

## Still seldom heard and hard to reach. Still drinking? NEET young people and alcohol in a northern town

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# **Still seldom heard and hard to reach. Still drinking? NEET young people and alcohol consumption in a Northern town.**

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Find out more at [alcoholchange.org.uk](https://alcoholchange.org.uk).

*Opinions and recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors.*

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## Executive summary

In 2008 the researchers undertook a study exploring the drinking careers of young people who are not in education, employment and training (NEET) in a small post-industrial town in England (Nelson and Tabberer 2015). This report presents research which repeated the study with the same cohort of young people described as NEET, in the same geographical location. Recent trends both in the UK and also more widely in an international context suggest adolescent drinking is declining amongst young people (Fat, Shelton, and Cable, 2018; Looze, et al 2015), with some groups seemingly bucking this trend including those from deprived areas, or those who are NEET.

## Aims

This project aimed to look at the transitions of young people described as NEET, in terms of starting, stopping, moderating or increasing their alcohol usage. To see if the characteristics of this group have stayed the same over the last 10 years and if this is reflected in their drinking, or if this group has, like their peers been affected by wider changes and are now decreasing their drinking.

## Methods

A project advisory group was set up from young people who met at the outset of the project, to guide the direction of the research, interviewing content and protocol, and then during the project to validate emerging findings. A professional group was set up to guide sampling and research design

Sampling used a range of settings to access young people aged 16-18, (an identified research gap), who might be described as NEET including a Youth Club, a Training provider with young people not engaged in other forms of education or training, the Youth Offending Team, and the Leaving Care project, all based in the same geographical area as the first study. It is important to add a word of caution as to whether we can be sure we have been talking to the same demographic group of people in both research projects. Changes in social and government policy required different sampling processes with the consequence that we cannot be sure they are the same cohort of young people; some almost certainly are but others may not be.

Individual semi-structured interviews were held with 16 young people. A focal point of the interview is a simple graph the young person completes charting their drinking career alongside a map identifying their place in the community and where drinking takes place. Framework analysis methods were then used to generate categories, codes and themes that captured the experiences, views and perceptions of the sample and which arose from the data.

Following data analysis, a focus group was held separately with professionals and the young people's advisory group to validate emerging findings and test explanations. As part of our dissemination verbatim testimony from the interviews will be used to tell the story of the research to professionals working with young people.

## Findings

Our original research concluded:

*The young people we talked to were drinking a lot of alcohol, most of them saw drinking as an important part of their social life and part of having fun. Drinking led to other activities from the risky but enjoyable 'messaging about', to being out of control, and more problematic behaviours including fighting, unprotected sex, and in some cases rape and death. (Nelson and Tabberer 2015:438)*

Our current research appears to indicate there have been changes in the drinking behaviour of young people described as NEET.

- 1 In contrast to our earlier work where all but one of our interviewees were regular drinkers, many of the young people we interviewed in the current research drank little or no alcohol and drinking played little part in their lives. In particular in our first study young women were drinking a lot, now they were not. Alcohol had been tried and drinking undertaken in an experimental and celebratory manner, often to excess, but this had taken place at an earlier age. Exposure to drunkenness and risky behaviour tended to occur in their early teens. By seventeen they had *grown up* and drinking and particular drunken behaviour and losing control was seen as *stupid*.
- 2 Young people had their first experience of alcohol at a young age, often pre-teen, but in our sample only a small number went on to become heavy or regular drinkers primarily those drinking for therapeutic or adaptive reasons to overcome, or help manage, previous adverse life experiences.
- 3 Where young people drank also appeared to have changed emphasis. In our earlier study the park and street drinking were central. Now drinking in the park occurred primarily only at an early age when drinking had to be hidden from parents. As the young people grew up street drinking was described as unsafe and undesirable with drinking mostly occurring in friend's houses where parents tolerated or even encouraged drinking.
- 4 Parental involvement in young people's drinking was a recurring theme, whether that be hosting the drinking, encouraging early drinking experiences or buying alcohol. This may be an attempt to control their children's drinking regarding amount and place but as the focus group identified early exposure to alcohol is not linked to health benefits.
- 5 The apparent reduction in street drinking, and a reduction in alcohol use overall can be seen as contributing to a reduction in risky behaviour identified in the first study and improving wellbeing. However, for a group described as NEET and already socially and economically isolated, the removal of a community of drinkers potentially removes the one group, to which they could belong, increasing isolation and potential mental health problems. Certainly, the activities our interviewees undertook rarely involved socially going out to a pub or club. Isolated activities such as playing computer games or watching films predominated. Interestingly for a group who described themselves a grown up at seventeen there was a curious mix of younger age activity, set against much rarer going out behaviour of a maturity beyond their years.
- 6 NEET are perhaps drinking less and going out less because they cannot afford to drink in clubs. The change in benefit policy means they have no money and therefore cannot afford the cost of drinks in pubs or clubs. Consequently, where alcohol is

bought is the corner shop or local off-licence where it is cheap and most readily available for the under-aged, and drunk at home with small groups of friends.

- 7 There was some evidence in our sample of alcohol acting as a gateway drug and of young people using cheaper legal and illegal drugs. The use of drugs other than alcohol appeared to be something that occurred after younger early experimental drinking behaviour had started. Initially this was alongside alcohol but could go on to replace alcohol as the drug of choice. The professional focus group felt that for young people today drug use was accepted and not problematic, particularly cocaine. Cannabis use was thought to be increasing. Another change was that heroin users were not drinking to help with their drug habit, rather using spice which was cheaper.
- 8 These young people overall used social media sparingly and over a limited range with Facebook the most common. The influence of social media in encouraging drinking was seen as being mostly on younger teenagers. It acted by making people feel left out and wondering why they were not having as much fun as those they saw on Facebook. Mainstream media and television were described by a small number as acting in the same way. As they became older the images were described less as fun and more as people looking stupid. As public drunkenness was disapproved of so was losing control through drugs. Images of drunkenness and being out of control on social media as in real life were given as reasons to not drink rather more than being seen as encouraging drinking.

