occasion or point in time, drinking was reported by young people to be a particularly social activity. Drinking typically involved being with friends in locations such as parks, one's own or a friend's home. Some young people suggested that homes could be a safer and more enjoyable place to drink alcohol than in parks.

R *Where would you guys drink?*

M *I'd rather be in somebody's house.*

M2 *It's safer isn't it than a park?*

M *No just warmer .*

M2 *If you drink down the park it's just boring. Like at home it's more fun 'cos you can listen to music and that.*

R *You don't drink by yourselves then?*

<laughter>

M2 *No, no.*

M3 *With others. It'd be boring by yourself. Sitting there going, getting out your head. (Three young men, 13/14, site 1).*

R *Where do you tend to drink?*

M *With friends, but we don't drink on the streets we drink in the house. So we don't get pulled up and we're all safe. (Young man, 16, site 2).*

Alcohol consumption in parks depended on a number of factors, such as the size of the group of young people socialising, whether there were indoor spaces available to meet, and the time of year. One young man – echoing the views of other young people – noted that he had not drunk much recently as the *'weather was worse so you can't hang around outside.'*

However, some young people noted that they would drink 'anywhere', whether in a friend's home, a park at a pub or at *'any random place'*. What young people valued particularly were opportunities not only to alleviate boredom, but also to have a *'good laugh'*.

*M Cos there's nothing else to do just wandering around the streets and then go to a mate's house, it's boredom really – you get a few beers, sit down in the park, get a bag of weed, people do it to be sociable.*

*M It's a social thing.*

*M If we're just sitting there in the street with nothing to do then I'd rather be sitting there with a beer, and then another beer, and when you have a beer you tend to sit and talk more and have a conversation but it's when you don't drink and you're all sitting there and no-one's talking and, I don't know*

*M It's better when you all get drunk. (Group, 3 young women, 6 young men, 15/16, site 1).*

Most young people spoke of alcohol consumption as an integral part of their lives. Not only did they witness adults and other young people drinking, but consumption was also closely associated with their own patterns of socialising. Moreover, some young people indicated that without alcohol (or other drugs) to consume at weekends, this would result in Friday nights and Saturdays becoming much like the rest of the week – rather than a time to which they could look forward.

*R If you weren't getting drunk or stoned what would life be like.*

*M2 I dunno.*

*<laughter>*

*M1 That's just like saying what do you do on a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday isn't it? It's still the same thing. If you're gonna do that then you got nothing to do on a Friday. You do the same.*

*M2 On Friday, if there weren't nothing to do, I'd go out for about an hour and go back in and eat dinner and go to bed*

*R Would that be boring?*

*M3 Sleeping? Nah.*

*M2 Yeah <laughs> that'd be boring.*

*M3 It would be like a ghost town wouldn't it? (Three young men, 13/14, site 1).*

### **Use of alcohol and other drugs**

It was not uncommon for young people to talk about using drugs other than alcohol. Although the use of cannabis, in particular, was mentioned, some young people were firmly against the use of such drugs.

M1 *'I fucking hate it, I don't smoke weed ever. I drink, I don't smoke weed. It don't do anything for me.*

M2 *I do poppers. They're well good. <laughter>. (Three young men, 14/15, site 1).*

Some young people, though, (largely those who were in their late teens) mentioned that they had used recreational drugs such as cocaine, ecstasy or speed. Rather more common – especially among young men – was use of cannabis.

R *Where do you drink?*

M *Parties <laughter>.*

M *In the park, parties.*

M *In the pub, parties in people's houses if there is any.*

M *We drink with whoever goes out.*

M *But girls get drunk every night.*

M *Some of the girls do.*

R *The difference between boys and girls, could you say something about that?*

M *Boys smoke, girls drink.*

M *Smoke in the park. Weed, rollies, everything you can put into a Rizla.*

F *I like a fag but I don't smoke weed. (Group, three young women, six young men, 15/16, site 1).*

One or two young people indicated that it made economic sense to get 'stoned' rather than drunk – especially if they could add value to the cannabis they bought by making it into a 'joint' with tobacco and selling it on.

R *What would you do if you weren't going out drinking?*

M2 *Get stoned. I'd rather get stoned than drink. You feel more, like better.*

M3 *Like if you drink you just get pissed.*

M *I know someone who smokes weed every day. He says it's better.*

M2 *It is actually cheaper than drinking.*

M *Alcohol is cheaper.*

M2 *It's not, you can get eighth for ten pounds .*

M You can get a bottle of cider for 68p.

M2 And you have to buy about six of them to get drunk. And that's about 4 pounds when you can buy 10 pounds worth of weed and get stoned with one joint and save the rest and then get stoned again and make a joint and then sell it for a tenner again. (Three young men, 13/14, site 1).

The chief reason for smoking cannabis was the effect it was reported to have. A few young people stated that cannabis calmed them down, while alcohol could be associated with feelings of agitation or aggression. One young woman who smoked cannabis said, 'I just feel calmer if I've had a fag or a spliff'. She went on to say more about her use of cannabis,

W Cannabis is used widely. I know loads and loads of people who use it, starting from about 12 and then older. I know I'm stupid, I shouldn't have started using it, but I don't go over the top. Like everyone else they will buy loads of weed whereas me I just smoke like one a day or something like that, or if it's a Friday I smoke two – just to take the edge off the day or whatever. (Young woman, 16, site 3).

