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## Rachel Locke and Gary Jones

### Tackling underage drinking: reflections on one local authority's response

Alcohol misuse among young people is a growing cause of concern to health care professionals, teachers and policy makers because of the associated health risks and anti-social behaviour. There are long term benefits of delaying the start in drinking in young people: for example, they are less likely to engage in health risk behaviours (Grunbaum et al, 2004) and to later become dependent on alcohol (Grant et al, 2001). Recent government policy charges local communities with tackling alcohol related disorder (Department of Health, 2011). This article evaluates an innovative local authority project intended to reduce underage drinking that has been running for over two years.

The local project aims to divert young people (8-14 years) from drinking, educating children early about the effects of their longer term drinking habits by providing health advice and

raising awareness of the effects of alcohol. Putting into place some diversionary activities as well as measures to manage anti-social behaviour and ensure community safety, the initiatives collectively seek to challenge the culture of drinking by influencing young people's attitudes to alcohol before they become older. Examples of different measures adopted are shown in Table 1 (below). In addition to the local authority agencies involved in a coordinated approach are the local police, youth service, trading standards, children's centres, schools and colleges, sexual health advisors and drugs and alcohol advisory services. They are all represented on a steering group that has responsibility for the multiple interventions on alcohol, attitudes and behaviour in the local area. This group meets regularly to discuss issues, keep the project moving forward and plan additional interventions. Feeding into this

Measures	Types of activity
Preventative / diversionary	School based activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Healthy Schools in Personal, Health and Social Education (PHSE)</li> <li>▪ Interactive workshop on substance misuse</li> <li>▪ Production and use of film to inform students</li> <li>▪ Annual performing arts event</li> <li>▪ Hosting play about risks of excessive drinking</li> </ul>
	Community based activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ After school and Friday night activities including football, boxing, skate boarding, dance and beauty therapy</li> <li>▪ Mobile skate board</li> <li>▪ BBQs at the youth centre</li> <li>▪ Youth centre based activities</li> </ul>
Promotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Freebies promoting local project (eg memory sticks, pens)</li> <li>▪ Leaflets about local project with advice about safe drinking levels</li> <li>▪ Alcohol information packs given to parents in Children's Centres and parents evenings in Schools</li> <li>▪ Stands at events</li> </ul>
Punitive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Phone calls to parents to collect their children</li> <li>▪ Ticketing parents for supplying alcohol</li> <li>▪ Tackling proxy alcohol sales whereby anyone 18 or over buys alcohol on behalf of a young person</li> <li>▪ Confiscation of alcohol from the under 18s</li> <li>▪ Letters to parents informing them of their children's behaviour and the effect on the community</li> </ul>

group is a network of groups, one representing each of the geographical areas that the project covers. A coordinator employed by the local authority manages and promotes the project, providing the communication link between the network of groups and the steering group at the strategic level. The coordinator also provides a link with the wider community who do not attend the group meetings e.g. local Parish Councils.

### Research methods

Existing studies look at the impact of alcohol consumption on young people, their motivations for drinking and attitudes towards alcohol (e.g. Newbury-Birch et al, 2008). There is research on preventive strategies for older young people (Foxcroft et al, 2002), but little on targeting a younger age group. To assess the impact of this local project, a survey questionnaire was administered to Year 8 students through the secondary school in the area. This year group was sampled because these students had experience of the local project while they were at primary school. Consent for students' involvement was sought from the deputy Headteacher and parents. The 67 students, who completed the survey (intended to take 10 minutes) during time in their tutor groups, were asked about their awareness of the different activities and their involvement.

Parents were also asked about their views about the project and whether it affected the attitudes and behaviour of their children and other young children. Questionnaires were completed by 39 parents, selected as their children had taken part in the study. A pilot took place of both surveys which prompted revisions to the survey and the feedback was also used to develop prompts for the focus groups with project leaders. Three groups were run with leaders representing the various agencies involved in the project.

From the completed questionnaires from students and parents, a data set was generated and analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) to produce descriptive statistics. Qualitative data was obtained from open questions on the survey and from the focus groups with project leaders. The data were analysed to identify frequently occurring themes and quotations representative of these

themes are provided in this report.

## Findings

### Current alcohol use

The vast majority of students in the survey were not drinking alcohol regularly. Rather they reported drinking alcohol infrequently in a supervised environment, at home with their parents and relatives (85%). One student reported drinking outdoors (i.e. in a field) and unsupervised, which has been shown to be associated with a higher level of risky behaviour (The Institute for Political and Economic Governance for the Centre for Local Governance, 2007).