## Implications

Young people described as NEET are drinking less, but risky and harmful behaviours as a result of drinking alcohol are still occurring at an early age and it seems unlikely this behaviour is restricted to those subsequently NEET. If preventative public health or individual interventions are to have impact they should target a younger age group, and one which includes parents; by thirteen it is perhaps too late.

The overall message of young people drinking less should not obscure the small number drinking in a therapeutic manner who may require more targeted support.

Changes in social policy and income benefits means NEET young people have little money, impacting on the supply, pattern and place of their drinking. The reduction in amount drunk perhaps gives some weight to the view that making alcohol expensive relative to income leads to reduced drinking amongst some sections of the community. However, for a group described as NEET and already socially and economically isolated, the removal of a community of drinkers potentially removes the one group to which they could belong, increasing isolation and potential mental health problems.

More research is required to identify the change agents leading to reduced drinking, so that appropriate interventions can be put in place to support positive trends, whilst guarding against punitive economic sanctions which may have positive impacts on drinking behaviour but adverse impacts on wider measures of wellbeing and social isolation.



## Conclusion

This project was an in-depth qualitative exploration of the drinking behaviours of young people described as NEET which sought to replicate a study where data collection occurred ten years ago, in order to identify changes in a group where the norms of transition to employment or study are lacking. The findings support the research literature about young people in general - young people described as NEET are drinking less than they were ten years ago. In particular in the original study young women were drinking a lot, now they are not.

There are of course exceptions, particularly those drinking for therapeutic or adaptive reasons to overcome, or help manage, previous adverse life experiences. Our original research described the NEET population as hard to reach and easy to ignore. In making statements about overall drinking behaviour it is important not to ignore those engaged in harmful drinking and to be mindful of their specific needs.

In a sense the young people we talked to describe themselves as simply losing interest in drinking. It was something they tried in early teenage years but is now something in which they no longer want to engage. It is difficult to point to any one specific reason for this apparent change in behaviour and it may in fact be a combination of social policy changes allied with more individualistic psycho-social influences which has brought about change.

## Introduction

In 2008 the researchers undertook a study exploring the drinking careers of young people who are not in education, employment and training (NEET) in a small post-industrial town in England. The results of that study were published (Nelson and Tabberer 2015), disseminated at international conferences (ISPCAN Canada 2015 and JSWEC UK 2015), informed national thinking (Wybron 2016) and local practice. This report presents research which repeated the study with the same cohort of young people described as NEET, in the same geographical location, to see if anything has changed over the ensuing 10 years, and to further investigate this under-researched group.

## Background

Recent trends both in the UK and also more widely in an international context suggest adolescent drinking is declining amongst young people (Fat, Shelton, and Cable, 2018; Norström and Svensson, 2014, Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015, Looze, et al 2015). With some groups seemingly bucking this trend including those from deprived areas (HSCIC 2015), or those who are NEET (O'Neill 2015). This project aims to look at the transitions of this group of young people, in terms of stopping, moderating or increasing their alcohol usage. Understanding transitional alcohol use is important to policy and practice as regular drinking by mid adolescence has been linked to less positive life trajectories including employment (Wybron 2016).

The research site is an area of high youth unemployment with an identified problem regarding young people and alcohol. For example:

- 22% of people live in areas amongst the 10% most deprived nationally with 25% of under 18s living in those areas.
- 15.9% of secondary aged pupils in Doncaster said that they had drunk in the past four weeks compared to 14.6% nationally.

Research evidence is sparse on the drinking behaviours of NEETs, changes in drinking patterns, and the implications for policy and practice support. As a result, policy and practice is not rooted in a strong evidence base. The age range of 16-17 years is a specific research gap (Wybron 2016).

Since the previous research in 2008 the number of young people who are NEETS has changed. The proportion increased following the 2008 recession and peaked in July-September 2011 when 16.9% of 16-24 year olds were NEET (1.25 million people). Since then the number of people who are NEET has generally been falling. This fall can be attributed to changes in the benefit and support landscape for young people, in particular, the participation age was raised in 2013 and young people are now required to continue in education or training until at least their 18th birthday.

Nationally, 783,000 people aged 16-24 were Not in Education, Employment or Training in the second quarter of 2018, 11.2% of all people in this age group. This was a decrease of 25,000 from the previous quarter and also a slight decrease from the second quarter of 2017 (Powell 2018).

## Aims

The main aim of this project was to look at the experience of NEET young people in this changed landscape to see if the characteristics of this group have stayed the same over the last 10 years and if this is reflected in their drinking, or if this group has, like their peers been affected by wider changes and are now decreasing their drinking.

## Methods

### Design

Individual semi-structured interviews were held with 16 young people. A focal point of the interview is a simple graph the young person completes charting their drinking career and a map identifying place.

Ethical approval was provided by Sheffield Hallam University ethics committee and research governance from Doncaster MBC.

A project advisory group was set up from young people in the sixth form of a local school which met at the outset of the project, to guide the direction of the research, interviewing content and protocol, and then during the project to validate emerging findings. A professional group was set up at the outset of the project to guide sampling and research design. Following data collection, a focus group was held separately with professionals and the young people's advisory group to validate emerging findings and test explanations.