## ***Negative consequences of consuming alcohol***

### **Professionals' perspectives**

Although professional respondents generally noted that most young people used alcohol relatively unproblematically, they were also aware of more problematic use. Of particular concern were those young people who consumed alcohol daily. One professional who worked in a drug and alcohol service for young people suggested there were number of reasons for this, not least difficulties in being involved in sustained and sustaining relationships.

P You know you hear a lot in the media about binge drinking and that can be a problem. But there are other young people, and it tends to be the young people that are trying to cover up some other sort of problem that tend to start drinking during the week. So there's obviously an underlying issue that the young people are trying to mask (...) Often its relationships with parents that have broken down. And so you know, they feel unwanted and unloved I guess. There will be a lot of the young people we work with who have lots of other things going on, relationship wise. Maybe they're not doing very well at school. Maybe there's been a certain amount of, I would say, neglect by families that they're drinking to forget. Growing up, you know, fallen out with a best mate, 'No one loves me, I got no friends' that sort of thing. (Site 2).

Among a group of youth workers, there were particular concerns about problematic use of alcohol among some young women they worked with.

*P* Some young women get 'bladdered' every day (...) some young men we work with do drink, but they tend to keep themselves sober and tend to drink particularly on a Friday night in [name of local park]. We know some girls who drink on a Monday night and do so through the week. A typical night of drinking may be 2 little bottles of cider & two lines of cocaine. We got girls of 15 drinking in this way. (Site 1).

## **Young people's perspectives**

Among young people, the outcomes of consuming alcohol were most usually intended, as well as perceived positively – such as enjoying times socialising with friends. However, other consequences or outcomes, while not necessarily unanticipated, were occasionally viewed with regret. These included relatively minor occurrences such as hangovers, losing one's way home, misplacing a phone, and doing 'embarrassing things', like falling down in a park or vomiting in inappropriate places. More often than not, hangovers were generally viewed without a great deal of regret – most young people stated that they perhaps felt 'tired' the next day, but by early evening they might be ready for another alcoholic drink. Certain other outcomes, however, were viewed more seriously, such as having 'unsafe' sex, or witnessing or experiencing violence.

Accounts of drinking too much during an evening out were sometimes associated with difficulty getting home and, after arriving at home, with being unwell. As these two young men noted,

*M* I'd had about 5 litres of cider in about an hour and I couldn't walk, My eyes were out the back of me head, I couldn't see nowt. I got put in a taxi and took home. I was asleep for about three days, pretty much a black out. It's happened twice to me. The second time I couldn't sleep as I kept being sick. (Young male, 16, site 2).

Two young women also spoke about occasions when they, or their friends, had consumed too much alcohol.

*F1* Once we was out and two of our mates were so paralytic we had to call an ambulance because they couldn't be moved or anything and they had to have a pump in their stomach (...) They was about 13 (...) They had been drinking vodka, brandy and everything, anything they could get at they drank.

*F2* For me, it was at my cousin's party, it was like Christmas day and I stayed over and I was like sick all over her new bed. It was so embarrassing and it came out of my nose and everything. (Two young women, 13/14, site 3).

Although there were several descriptions of young people consuming too much alcohol, passing out, having to be helped home, vomiting and being 'hung over', many of these accounts were told with humour. This was more often the case among groups of young people and less often during interviews with a pair of friends or with individuals.

In the following group of young people, stories about being drunk, passing out and being helped home were interspersed with comments about sexual relations. While there appeared to be a degree of delight among the group when narrating these events, there were also moments of concern regarding whether an activity had been too risky. Among the following group a young woman expresses concern about the sexual activities of a male friend.

*R If you are, as you say, pissed out of your heads, how do you get home?*

*F I was the other weekend , yeah, and out of my face, and I was on the bus going home and I forgot to press the bell to get off at my stop and I went down the main road the stops are miles apart yeah and I had to get off and walk all the way through the park in the pitch black and all these people trying to talk to me and I took my shoes off. This road took me fifteen minutes to walk down but it took me an hour and a half.*

*F I went out for a meal and that, and had a few drinks at a meal, and mixing my drinks and then I was laying on the floor and then I was being sick and five people had to lift me and put me in the cab and I don't even remember them or nothing. Apparently I was talking to the cab driver but I don't remember nothing.*

*M I love it when you're pissed and when you're coming from {name of place} and you get on a bus, especially the [number of bus] you always see people and you don't know them but you talk to them 'cos you're both pissed.*

*<laughter>*

*M I see loads of people on that bus.*

*F I was out and I went, yeah, 'where am I' and 'where have I put my bag' and I realise that I put in the ashtray, dozy cunt, and I thought it might have gone and I looked down it was alright, I'd be putting fags out in my bag.*

*<laughter>*

*M I like it when you get a random girl and she don't know what the fuck's going on.*

*F No, I don't do that.*

*M I actually jumped on top of her and the next moment I was in the toilet.*

*F You might have had sex there.*

*M Thanks very much, just what I need something to come down.*

*F The next morning after a night I sometimes don't want to go out in case I've embarrassed myself.*