In the main, alcoholic consumption amongst those surveyed was infrequent, modest and with the permission of parents.

*'Because it was my granddad's funeral and we raised a toast to his great life' (student).*

*'I drink small amounts of alcohol only on special occasions like Christmas' (student).*

*'Because if it is done in the presence of my Mum and Dad it is ok, because they have allowed me to have a little drink' (student).*

*'I try it when my family have it' (student).*

### Diverting young people from drinking

The aim of the project is to educate young people and to give them diversionary activities to do instead of drinking. The project is based on a development approach and has the developmental task of teaching young people about the responsible (adult) use of alcohol in a society where drinking alcohol is ubiquitous and socially acceptable behaviour for adults (Masten et al, 2008).

Students, parents and project leaders expressed positive views about the local project and initiatives early on to educate young people about alcohol misuse and divert them from drinking.

*'It will help them to make balanced choices and be more aware of risks' (parent).*

*'Because hopefully they can see what happened to people's feelings in the workshops. It also gets them off the streets' (parent).*

*'Gives them a constructive interest' (parent).*

*'Once they start drinking then it is difficult but try and get diversions going for younger groups to stop them joining the older ones drinking' (project leader).*

A fifth (20%) of students in the sample indicated that doing an activity stopped them from drinking. About a quarter (26%) said they did these activities instead of drinking. A few parents (11%) indicated that the project had prevented their children from drinking alcohol.

As the majority of children in the survey do not regularly drink alcohol they do not necessarily need 'diverting' from drinking. Rather their current behaviour needs reinforcing through the provision of non-alcohol related activity and preventative education. There was support for education about the possible effects of misuse of alcohol with younger children (i.e. aged five to seven years) that could also serve to extend the number of parents engaged.

*'Could primary schools be more engaged with parents about alcohol? Parents are more involved at this level of education than secondary level so it may be a good time to involve parents and help them understand the damage drink does to young people still developing' (project leader).*

### **Involvement of parents, schools and others**

The project is based on the premise that different parties need to be involved in addressing the culture of drinking and educating young people about the safe use of alcohol. Social ecological theory draws attention to young people's interaction with peers and others within and beyond the family in which they live (i.e. school and social networks), and that behaviour is influenced by the many kinds and levels of system interaction (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Applying this theory means that interventions to address underage drinking need to be directed at the many aspects of these interacting systems (Masten et al, 2008).

The local authority viewed parents as particularly important, hence their inclusion in the survey.

*'Parents have also been there on the radar too as the key to social change' (project leader).*

Parents reflected on their own drinking habits and what they say to their child(ren): 40% said they often thought about this and 15% said they did not. A third of the parents who had thought about their behaviour said that they had tried to be good role models and regulate intake.

*'Knowing how my actions influence my children and knowing how I should and must set an example. I ensure that they are aware that the purpose of the drink is for example to accompany a meal and not to get drunk and out of control and so make sure my drinking habits are not going to give my children the wrong impression of alcohol being okay to drink in quantity and not harmful' (parent).*

*'I do not drink to excess in front of them' (parent).*

The involvement of a local secondary school was seen as 'pivotal' to the success of the project. Activities run by or hosted at the school included a peer-led alcohol and drugs education event in Personal, Health and Social Education (PHSE) lessons; production and use of film to inform students about the risks of excessive drinking; a play and developing approaches to engage parents on the subject.

*'The input of education has been essential. We are lucky with [deputy headteacher] at [name] School. If [deputy headteacher] wasn't involved, the project won't have worked. We needed someone for education and the school was involved and [deputy headteacher] was that individual' (project leader).*

*'A crucial bit of [project name] is involving education and that is different from what is happening in other areas' (project leader).*

Project leaders reported low turn-out of parents at alcohol awareness events at the secondary school. To try to reach parents, the local project built a section on its website to guide parents on talking to their under 18 children about alcohol.

Various other agencies involved in the project ran initiatives, including the youth service having BBQs at the youth centre; the police deploying higher visibility of Police Community Support Officers in the area and seizure of alcohol from young people; and trading standards undertaking test purchases

and issuing fixed penalty notices to those selling alcohol to underage people.

'[The project] is a good multi agency group all focused on the same thing. Police have powers and other agencies have other powers so we are all of us trying to crack the same nut rather than all of us doing different things' (project leader).

'[The project] means coming together as a coordinated approach to things. So trading standards being more aware of youth team, what police are doing and so best use of resources' (project leader).

Community involvement could be further extended to the engagement of local retailers and other small businesses.