A key consideration throughout the research was in making sure that the young people of Doncaster were heard. This was to be achieved through both the advisory group of young people and using the voices of young people as one of the reporting methods. To this end a verbatim testimony piece is being developed with the Advisory Group. This will use the words of the young people interviewed to tell the story of the research to professionals working with young people in Doncaster. The hope is that this will have more impact than a traditional report and will ground the findings in place.

### Sampling

For the previous research in 2008 the Connexions service provided a focus point for young people who were NEET as they were required to attend regularly in order to receive benefits. The researchers assessed young people through attendance at a Connexions service in Doncaster where a randomly selected group of young people were interviewed.

The benefits system no longer has this central point of contact as the increase in participation age means that young people are required to be in full time education until at least their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday.

This presents a challenge for research with this group of young people. To overcome this the team had to look at new ways to access young people who are NEET. Routes explored included a Youth Club, a Training provider with young people not engaged in other forms of education or training, the Youth Offending Team, and the Leaving Care project. From these sources the following young people were interviewed.

Table 1: Young people interviewed

Code	Gender	Age	Location interviewed
60	F	17	Training provider
59	M	17	Training provider
58	M	17	Training provider
57	F	18	Training provider
56	M	18	Training provider
54	F	17	Leaving care project
52	M	16	Leaving care project
22	M	19	Training provider
25	M	17	Leaving care project
21	M	17	Leaving care project
23	F	19	Leaving care project
47	M	15	Youth club
48	F	15	Youth club
80	F	16	Youth club
81	F	16	Youth club
24	M	17	Training provider

## Data collection

Prospective participants were provided with a participant information sheet and allowed time to consider participating in the study. If they agreed and following the signing of a consent form interviews were conducted in a private area. Interviews took a semi-structured pattern and were conducted using an interview schedule alongside the completion of a graph and a map of place. These were used to guide conversation and had been devised collectively by the research team in consultation with the initial advisory group.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. The transcriptions were anonymised and any data identifying the individual removed. The data was stored securely within a protected base in accordance with data protection protocol. The number given to each participant relates to the anonymised code ascribed for purposes of data collection and analysis.

## Analysis

Framework analysis methods were used to generate categories, codes and themes that capture the experiences, views and perceptions of the sample. Framework analysis has emerged from policy research and is a pragmatic and systematic approach to qualitative data analysis. (Gale et al 2013,) It involves a systematic process of sifting, charting and sorting the material into key issues and themes. It allows the integration of pre-existing themes into the emerging data analysis. Framework analysis has been used and is particularly useful in multi-disciplinary health research teams.

The following table displays the themes and sub-themes derived from the interview data.

## Thematic framework

Table 2: Thematic analysis

Categories	Codes	Themes	Sub-themes
Alcohol and Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>amount drunk</li> <li>starting drinking</li> <li>regularity of drinking</li> <li>stopping or not drinking</li> <li>impact of drinking on personal life</li> <li>activity other than drinking</li> <li>alcohol and other drugs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>influences on starting drinking</li> <li>reasons for regular drinking</li> <li>reasons for stopping or not drinking</li> <li>positive and adverse impact</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>parents</li> <li>friends</li> <li>media</li> <li>-social</li> <li>rule breaking</li> <li>peer pressure</li> <li>positive impact</li> <li>social media</li> <li>education/employment</li> <li>safety/fear</li> <li>growing up</li> <li>seeing impact on others</li> <li>getting ill from drink</li> <li>girlfriend</li> <li>guilt/shame</li> <li>control</li> <li>sport</li> </ul>
Alcohol and Place	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>where drinking</li> <li>who drinking with?</li> <li>where alcohol is bought</li> <li>who buys it</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>home</li> <li>park</li> <li>friend's house</li> <li>pub</li> <li>friends</li> <li>family</li> <li>corner shop</li> <li>adults</li> <li>parents</li> <li>older looking young people</li> <li>drug users</li> </ul>	
The influence of social media on drinking behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>what social media were used?</li> <li>attitude to social media</li> <li>influence of social media on drinking</li> <li>other media influences</li> </ul>		

A separate analysis was conducted of the interviews to select extracts for the verbatim testimony. The Advisory Group worked with the researchers to select the extracts. Drama students from Doncaster will deliver this testimony to the professionals as part of the ongoing dissemination from the research.

## Limitations

Sample: we were interested in whether young people who are NEET were drinking less than similar young people ten years ago. One of the limitations of this study has been accessing these young people. As identified under the discussion of sampling above, since the extension of the school leaving age, this group of young people aged under 18 should no longer exist. Consequently, services are no longer set up to address their needs in the same way. In 2008 young people who were NEET could claim benefit with access to financial support obtained through regular attendance at a Connexions Centre. By accessing research participants when they attended the Centre we could be sure of their NEET status. To access young people in 2018 we therefore had to engage research participants who were in contact with services due to other circumstances such as leaving care or youth offending. Whilst some of these young people will have been NEET, this is not certain. What is consistent is their place.

Sample size: this is a qualitative piece of research based on interviews with 16 young people plus supporting focus groups with professionals and other young people and as such generalisations cannot be made.

Sample place: We deliberately based this study in a small post-industrial town to replicate the conditions of the previous study. Lessons for other areas will be limited considering the complexity of young people's place-based decision making.

## Findings

The following section presents the findings from the interviews using the thematic analysis.

### Alcohol and Behaviour

In this section we are interested in the young people's journeys with alcohol, when they started drinking, how much they drink, and the circumstances of that drinking.

#### Amount drunk

What was striking for many of the young people we interviewed was that they drank little or no alcohol. Alcohol played no part in their lives.