*M I want to do it again.*

*M Fucking right.*

*<laughter> (Group, 6 young men, 3 young women, 15/16, site 1).*

There were also reports of incidents with adults in authority – such as the police, Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs), and Community Safety Wardens (CSWs). Such meetings often resulted in little more than the young person having their drink poured onto the ground or into a drain. Such actions by the police, PCSOs or CSWs were often seen to be unnecessary or unfair. As the following group of young men explained,

*M3 If someone is in trouble with the police then you move around. So we go to different places.*

*M2 There's always community police. Community Support Officers.*

*M3 I hate them, they stop you for no reason.*

*R Who should they stop?*

*M3 Well, those one's who can't walk.*

*M They're too scared to stop them.*

*M2 They come over the park and they say like, 'Oh yes I remember when I was your age and having a drink' and we're like 'Why don't you let us have drink then?' (Three young men, 13/14, site 1).*

Some other young people stated that they too were unfairly targeted by the police. Assumed middle class people, it was suggested, did not constantly have to seek out new venues in which to consume alcohol.

*F1 Bobbies always come and find us – now they know where we go. So you have to make a new place to go.*

*F2 They [the police] don't go to places like posh areas, but people up there drink all the time, they all have big posh houses and lots of money and drink all the time – but the police don't go up there .*

*F1 Whereas we get blamed in this area as it's one of the hotspots. But it's others that do stuff not us. (Group, 5 young women, 1 young man, 15/16/17).*

On some occasions, however, there were reported to be more serious consequences than being prevented from drinking by uniformed adults. Among a small group of young men, for example, two respondents talked about their consumption of a range of recreational drugs, including alcohol.

*R Did that lead to things you regretted?*

M3 *Yeah, I was at my mate's house in [name of place] and we'd had a few drinks and I drank two, two litre bottles straight and then I threw up all over my bed and that. I couldn't keep it down. I stayed in bed the next day.*

M1 *I ended up in the police cells. I was doing something that was bad but I ain't saying that on tape like, I ain't saying that on tape.*

R *If I turn the tape off, can I take notes?*

The young man went onto explain how he had been caught by the police for stealing a car, a 'smart BMW', had spent the night in a police cell, and he was now awaiting an appearance in a magistrates' court.

Some young people, especially young men, noted that any regrets they felt were related both to consuming alcohol and having sex with young women. Although some young men stated that, by and large, they had sex 'with a condom', this was not always the case. As one young man remarked, 'bareback has to be done, doesn't it, sometimes?' Another young man told of celebrations following the publication of his and his friends' GCSE results.

M *When we found out our results, our GCSE results, we had a party at his house and we had been drinking all through the night and all day, so we'd had quite a lot. There was about 18 crates of Fosters, say about 10 of us there and then we drank all of them and then went back for more, bottles of vodka, two litres. And in the night we got lasses round and that and I fell asleep on the trampoline and then had sex with a lass, although I don't really remember anything about it. And then she found out she was pregnant.*

R *So what happened then?*

M *She had an abortion, I think.*

R *You think?*

M *No, actually I know she did because she hasn't had it and this was about 2 year ago. (Young man, 16, site 2).*

More common than regrets associated with sexual activity were those related to violence of one kind or another. Young people frequently spoke of violent incidents they had witnessed – fights in parks, on streets, and outside pubs and nightclubs. Witnessing violence or being involved in it were often causes for regret.

M *There's a nightclub in town they have a night for, like, 13-17 year-olds, it's just like a pub but they don't sell alcohol and stuff like that. And we went to that and I had about 2 litre of vodka before we went and we snuck vodka in and at the end of it, we started fighting with different lads from different areas and we got locked up. I regretted doing that. I wished I*

*didn't do that, but they didn't press charges. But they left me in for 23 hours. (Group, 16/17, site 2).*

Violence was most usually understood to be perpetrated by young men. Some young men, for example, were 'known' to be violent after consuming alcohol. However, a reputation such as this was generally not perceived positively. Young men who were violent were often perceived to have few friends.

*M We all mess about and stuff (...) We drink in the house, 'cos there are people about that we don't like and once they get a drink they walk around looking for fights. This guy has got the reputation of the hard man and he wants to keep it and he wants to prove it by walking around. It's him and there are people that follow him and that. He's going through a stage when no one likes him and they realise what he is and he's only got two or three friends (...) I think they're stupid 'cos they just get the police and the wardens down if they're walking around all night. But especially lads when they start drinking too much they just start fighting. (Young man, 16, site 3).*

A few young people stated they themselves had been victims of violence. Although young men were often reported to be perpetrators of violence, accounts of violence among young women were not uncommon. While discussing young people's alcohol use more generally, two young women stated that they themselves occasionally drank too much. Being able to 'forget about things' and 'letting yourself go' were said to be positive outcomes associated with alcohol consumption. However, these young women believed that alcohol 'might affect people in different ways' and described an encounter with a young woman they knew.