*'Small businesses could be involved rather than just enforcement because kids tend to meet outside the shops that can be off putting for other shoppers so it is in their interest but how we get them involved I don't know' (project leader).*

### **Impact on anti-social behaviour**

During the life of the project antisocial behaviour related to alcohol has diminished in all three geographical areas covered by the project. The number of drink-related 101 (non-emergencies) calls fell between the years 2007 to 2009 and the number of assaults, a crime often associated with alcohol, also dropped significantly. However, we need to be cautious when assessing the contribution the project made to these improved indicators of antisocial behaviour, since it is almost impossible to attribute cause and effect in a rapidly changing social environment in which many factors are implicated in producing such trends.

### **Challenges for local authorities in tackling underage drinking**

#### **Measuring Impact**

The issue of alcohol related anti-social behaviour has not gone away as project leaders reported continued regular confiscation of alcohol from the under 18s and letters to parents informing them of their children's behaviour and the effect on the community. In order to separate out the other factors that could have accounted for any reduction there needs to be clarity about what impact the local authority is looking for and what measures are going to be used to assess any outcomes. An established

format like the Program Logic Model could help identify outputs and outcomes in such a project (Daponte, 2008, p. 21). Any evidence could be reported to the strategic level involved in the project at regular intervals.

The on-going collection of the views of students, parents and project leaders could be part of performance monitoring of such a project. It should not be the only source of data though as just by taking part in this study may have raised awareness of issues related to drinking rather than involvement in the project itself. There is also the risk with the survey data that participants may have misreported either because they do not remember or they wished to present themselves in a socially acceptable manner. Young people, and parents, involved in this evaluation were not required to identify themselves to minimise the risk of this type of bias.

Other sources of data for auditing the on-going performance of the project could for example be basic information about patterns of alcohol use in this age group. Findings from this study suggest the majority of young people are not drinking regularly and by recording the frequency of incidents involving this age range the local authority could monitor whether there is any increase. The real question is about whether tackling issues at this age influences later behaviour - one which would need a much bigger investment in research.

Challenging the culture of drinking through projects like the one discussed here needs to be undertaken over the long term. A teenager getting drunk is viewed as a rite of passage by parents and young people and compared to drug misuse, underage drinking is seen as the lesser evil.

*'It's about kids making choices and you are fighting against something that makes you feel good' (project leader).*

*'Whispers start about drink at School after the prom as the thing is to go to someone's party and get drunk' (project leader).*

Local politicians are looking for short term fixes before the next elections. The extent to which a local authority can bring about a change of culture in this time scale is clearly limited but an extremely important role it can play is to encourage different political parties to

be involved and take action, as this local project aimed to do. We know that parents who did not take part in the study may have different views to those that did respond and a challenge for the local authority is how to involve more parents as they are critical in effecting change. Project leaders suggested parental training events and support groups to help parents to manage their children and the use of alcohol. Also, there is the wider issue of how local authorities involve other community members in such projects.

### Achieving Sustainability

Progress of the project was due to a few key individuals or 'champions' and their continued support would be needed for the project to be sustained. The local authority co-ordinator brought 'energy' and 'enthusiasm' to the project with their engagement with young people, talking to them about alcohol when they are out on a Friday night and making them aware of the risks.

*'I have helped [coordinator] with events and making goody bags. [the coordinator] is really nice and I can talk to [them] about whatever and alcohol stuff' (Student).*

Two senior managers in the local authority had the initial idea for the coordinated approach, and planned and implemented it at the strategic level. Securing funding for the project, including the coordinator's post, was always difficult. Whether the project is sustainable depends on whether the funding continues for the coordinator's role and the commitment of other staff in the local authority as well as the different parties involved like the deputy head and project leaders.

### Conclusion

This paper describes a study of the work of one local authority tackling underage drinking. The findings are not representative in the way that allows generalisation to other authorities, but they are nevertheless of relevance to those responsible for preventing alcohol-related disorder and the detrimental impact on health. There is widespread support for educating young people early on about the effects of alcohol and evidence that the project, focused on 12 to 13 year olds, chose an appropriate age group before the vast majority have started drinking alcohol away from home and

unsupervised. Local authorities are limited in their capacity to effect a change of culture in the short term but this study demonstrates the potential of a project that is based on the notion of involvement of and collaboration between parents, schools, police and other parties. There is enough evidence to suggest further study is warranted as to the on-going impact and for local authorities to address the challenges that the project and underage drinking present with the need to clearly define the impact intended of any initiatives, reach more widely into the community and to achieve long term sustainability.

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