*Not really now because I don't normally drink that much. 21*

*I don't even drink now. 47*

*No, I don't drink. 24*

For others alcohol had been tried but that remained a rare event

*One glass or two, well small glasses, that's really it. I'm not really an alcohol person; it always gives me a really bad head straightaway... I don't drink at all anymore; I haven't drunk in the past two years, so. 58*

Or one reserved for the occasional celebration or when out with their family

*Well I only really drink on special occasions; I've not really been much of a drinker. 23*

*Yeah. I'm 17 now and I don't drink, I drink if I'm out with my family but not heavily. 54*

These young people reflected on early experimental drinking behaviour which they had now grown out of by the age of 17.

*{when 14/15} It's like there was parties and that so everyone just went, just get drunk and that. But don't get to a level where you can't control yourself, where you can handle yourself. And, you know, but have an all right night. 59*

*I just, rather just chill at home and go out with mates and that rather than drink, waste your money on it. 59*

Modest amounts of alcohol use could be viewed quite critically

*In a year I drink about three times in a year. But I'm only 16, I know that's bad, but it happens sometimes. 52*

For one young man, however, alcohol was a large part of his life and the ability to drink large amounts was something to be proud of

*So that was more to do with people understanding that I could drink quite heavily. It doesn't touch me...It's usually me buying my own. And then friends trying to keep up and then I'll end up finding it really amusing because they're all lightweights. 56*

One young person thought that the amount drunk currently varied between two extremes of not drinking or drinking to excess with few people taking a middle course of moderate drinking.

*well some people are drinking more, but there are still people drinking less. So, you will find people who won't drink, but you'll find people who will drink a lot. But I don't find many people that will stay in the middle. 58*

## Starting drinking

For a small number of young people drinking began at a very young age with grandparents or parents being the first to introduce them to alcohol.

*Because obviously I had my first drink really young, I think that was mainly my dad, because obviously I saw him do it. 23*

*I had that with my granddad before he passed away. I had my first drink with him, so he knew he was the first man to ever give me an alcoholic drink. 54*

Parents were seen as having a significant influence on starting drinking and subsequent behaviour including more regular drinking as their children became older. This influence could be seen as encouraging drinking in young people and was the subject of some criticism.

*Yeah probably just people's parents and things like that, especially if they're the types of parents who like to have parties or store alcohol in the house, things like that, where kids are like oh, I might try a bit of this. So, I think parents are a big part of it more than friends really to be honest, so yeah. 60*

*Unless their parents influence them. If they go and buy it for them, they're saying oh I'm going to a party, they're like oh we'll get you something. And there you go, that's them influenced by their parents. And they're going out getting drunk, doing stupid things.59*

Alongside this access was an introduction in early or mid-teens to drinking collectively at friends or social events.

*Well 14 I think I was, yeah because it's when I went to my first party. But no, I don't drink heavily or regularly at all. I don't really drink at all. 60*

The attraction for this early age drinking for some was of doing something they shouldn't - of rule breaking.

*I think the main thing about it when I was 13, 14 is it's like yeah, I'm drinking and I'm not supposed to be, so you felt that because you're breaking a few rules. 22*

For these young people an introduction to drinking was a celebratory event which did not necessarily move into regular drinking but remained something of an isolated occasion. For a small number however, particularly the care leaver group, starting drinking was not celebratory but rather a way of coping with difficult life experiences. Here the progression to regular drinking was more common.

*My past. And I've been through some stuff, I got troubled, and then I thought it was a way to escape. I thought it'd take it all away. It did for the time that I was drinking, but then I woke up and I realised the next morning it just comes back, it's not helping it leave. 54*

*Yeah, I moved about quite a lot. I've been in care since I was eight. But from eight to about 13 it weren't moving about as much. I were moving about a bit but it was like steadily. But then when I hit 13, 14 I were out causing trouble, drinking, sniffing and I was just being passed from pillar to post, no one could handle me. 22*

## Regularity of drinking

Where drinking had become a more frequent activity for some this began in early or mid-teens shortly after a first drink and in the context of parties, as a place to make new friends, develop sexual relationships and with alcohol a social lubricant. As some of the older male interviewees reflected:

*Because if you drink then you get invited to parties and at parties there's more people from school and just people in general, so you make more friends. And then you just get more popular the more you drink 56*

*I won't get up in a morning and I'm like oh yes, I'm going to get a drink. But if someone's like oh I'm having a party and it starts at four, I'll be there for four. 22*

Although primarily an enjoyable activity, drinking at parties was not without its risks, both in terms of the amount drunk and the risky behaviour alcohol could promote.



*Or with a girl, I know it's not right to say, but the younger lasses, when they put themselves out about with all the younger lads, they get more popular, and when they're drinking, they get even more popular, because they made bad choices. 56*

The link between friendship and drink, particularly making friends was strongly stated but on reflection could have its downside.

*You'd use drink, drugs, anything really-as a way to get people in and make friends and have company, and it affects your social life as well though because then those people, they're not really your friends, they're just using you for what you've got. 22*

The concept of peer pressure, both to drink but also to be part of a friendship group, was identified as a factor for drinking more frequently and sometimes to excess at times against a young person's wishes.

*So I did think about things, but then once I'd thought about things and sorted myself out then I'd fall back into it again because of other people and it's like, not so much peer pressure, but you can class it as peer pressure because they're drinking and they're like oh go on, go on, you'll be all right, and then you're like yeah why not? 22*

For girls, peer pressure operated in complex ways. the quotation below shows parental support for the young person to go to a party and drink modestly coupled with friends' encouragement to attend can result in a situation where excessive alcohol consumption leads to the young person feeling out of control.