*W1 I'm not like [name of person]. She got aggressive.*

*W2 She hit her over the head with a bottle.*

*R2 Were you hurt? Did you need stitches?*

*W1 Yes. I'll show you [gets out mobile phone].*

*R2 Was this a friend of yours?*

*W1 She **was** a friend, she was my friend but she drank too much and this 50 year old was getting her it and he tried to perve her and she was giving him kisses for it.*

*<shows picture>*

*W1 It didn't hurt, like the pain was numbing it if you know what I mean.*

*R When did this happen?*

*W2 Last month.*

W1 *Last month yeah.*

R1 *How are you now?*

W1 *I'm alright now.*

R1 *It was quite a shock?*

W1 *Yeah, I didn't expect it. She got into a huge fight and picked up the bottle and hit me over the head with it. I weren't crying, she was crying more than I was, I never cried once.*

R2 *That violence, do you see that very often?*

W1 *Mostly, when they've had a drink they fight, had too much to drink.*

W2 *If you're like drunk and a girl is really drunk and she makes a move on your boyfriend or something and then you have a fight with that girl don't you? (Two young women, 13/14, site 2).*

## ***Managing and limiting alcohol consumption***

### **Professionals' perspectives**

All the professionals we spoke with were concerned about young people's use of alcohol and the effects it had on them. They were also involved in a range of services to support young people. Some services were directly focused on minimising alcohol- and drug-related harms – such as making counselling available at a drug and alcohol service. Other services sought, particularly, to divert young people at risk of criminal activity – such as through a diversionary programme in which converted buses provided temporary activity centres and drop-ins for young people on particular estates. Yet other services provided more generic youth services – such as centre-based music, sporting and personal development activities. And others had a more formal educational focus – such as the provision made through alternative education services such as pupil referral units.

One service, for example, ran a 'safe alcohol programme' which sought to address the physical and mental effects of alcohol consumption, personal safety, how much money could be saved by reducing drinking and the positive alternative activities in which young people could be engaged. However, as one respondent noted, finding alternative activities in the borough was difficult when there was little in the way of inexpensive provision,

*P There is little if anything provided by the borough which does not cost money and actually if you have got a pound you might as well put that with your mate to get a bottle of cheap cider rather than go ice skating. (Site 3)*

A number of professionals noted that young people were not allowed to use the services available to them if the young people were perceived to be 'under the influence' of alcohol or other drugs. On the one hand, this was perceived to minimise the damage that young people could cause to a youth

centre or mobile drop-in. On the other hand, it also meant that young people may start to get 'irritated' if a service ran much past 6pm on a Friday night as they would want to consume alcohol with their friends in another location.

There were two recurring themes raised by professional regarding assisting young people to reduce or limit their use of alcohol. The first, related to putting in place programmes or activities that encouraged reductions in alcohol use or focused on minimising alcohol-related harm rather than preventing alcohol consumption completely. The latter was seen to be unrealistic given the central place of alcohol among young people and adults.

The second, related to a concern to develop, as far as possible, a particular sort of relationship with young people. Among other things, this involved being available to young people at times and places that were convenient to them. It was also characterised by listening to young people's concerns and understanding the factors that helped and hindered them. Professionals then highlighted the importance of building on young people's interests and strengths – particularly with regard to engaging them in activities that diverted them from using alcohol. As the following youth work professional noted,

*P It's about engaging young people and asking them what they would rather do. What kind of activities and what they want in their area as an alternative to drinking alcohol. So it's maybe about generating ideas from them getting them thinking about, 'Why do I drink? What would I rather do than drink? What would give me similar kind of satisfaction levels?' And I think that's key but obviously you know, we can't just give children, young people everything they want. But I think we do need to be led by the young people, by the ideas they have, definitely. (Site 2).*

Professionals, though, recognised there were limitations to what they could accomplish with young people – although some suggested that perhaps more could be achieved with the involvement of parents. Most professionals recognised the challenges that parents encountered in bringing up their children, especially given the low level of resources with which to do so. As one youth worker commented,

*P But I think definitely the parenting skills of parents of these young people are very limited at times. And the parents frequently say, 'I don't know what to do with him, I don't know what to do with her.' It's the responsibility of parents though (...) They may be the one with the problem and not the young person. (Site 1).*

In another site, professionals also highlighted the challenges which young mothers, in particular, faced, perhaps as a result of the gender-based values with which some young people operated. As two detached youth workers noted, these values had an impact on the way that young people, especially young men, might relate to her and her male co-worker.

*P1 What I've found around here is a lot of the parents are young, they're all young, and the majority are single mothers. And they have a few kids and they're having trouble*

*controlling them. And it's almost like a lack of energy. And these young lads are running rings around their mother. And I've noticed through my work a lot of them don't have respect for women. Some of our young people have automatically got respect for [name of male co-worker] and these tend to be, you can't say with all of them, but like single parent families. And automatically they speak to me like crap initially, until you get that relationship. And I think some of that is to do with the fact, my sex really.*

*P2 What I've found as well because of that you'll often find there has been a break down with the parents, and they're divorced and split up and it's like I say sometimes the mums, especially are trying to control them and I think it's easier to just say 'Right, I've had enough of you. Go on. Get out. Here's some money', you know 'Go'. And I've come across a lot of parents that think it's much easier to do that, the short term fix with them.*

*P1 Well what I've noticed is like, say, I've told them not to do something, they'll say 'Well I'll go and ask [name of male co-worker].' We're almost like the Mum and Dad where like [name of male co-worker] is in charge, that they can override what I say rather than seeing us as a team. It's very much like a hierarchy with them. (Site 2).*

In this same site, a parenting programme had recently been started, the aim of which was to engage parents in identifying new ways to communicate with and relate to their children.

*P The top 30 young people most at risk of entering the criminal justice system are identified through multi agency identification system (...) The workers will liaise with the school, ensuring that their attendance is up to date, their behaviour at school is acceptable and also liaise with the parents and offer parenting interventions for parents. But the parents have to self-identify that they have this need. So it's kind of sold to the parents, if they're not coping with their children's behaviour than the parenting course will help with that. Rather than target the parents and say, 'Well, you're not a very good parent', it is sold to them in a way that it will help and support them. (Site 2).*

## **Young people's perspectives**

Young people spoke about the factors that influenced their consumption of alcohol and also highlighted that they recurrently and routinely moderated their drinking. There were a number of factors that influenced whether young people consumed alcohol at all, or the extent to which they did so. For example, if drunk at all, alcohol was consumed at particular times, with particular people and in particular locations.

It was unusual for young people not to consume alcohol at all. Indeed, a few young people indicated that a life without alcohol would be undesirable. Some respondents suggested if there were no alcohol around, this might result in other potentially risky practices related to other recreational drugs or to sexual activity.

*R What would you do if there was no alcohol around?*

*M Smoke more weed.*

*F1 If there was no alcohol and no drugs then everyone would end up killing themselves because they were so bored.*

*F2 Everyone would end up pregnant 'cos that's what they would do instead. (Group, 6 young men, 3 young women, 15/16, site 1).*

*M2 I used to drink all the time but I haven't drunk for a couple of months now.*

*R Why's that?*

*M2 I buy drugs instead. (Three young men, 13/14, site 1).*

More usually, however, young people pointed to a number of other factors which moderated their consumption of alcohol. These included the times or occasions when alcohol was consumed, being engaged with services (such as school or college), unwanted physical consequences of alcohol consumption and the influences of friends and family members.

As noted earlier, there were particular occasions – such as parties – where alcohol might be more readily consumed than at other times. There were also days of the week, especially Friday and Saturday nights when alcohol was enjoyed. As the following young people noted, factors associated with not consuming alcohol during the week, related not only to looking forward to having an enjoyable time at the weekend, but also to having other things to do prior to that.

*M1 But I hardly ever drink only if there is a party. I'd only drink on a Friday, sometimes on a Saturday but not during the week.*

*R Why not during the week?*

*M1 School.*

*M2 It's like the week builds up to it and builds up to it. (Group, 6 young men, 3 young women, 15/16, site 1).*

Having 'things to do' was often reported to be associated with limiting use of alcohol. A few young people stated that when there was some provision made for them locally – such as the mobile truck or bus that visited their estate – this had helped them to stop drinking on the streets.

*F I used to drink on the streets. But then when the bus started coming round and that I started going on more and doing loads of stuff, getting involved. Now I just want to get involved and make other kids get involved in other things and not be drinking on the streets all the time. (Young women, 16, site 2).*

Some other young people also associated limiting their use of alcohol with other things that they wanted to do. For boys in particular, this included being involved in sports, such as football or rugby.

*R You don't drink for a particular reason?*

*M2 He can't handle it*

*<laughter>*

*M1 Cos of the football, I play football. (Two young men, 15, site 1).*

One young man stated that he used to drink regularly at weekends but had since ceased doing so. This was, in part, said to be due to enjoying practicing and playing darts with friends and the influence of his mother. Consuming alcohol, he felt, constrained his ability to play and negatively affected his relationship with his mother.

*M I used to drink a lot but I stopped drinking now. I look forward to my darts, I play about four hours a day, and I don't want to fall out with my Mum. (Young man, 18, site 3).*

Having enjoyable things to do was a fairly central theme which influenced young people's accounts of activities in which they would engage. Alcohol use itself could become associated with boredom. Among a group of young people who used to consume alcohol on a daily basis, for example, their reduction in alcohol consumption was particularly associated with boredom.

*R So what has that changed then? Why don't you drink every day now?*

*M2 Cos you get bored of it.*

*M1 It's a waste of money. Every night's just the same.*

*M2 You have a drink and you get used to being drunk so you want to try something new.*

*M1 After the Friday and the Saturday its finished and the Sunday, you just think, 'I won't drink now 'til the Friday' and you look forward to the Friday to get something to drink, to have a good time. (Two young men, 16/17, site 2).*

Among another group of young people, the amount of alcohol consumed was associated with a sense of fun and mucking about. Drinking too much alcohol might affect perceptions of relationships and lead to inappropriate behaviour, including violence.