*And I remember the first time, well obviously when I was going to that party and I was like, my mum's not really going to like it if I drink way too much, obviously because of my age. And she was like, oh just have a couple, you'll be all right, things like that. And I'm like, all right, whatever, just a few and a few turned into a lot. And yeah, but obviously after that it was, well I also fell out with most of the people who got me to go to that party because I were just like, because I really thought about it and I was like, well if they wouldn't have said all that to me, things like that, then I wouldn't have gone and none of it would have happened and I probably wouldn't even be that bothered about having a drink sometimes, so. But yeah, they're probably my biggest influence on what happened, so. 60*

Peer pressure could also operate as a reason not to drink

*I think it's just friends, just peer pressure I'd say. Yeah. None of my close friends drink a lot, so. Yeah. Shannon, she's my best friend, so she doesn't drink a lot either. I think it just, it's people around you I'd say.*

### Stopping drinking and not drinking

For the young woman above, as with the majority of our interviewees, not drinking or drinking very small amounts was the norm. The reasons given covered a wide range in addition to the peer pressure identified above including social media, education and employment, safety and fear, growing up, seeing the impact on others, becoming ill from drink, a girl or boyfriend, guilt and shame, control, sport and adverse impact on life.

Seeing the impact of excessive alcohol use on others, whether in reality or on **social media** and wishing to distance themselves from that behaviour was common to many participants.

*Because I just see people my age and you just see videos and it's like I don't want to put myself in that situation because they just look really bad 47*

*I just thought to myself how can you just get yourself in that state? It's just you should know a limit. You should know how to control yourself and how much you should be able to handle, you shouldn't go over so you're like can't walk and you've got to crawl everywhere and you're sleeping in your own sick and it's just not nice at all. 23*

A number of young people had parents or family members who drank heavily and **seeing the impact of that drinking behaviour** on the individual or family led to a decision not to drink.

*Yeah, he (brother) drinks, he's 32, and he drinks literally every single day, like 10...Budweiser. I say to him you're going to die before you're 40... I will never drink.25*

*No, I've seen what it does to people and the states that they get in, it's just...Well my dad's a heavy drinker, and he has really bad gout and stuff, which is obviously caused by heavy drinking and I've seen what it does to him. In the morning he's got a drink in his hand until he goes to bed. And that's every single day. 23*

There was an element of **fear** attached to drinking in respect of what alcohol might do to the individual's own health but also what they might do if they lost control through alcohol use.

*Bad fear and I don't live to be evil or something... Didn't like it.24*

*I don't think drinking's safe. Because if you get too drunk you don't know what you're doing and then things can happen and things that you don't want to happen anyway, so I just stay away from it. 54*

For some this fear stemmed from what they saw in the media

*Normally there's quite a lot of stuff in magazines and in newspapers and things like that when people have been drunk or they've been stabbed or, things like that and I'm just like no. Because it could happen to anyone, I can't just turn around and say it's not going to happen to me. 60*

For others the fear of something bad happening, of feeling **unsafe** was from the experiences of friends or older family members

*I think about two or three months ago, something like that, obviously not a friend, but it was my brother actually, he went out on a night round town with his friends and all that. I think he's 21 now. And he got overly drunk, but then his friends left him, and he ended up getting jumped and robbed and all this... but he couldn't remember a thing that happened because he was completely drunk. So, I just, I dread for anything like that to have happened to me if I ever did it like that. 60*

*Yeah, I'm afraid of falling asleep and something might go wrong...One boy died in my town back where I'm from about four years ago and he was 16, on his birthday and he was drinking. And he went to sleep, and he died because he was sick, and he couldn't get up because he was too drunk and he couldn't shout. So, he choked himself to death. 52*

Some young people had experienced the direct effects of **becoming ill** themselves through drink, an experience they had not enjoyed and which had put them off drinking again.

*That's the worst. When I was 15 it's the worst I've ever been when I were drunk and I don't barely remember anything from that night; I only remember what I've been told after, so. That's the one and only time I ever got out my face and I didn't like it. I didn't enjoy it. 54*

*Basically, I was drinking, and I was sick once and then I drank more. And then it was like I couldn't stand up straight and I couldn't open my eyes, kept on falling over. 21*

There was a sense in which as the young people matured into their later teens drunken behaviour held no attraction - it was 'stupid'.

*It's not worth it basically. No point going through all that shit basically just for drinking. It's stupid. 59*

They had as they put it '**grown up:**'

*Yeah, well I realised as I was growing up, it's not really the best thing to do is it? 22*

Drinking in an out of **control** manner to become drunk was something for the early or mid-teens, and by 17 or 18 the behaviour was looked down on in others and avoided in themselves.

*Responsibility, you've got to take responsibility for how much you drink. 48*

If drunken out of control behaviour did take place this was accompanied by feelings of regret and guilt rather than bravado

*Yeah, guilty, very guilty, waking up I didn't want to go next to people and I was worried about what people might say when they see me and all that. So that's it. 52*

*It was more what people told me, so. But I, well because I got so drunk things like that, I got kicked out of this party. And I was arguing with all these random people I've never even met all on the streets and knocking on people's door and shouting abuse and things at them for no reason at all. And, well, it were, my parents got rung and everything. So, they came and picked me up and well I got home, and I were quite sick actually after that. I just had a glass of water and just went to bed and completely regretted everything I did. So, the person's party who it was, I went round the next day, apologised to all the neighbours and things like that, because it all just got too out of hand and I just felt terrible about it. So, I figured I had to sort summat out like. But I won't do it again, no way. 60*

Being in control of yourself was important

*Yeah. I like to know that I'm in my own control of my own body; I don't like anything taking over it. 54*

Outside of being in control, there were a range of external factors unrelated to alcohol which affected the decision not to drink or to drink very little. For the older young men, having a girlfriend could be a significant influence.