*M3 My friends don't drink too much*

*M1 Like you get drunk but you don't drink too much*

*M3 You don't get stupid. There's no point is there. After you're smashed you're smashed. That's when it stops being fun.*

R *What happens when you're smashed?*

M2 *You don't really know what's going on. Like start getting into fights and you think you're mucking about but people take you like serious.*

M3 *You don't realise what you're doing do you?*

M2 *Yeah. Basically. And that's how you get into fights.*

M1 *When you're drunk you're wacky and fun, but when you're smashed, you're not.*

(Three young men, 13/14, site 1),

However, some young people indicated that while certain activities might assist young people to moderate their consumption of alcohol, this did not necessarily hold true in all situations. A group of young men complained about having little to do in their local area. They suggested a number of activities that might be of interest to them, but also joked that these new activities would not necessarily prevent alcohol use together.

M1 *My friends just get bored 'cos there's ain't nowhere to go so they drink and they're all out drinking.*

M2 *The conversation's boring if you don't drink.*

M3 *And they find someone's house to go to.*

R *You say about getting bored.*

M1 *There's nothing to do and you got no money .*

R *If you had more money would you spend it on different things?*

M1 *Yes, just chip in.*

M2 *Go anywhere.*

M3 *Round the girlfriend's house.*

M2 *I'd go with my cousin and with his caravan by the [name of seaside resort] and go on the slot machines, you can win £50 on those you put in a fiver.*

R *So you would go somewhere else and what would you do?*

M2 *Drink.*

<laughter> (Three young men, 13/14/15, site 1)

Although there were general contextual factors that were associated with minimising, if not ceasing, the use of alcohol – such as having things to do and places to go – there were also more personal

issues that were reported to influence alcohol consumption. Two young men, for example, spoke about immediate and longer term factors which influenced them – some of these related to costs, others to the effects of alcohol on their own bodies or those of a relative.

*R2 Why don't you drink more alcohol, as you say your friends' do?*

*M1 Cos of what it does to you, your liver and your kidneys. And I don't want to become an alcoholic and I don't like drinking*

*M2 It's the money for me and the way it affects my life. Like my uncle and his liver. (Two young men, 14, site 2)*

The following three young women also made reference to the injuries associated with alcohol use. They also highlighted that there were consequences of being associated with friends who consumed alcohol regularly and who had few, if any, qualifications.

*F2 We don't drink that much now 'cos it's probably because of people we know who have been injured by alcohol and know people who have died from smoking – and we see things differently.*

*F1 I just hate being sick.*

*F3 I used to hang around with people older than me and they have done what the people are doing now (...) so I've seen them do it and they've ended up no education, no nothing to their name (...) so I just don't see the point in doing it. (Three young women, 14, site 3).*

Young people often talked about members of their family. Sometimes older family members were reported to an embarrassment to their children due to the effects of alcohol on the parents' behaviour. Young people were concerned, too, about the harmful effects that alcohol had on the health of parent or close relative. However, a few young people also reported that their parents expressed concern about their children's use of alcohol. Some young people were responsive to parental requests or requirements to limit or cease drinking alcohol, although this was not always the case. One young woman stated that she completely ignored requests from her mother that she cut down the amount of alcohol she drank. *'It made no difference. I just carried on and was drinking most days on the streets, me.'* Still, family members' views about, and experiences of, alcohol did matter to many young people.

One young man highlighted the influence of his mother on his decisions not to consume alcohol at all.

*M I had a pint of shandy and then a whole bottle of wine. I got up early the next day and woke up really dehydrated, went to the toilet, had a drink and then back to bed. I felt fine, just a bit tired.*

R *But you've never drunk again. Why not?*

M *My mum, she's, if she ever found out, if she did find out, I did tell her and I felt a bit guilty and I'd feel a bit guilty if I went and did it behind her back and I guess that's why.*

R *How did she react when you told her?*

M *She was understanding really. She wasn't angry but just glad that I owned up. She's alright about me being friends with [name] but she wouldn't let me go around his house. I don't want to drink now, maybe later, but I'd feel really guilty if my mum found out, she'd be upset. (Young man, 14, site 2).*

Another young man talked about discussions he had about alcohol with two women to whom he felt close. He had talked about alcohol use with his parents – his mother in particular – who had discussed some of the negative aspects of alcohol use, although had not prevented him from drinking alcohol at all. His girlfriend has also shared her concern about the young man's consumption of alcohol, particularly its association with violence.

R *Do mum or dad know that you drink?*

M *Yeah.*

R *Are they ok about that?*

M *Well, when they tell me not to I don't, I don't do it. They're ok with it, my mum always says 'Don't demonise drink 'cos if you do then you'll go and do it more often' So she makes it sound like it's ok and I can say that 'No, I don't want it now I'll have it later' sort of thing.*

R *Why does she sometimes say not to drink to you?*

M *Cos, I'm so young and they don't want me to wreck my body before it's fully grown. She knows how much I drink so maybe she thinks that I sometimes drink too much. Or maybe she thinks that I drink alright and she wants me to give it a rest. I don't know.*

(...)

M *I'm in a relationship and I have been for about a year and I don't go around. I drink and don't go around after someone else and she [girlfriend] is the same but she's usually drinking with me. But I'm stopping drinking now 'cos of her 'cos she doesn't like it*

R *Why doesn't she like it?*

M *Well, she doesn't like drinking anyway as she doesn't like the taste of anything and then she say that she lives up in [name of place] and she's seen people start fighting and stuff*

*and she doesn't want me to get into those sorts of situations. So, I'm stopping now.* (Young man, 16, site 2).