*I think it's helped me having my girlfriend there. Because if it were on my own, I'd have ended up partying all the time, I'd have people over all the time inviting mates round, because if you're on own you just start feeling a bit lonely, don't you? 22*

*My girlfriend doesn't drink as much. So, I've stopped as much. 56*

For one young person engaging in **sport** meant alcohol was to be avoided.

*I haven't been bothered about it because of the football and things and I've realised what it can do to you and things. **Yeah, tell us a bit more.** It can, with your body it can break it down, like if you drink more and more it's just going to, it can kill you. So, I've realised there's no point in doing it and it's not good for me, so. 81*

For those engaged in **education** or **employment**, albeit a small number given our focus on NEET young people, exams or work was seen as incompatible with drinking.

*I'm in year 10 and then I've got loads more to do in year 11, so yeah. I've just got to revise, revise all the time. 47*

### Impact of drinking on personal life – positive and adverse

Alcohol and drinking had an impact on most but not all of the young people's lives even those who now drank very little or not at all. For some their experience had been trouble free.

*No nothing ever happened. 47*

For others the impact was positive, with alcohol and social drinking smoothing the way for making friends, but even here the experience could be a double-edged sword with negative experiences never far away.

*Oh, I've met a lot of people and made a lot of friends. It's always a good night until something bad happens as well. Like, we went out around town together actually me and my girlfriend and we went with a few mates. It were a good night until one of us got into an argument and then everyone got involved. Because you don't think do you after you've had a drink and it's just like yeah you start mouthing off and it just causes more trouble.22*

*Well I used to like it, I used to enjoy doing it, I used to enjoy getting drunk and waking up and not remembering the next day. But then you hear stories about it as you get older. You've heard people that have got addicted and then they can't get off it and then they ruin their entire lives: lose their job, their family all because they wanted a bottle. 54*

For those who had or did drink large amounts a number had experienced risky and dangerous experiences caused by alcohol.

*Yeah. I've had a couple of bad ones myself. Where I've got really drunk with friends, because we've had quite a bit of money for drink, and then you wake up the next day and it's dark again and you don't remember where you are. I went out drinking at seven at night the day before and then I got home the day after at eight o'clock, but I only woke up at seven and I didn't even know where I was. I had to ring a taxi and it cost me £15 to get back to my house, so I was quite a distance away. I was just out in field near a motorway and they had a little café. 56*

Overall these experiences tended to turn young people away from drinking.

*I've known someone die of alcohol poisoning, they had that much of it it killed them, so that put me off drinking, so. I just don't see why some people have to get themselves into a state where they don't know what they're doing. And then by the end of the night they end up in a police cell or something or in danger or hurt, so I don't see the point in it. 54*

*On my 16th birthday actually I went out and got absolutely hammered... And I ended up getting arrested for assault. So, it does affect quite a lot really doesn't it? That's why I realised because it were like well, hang on I've not really learned, I'm doing the same thing over and over. 22*

### Activity other than drinking

We were interested in what young people did when they were not engaged in friendship groups which focused on alcohol use. There were a range of responses which focused on activities at home such as playing computer games or watching films and outside playing football or bike riding. These young people rarely went out in the sense of a social outing to a club or pub.

*We tend to just go out and just play football, because we all like playing football and we've been playing football earlier, so. Mainly tend to be, that's all we do, so. 81*

*I'd normally just go down to my brother's or something like that and just chill over there, watch a couple of films or summat with him. I don't really tend to go out that much other than on Fridays, I go to my boyfriend's which is in Wakefield. 60*

*Plays games, speak, go out somewhere. No, we don't have any alcohol. 58*

*Play football or go out on bikes or just go round pit up in woodlands. 59*

When they did go out there was a sense in which the activity was mature for their years with alcohol playing little or no part.

*On a night out if I'm going out with friends or anything it'd normally just be a meal, or we go to the cinema or something like that. Or have a game of bowling, things like that. Not really, I don't go to parties or anything really, so yeah. 60*

### Alcohol and other drugs

Few young people mentioned drugs.

***Do any of your friends smoke cannabis or something?***

*I think some do but not all the time, yeah.*

***And how about you, do you?***

*No. I wouldn't ever try it either. 80*

Where they did, in particular, those older and more alcohol experienced, just as alcohol use was occasional so was smoking cannabis.

*I won't lie, I smoke weed, but I do that, it's only every now and again, it's only if say, I don't know, if I'm in a bit of a stressful mood it calms me down a little bit, but that's not really that much. 22*

There was some evidence of alcohol being identified as a potential gateway drug.

*I think the alcohol set it off to be honest, because I was drinking over at people's houses and then they'd have a joint and they're like oh do you want some? And I were like no I'm all right, and then peer pressure. 22*

*I think there's a gateway drug, like alcohol. Because it usually leads to people trying other stuff, just getting more adventurous and more...I'm not saying everywhere they do, but in Doncaster anybody you see is probably selling. You walk up a street and you'll meet someone that's selling something and then because it's the only thing they can get hold of that's what they'll take, just because it's easy to access. 56*

One young person thought the reduction in drinking was down to the easy availability and low cost of legal highs.

*I think people are drinking a lot less now, but I think that's because there's stuff out there more legalised and they're doing that instead. It's a lot cheaper, so they're all like yeah, we'll do this. And then you see them all on the streets proper minged out, laying down on the floor. 22*

The apparent criticism of public drugged behaviour mirrors the comments made about alcohol and drunkenness. Using drugs or alcohol either separately or together to excess was frowned on, even by those who identified themselves as users of both.