## Summary and implications

### *Summary*

Between October, 2008 and January, 2009 we spoke with 82 young people about their patterns of alcohol use. The majority of these respondents were male (74%), aged 11-19, of British White ethnic descent, and lived in three areas of socio-economic deprivation. Contextual information about each site was provided through a small number of interviews with professionals who worked with young people in each site.

Overall, the consumption of alcohol had an important and often central place in the lives of young people interviewed. In particular, its use was frequently integral to socialising and was associated with finding 'things to do' with friends. Alcohol use helped to transform boring periods of time into enjoyable occasions. Respondents noted that, as alcohol was consumed routinely by adults, its use by young people was not necessarily seen as something out of the ordinary.

Young people indicated that they rarely had problems gaining access to alcohol. If they themselves were unable to purchase it, then an older relative or passerby outside a shop could be asked to acquire it on their behalf. Alcohol was generally inexpensive enough for young people to purchase, either as individuals or by pooling resources among friends.

The types of alcoholic drinks consumed differed somewhat according to age and gender – with sweeter drinks being said to be preferred by young women and younger males. The amount of alcohol that some young people consumed was, in their own words, 'amazing'. That said, there were a number of young people who did not consume alcohol at all, or did so moderately. A small number of those young people stated that they preferred other drugs, such as cannabis, to alcohol. A few young people used recreational drugs in addition to consuming alcohol.

Young people reported that they had often first consumed alcohol at special family occasions, including Christmas, New Year and birthdays. Their current use of alcohol, however, mostly took place at weekends, particularly Friday and Saturday evenings. Such use was said to differentiate weekends from more routine weekdays.

While some young people spoke about drinking on the streets, in parks and other public places, on the whole, young people appeared to prefer to drink in their own or friends' homes. Although this may, in part, be related to the time of year at which the study was conducted, it was also reported to be safer to drink in homes rather than public places.

Alcohol consumption was related to a number of negative consequences. Some of these were perceived to be less serious than others. Encounters with the police or PCSOs, losing one's way home, vomiting in inappropriate places, hangovers and not remembering much about an evening in which alcohol was consumed were often spoken about humorously – especially when accounts of these incidents were provided during group interviews. Violent or unwanted sexual incidents were

talked about more seriously. Both young men and young women reported that they had witnessed or been involved in violent incidents that were related to alcohol – some of which resulted in hospital admissions. With regard to sexual incidents, although a few young men reported these with a degree of bluster, some young women expressed concern about the association of unwanted sexual practices which occurred in association with alcohol consumption.

Although reports of alcohol use were commonplace among the young people interviewed, these accounts also highlighted concomitant practices associated with managing and limiting consumption. For example, reasons for drinking at weekends were provided alongside reasons for not drinking during the week. Friday nights provided an opportunity to enjoy time with friends in a way that attendance at school or college during the week did not. Although alcohol could be consumed with friends, much less was said to be consumed when it might interfere with other activities perceived to be important – such as playing football or other sports. Whether alcohol was consumed as well as the extent to which it might be depended, to a degree, on the presence of diversionary activities with which young people could engage and enjoy with friends.

Some young people noted that there were other factors that influenced them not to consume as much alcohol as they otherwise might. For a very few, this was because they took other drugs, such as smoking cannabis. A few others stated that they did not like the taste of alcohol. Yet others were mindful about the potential longer term effects of alcohol. These included the impact of too great a use of alcohol on educational achievements. Moreover, a few young people expressed concerns about the development of alcohol-related illness which might affect friends, relatives or themselves personally.

Although many young people spoke about alcohol being consumed by family members, very few reported that they spoke to their parents about drinking. Some young people drank alcohol in moderation with parents. Although one or two young people mentioned that their parents had been ineffective in preventing their excessive drinking, three young men, however, stated they had limited their use of alcohol so as not to upset their mothers. Two of these young men indicated that they had spoken with their mothers about the harms caused by alcohol and were under the impression that their mothers disapproved of their use of it.

Professionals' accounts of young people's alcohol use often highlighted similar themes to those raised by young people themselves. In particular, they noted that feeling bored, having little or nothing to do, living among communities where alcoholic drinks (and sometimes other drugs) were customarily consumed were leading factors associated with alcohol use among young people. Notwithstanding this, professionals, more often than young people, highlighted that parents often appeared minimally involved in addressing their children's alcohol use. A number of professionals highlighted that many parents in the study sites faced particular socio-economic challenges. Moreover, and as two professionals noted, the lack of respect afforded women in the local communities – and young mothers in particular – might make it harder for them to engage authoritatively with their children regarding their consumption of alcohol.

## ***Implications***

The range of themes, issues and concerns raised by respondents regarding young people's use of alcohol has a number of potential implications.

Recent draft guidance from the CMO on the consumption of alcohol by children and young people, for example, suggests that childhood should be alcohol-free (Donaldson, 2009). Moreover, the guidance states that young people between the ages of 15 and 17 years should only consume alcohol under the direction of a parent or carer or in a supervised environment. While this could be considered an ideal ultimate goal, it may prove more practical, both strategically and operationally, to adopt a more flexible harm minimisation approach among certain constituencies of young people.