*People want to smoke that rather than drink, but then there is also the people out there that do both and they'll drink and then because they're drinking, they'll want to smoke and they'll go out and they'll get legal highs and they fuck their lives up. Mind my language there, but they do. 22*

## **Alcohol and Place**

### **Where young people are drinking**

Where young people drank or had drunk appeared to vary with age. Whilst some had early experiences of special occasion drinking with the family, when drinking became more associated with friends there was a requirement to hide the drinking from their parents. Consequently, the park was a popular venue when younger.

*In a park, because when you've got to hide drinking from your parents at first you sit in the park with whatever alcohol you've got and just get hammered. Then you go home and they're like where you been? So-and-so had a party. Oh, OK is that why you're drunk? Yeah. 56*

Interestingly this early stage of experimental drinking is made riskier by both drinking to get drunk and the unsafe environment where the drinking takes place.

*Woods, park, sewerage works, riverboat and then on top of the Frenchgate. You know, shopping centre ... It's when you're trying to avoid people. 56*

As these young people became older, they did not want to be seen to be drunk in a public place with drinking in the street seen as both unsafe and undesirable.

*Somewhere where you know it's going to be all right and not on the streets where you don't know what's going to happen. 23*

For the majority where drinking did take place, it was at home or in friend's houses with parents seen as tolerant of drinking in the house.

*Houses. 21*

*At home, yeah. 47*

*I think parents are just getting more relaxed about it. Not really bothered. 25*

There was also a distinction drawn between those who drank in the park and those who did not - an othering of those seen to be engaging in unacceptable behaviour for their age.

*It would be friends' houses. I wouldn't be them type of people that drink on park 23*

Pubs were not popular particularly for the boys who could not get past the age restriction on entry, even when over 18.

*Like photo ID, so pubs and that don't really let me in oh yeah, you've got bum fluff but you've not got ID... I know girls of 13 that's going out round town. 56*

### Who young people are drinking with

Drinking was not something undertaken alone but rather a social event with friends.

*Being with mates basically, that makes you drink because you wouldn't drink by yourself every time, all the time, would you? 59*

*I wouldn't really drink alone because that's a bit depressing isn't it? I drink with friends and stuff. But only if there was a reason behind it; I wouldn't just drink just for a laugh. 23*

It was seen as celebratory by the majority and not as a way of solitary drowning sorrows - that was seen as depressing.

*I don't drink on my own. I couldn't drink on my own. I think that's because of the fact that I'd end up just getting really depressed if I were on my own. I don't want that. 22*

As with the place young people drank a distinction was made with the type of people they drank with. Who they drank with was more important than the drinking and care was taken to ensure drinking friends could be trusted.

*The only other people that I drink with are ones that I can trust, that won't try and take advantage whilst obviously you're intoxicated. Probably the only people I drink with is people I trust. 56*

*Yeah. Like with nice people. Because them ones that are always on fields and that are the people I actually don't like, so. 47*

Drinking in large groups was something that might occur when they were younger and hiding their drinking from parents but perhaps ironically making the behaviour more public.

*Yeah, about 14, from 14 to about 16, I were knocking about with. They were quite big groups, there was 20, 25. It's classed as a riot. 22*

For those who drank very little, drinking with the family was prominent. This was the setting where they had first tried alcohol and where they had the very occasional drink.

*And then when I was 13 it was at a family party and I had some shots with my auntie. And then when I do drink it's at all these special occasions that I've been drinking. 54*

*Well the last occasion was in April. And we were just all together, all the family and uncles and all that, so we just kind of started it. 52*

Interestingly as some of the young people grew older they were encouraged to drink by their parents, but they were reluctant to take up the offer.

*My mum just asked me if I wanted any, do you know, just that I'm getting older obviously. Yeah, just that were it basically, just tried it. I prefer Coca Cola or something sweeter. 80*

*If my mum's been with her mates and that and she's brought a few home and she don't want them and there's four, we'll drink them but. My drinks last me like, the taste of it, I've got to be in the mood for it, if I'm not in the mood for it, it doesn't taste nice. 54*

#### Where alcohol is obtained and who buys it

When purchasing alcohol under the legal age of 18 the corner shop or local off-licence was seen as the easy option.

*But how easy it is or you just get off licence shops that aren't very well known, they're usually the ones that'll just serve it to you. 56*

Parents, other adults, young people who looked older than they were and drug users were identified as people who could buy the alcohol.

*Personally, yeah I think it is (easy), because if it's not, well if it's not their parents going to buy it because I know, well a lot of my friends their parents will go out and buy them drinks. Or it'd be other people's parents getting it for my other friends or. I know a couple of my friends ask people in the street, give them money and say can you go in and get this, things like that but. So, I think it is quite easy for people to do it. But there's a lot of younger people, people younger than me, who don't look their age, who look a lot older than their age, so sometimes they can easily go in and they don't even ask for ID, so. But yeah so, I think it's quite easy for people to get it. 60*

Young women in particular found it relatively easy to look older than they were and buy alcohol at the corner shop.

*Not really (hard to obtain) because with make up on and that it makes you look older doesn't it? 54*

Some young people described how drug users were prepared to buy alcohol as a means of making a little money and also described the complexities of the process.

*Everyone knows someone that's had their life impacted by drugs. And then you just say oh there's so much money here, get us this and then you can keep*



*change. Or keep whatever's left and then they'll end up trying to stitch you up and buying you the cheap brand. So, you send them back in and then they get you the proper stuff and then you can give them all the money back. Or you ask them to go to the shop and then say I'll give you a tenner after you've been in. And they're more likely to do it... 56*

*I don't want to say it to offend people, some drug users like be outside and they'll go in for them. 47*

## **The influence of Social media on drinking behaviour**

### **What social media was used by young people**

There was a range of social media use reported from at one end of the spectrum - *All of them. 21* to at the other end - *(none) used I find it boring. 24*

Surprisingly to the researchers these young people overall used social media sparingly and over a limited range with Facebook the most common.