As noted earlier, alcohol use is not only embedded among adults in certain local communities, but also forms an integral part of much of young people's informal leisure cultures. This is not to say that little can be done to engage young people in programmes or activities to reduce alcohol consumption, but it may be of value to build on young people's own ways of managing and limiting alcohol consumption. Such work, for example, could seek to enhance those protective factors and processes that operate at the community, individual and familial levels.

With regard to working at the community level, it is hard to determine from a study such as this whether there would be any significant effect of restricting further young people's access to alcohol. In general, there is strong evidence that increasing tax on alcohol, if passed through to retail prices, can reduce alcohol consumption among young people – although the evidence on the effects of increasing the minimum legal age for purchase of alcohol appears mixed (Mistral, 2009). It is not possible from this study to gauge what effects might arise from further restricting young people's access to alcohol in the sites we visited. However, it is perhaps useful to note that a number of those young people we spoke with showed a degree of creativity with regard to finding sufficient money to pay for alcohol and, if under age, finding ways to purchase it.

In relation to education, most young people we spoke with were engaged with schools, colleges or alternative educational provision that appeared to contribute to managing and limiting alcohol use. While no young people mentioned that education about alcohol had directly affected their consumption of it, they did indicate that attending formal educational provision contributed to decisions about when they would drink. Given evidence about the contribution of education to later health and wellbeing (Feinstein et al, 2008), there would appear to be value in continuing to support the capacity of schools to contribute to children's and young people's social, emotional and academic development – as is the ambition of *Healthy Lives, Brighter Futures* (DH/DCSF, 2009). This may be particularly important with regard to those young people at risk of poor outcomes with regard to their social and personal health and wellbeing.

There was clear evidence from this study to indicate there to be particular value in continuing with, and further developing, informal educational opportunities for young people. The young people we spoke with stated they limited their use of alcohol when they had opportunities to engage in activities with friends, and where the effects of alcohol might mitigate their proficiency in, and enjoyment of, these activities. Moreover, the CMO guidance recommends that young people should be provided with accessible and affordable alternatives to alcohol consumption in *all* localities.

Such alternatives could take a number of forms – from those that provide general alternatives to alcohol consumption, to those that are more focused on alcohol use, to those that engage young people and other family member.

Ofsted (2009) has noted that the best youth services meet a broad range of young people's needs. Successful engagement of young people 'whose attitudes and behaviours are more challenging than the majority, (Ofsted, 2007. p.3) requires 'effective grassroots (...) involvement of young people' themselves (as well as, Ofsted highlights, a 'sufficiency of resources') (Ofsted, 2007. p.7-8). General youth work programmes that are responsive to young people's concerns appear to go some way in assisting them to identify and limit potentially harmful and risky behaviours related to alcohol consumption (Ofsted, 2007).

Although information-based interventions focused on alcohol appear unsuccessful in reducing alcohol-related harm – they can increase young people's knowledge about the harmful effects of alcohol (Mistral, 2009). Moreover, there may be value in building on what young people know, by engaging them in informal educational activities that are responsive and relevant to their own alcohol-related needs, interests and concerns. For example, it might be useful to explore with young people how they distinguish and manage the boundaries between enjoying alcohol, or finding themselves in embarrassing or harmful situations.

It may also be useful to explore further with young people how parents help or hinder them to manage and limit their consumption of alcohol. A number of recent UK studies, for example, have begun to explore the links between parenting and young people's drinking behaviour. Hightet (2005), gathered information from young people aged 13 to 15 years about their alcohol and cannabis use, and their parents' actual and anticipated responses to this. They found that when parents talked openly about such use and negotiated boundaries around drinking, young people were more likely to develop and sustain a responsible approach to alcohol. A later study by Cox and colleagues (2006) included interviews with mothers and fathers from a range of family types to explore strategies and tactics used in communicating, monitoring and supervising alcohol use within the family. Findings highlighted the value of open communication about alcohol, together with negotiation among family members to introduce children and young people to alcohol in a safe and supervised way. In addition, findings suggested that parents felt they needed more guidance to support sensible drinking for young people. In addition, there appears to be some promise in providing alcohol-related primary prevention programmes for children and families, especially if they form part of a wider approach that brings together families, schools and other community-based organisations (Tyler, 2008).

Few young people we spoke with appeared to have engaged in open communication with their parents about alcohol. Some parents had asked their children to stop or reduce their levels of alcohol consumption, but not always with much success. There were also a few instances where young men had stopped or reduced their levels of drinking so as not to harm the relationship with their mother. In one study site, however, professionals were engaged in family-oriented programmes such as the *Strengthening Families* Programme and it was felt to be important to address what was seen as lack of respect for women (and mothers) in general and young single mothers in particular.

This might require youth and other community-based services to identify how families might be better involved in programmes that aim to influence young people. In particular, a range of young people friendly and family-oriented services – from structured, to semi-formal to relatively informal – can perform different functions and be perceived to be of value (Ghate & Hazel, 2002).

However, the development of such services means that we need to understand more fully how parents in challenging socio-economic influence young people's use – and non-use – of alcohol. In so doing, we might then be able to know how best to build, not only young people's resilience to alcohol-related risks, but also that of their families.

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