*Just Facebook and, I do have Twitter, but I just don't really go on that much...(Snapchat)I did have it, but it just doesn't interest me anymore; you get some weirdoes on it anyway. 23*

*I'm on Facebook and that's pretty much it, but I don't really go on it. Odd occasions I'll check it, see if anyone's texted. **Yeah, but it's more that you're looking at it is it rather than posting?** Yeah, looking to see if people's message not looking what people have posted. It's about connections, messaging people, not seeing what they're doing. Seeing what they're having for their breakfast. I don't want to see that. I'd rather go out and do something. 59*

Other platforms used as well as Facebook were mainly Snapchat and Instagram.

*Mostly? Snapchat... You can take photos, talk to people, it's sharing your life. 48*

### **Attitude to social media**

A number of the young people were either hostile or indifferent to the use of social media. For some they would rather spend time with people face to face and found that although they had social media on their phone it was not used.

*I put it on my phone and since then I haven't used it. I'd rather just go out and socialise with mates face to face. It's just better than over text because you don't know how they're feeling. You don't know if they're ill, you don't know if they're all right, you don't know if they want to go somewhere, you never know. 59*

For others the perceived hostility social media could cause put them off using it with any regularity.

*I used to, I used to post loads on Facebook and then it started causes fights. I think it's the root of all evil social media. I don't enjoy it, but I have it for family and friends. 54*

*I'm on them; I just don't really use them. Because all I see social media for is just causing arguments and people complaining. 56*

For some others the potential for causing trouble put them off using social media at all.

*Well I don't have social media or anything like that because it's just not something I'm really interested in because of all the gossip and things like that. **So, no Facebook, no Snapchat?** No, I'm not into the drama really...Especially with all the bad people who are also on social media as well. That you just don't know who you're going to run into really do you? So, I just tend to stay away from it all because there's too much drama all over Facebook and too many things happening and I'm just like oh God no. If somebody needs me then you can just ring me. 60*

### The influence of social media on drinking behaviour

Social media was seen as being able to influence drinking behaviour by both encouraging drinking and also inhibiting drinking.

*Yeah it can go either way for some people. It's just different ways of thinking. Like two different personalities.59*

Where the influence was to encourage drinking the impact was seen as being mostly on younger teenagers with a fear of missing out.

*Yeah because sometimes they see a lot of things on Facebook like kids going out drinking and they're like oh I want to go too, look they're having a great time, I want to go too. 52*

*I think it can because when you're going through and you're seeing everybody else doing it, you sit there and you think oh why aren't I doing that, why aren't I out having fun like that? So, then they go out and try it. They see that it's fun for that time until you wake up with a hangover the next morning or you wake up and you've got to clean your sick up or something, so. 54*

For the majority however as they grew older the influence of social media tended to put them off drinking and certainly put them off drunken behaviour.

*Because I just see people my age and you just see videos and it's like I don't want to put myself in that situation because they just look really bad. 47*

*Yeah because you do see videos of people being really stupid while they're drunk and making bad choices and everything, so I don't want to be like. So that's probably another influence as well. 58*

### Other media influences on drinking

Mainstream media and television were mentioned briefly as influencing starting drinking. It acted in the same way as social media by showing people having a good time drinking and prompting the idea that they were being left out of the fun.

*Usually just people on TV. Because that's what started me off...Like Love Island and people like that where they're just drinking constantly; Geordie Shore. You see it all and like oh they're having mint nights and then you're just like oh I could probably do the same. And then you start experiencing them and it's really good.56*

## Focus group analysis

### Professionals

Following the initial analysis a focus group was held with five professionals representing services who work with young people and alcohol issues including the YOT, Children's Services, Police and Public Health to test and validate findings.

Emerging findings were shared with the focus group and their responses and discussion are summarised and reported under thematic headings which arose from the framework analysis.

### Alcohol and Behaviour

Most of the professionals were not surprised by the finding that young people are drinking less. They were surprised by the graphs which showed little or no drinking currently and with pre-teen first acquaintance of alcohol for some participants.

In the professionals' experience there was a distinction between how much and how often young people drunk. Binge drinking was '*still there*' and the perception that more alcohol was drunk now than in the past in less time. That young people would tend to go out and drink '*the odd time*' say two nights a month but then drink a lot, and this was reinforced by a pre-drinking culture.

Potential explanations for less drinking included fear of social media and shaming, and a change in the benefit culture with young people having no benefits and therefore less money for alcohol. Children perhaps saw their parents drinking heavily and this put them off drinking themselves.

The professionals felt that for young people today drug use was accepted and not problematic, particularly cocaine. Cannabis use was thought to be increasing. Another change was that heroin users were not drinking to help with their drug habit, rather using spice which was cheaper.

### Alcohol and place

The perception amongst the professionals was that there was less public drinking across all ages and young people tended to drink at home, which is now normalised drinking. Some thought access to alcohol was easier - Parents are buying drink for their children and attempting to control early drinking experiences. '*Parents will go out and buy our kids alcohol...they will buy their kid a fake ID*'.

Young people were seen to be going into town where ID was not checked to the same extent as previously and fake ID were available. Unlike ten years ago police were rarely taking alcohol off young people in the street. This only occurred where parties spilled over into the street from house parties.

### The influence of social media on drinking behaviour

The feeling was that young people were '*creating a culture of their own*' spending more time in than out using social media and the internet, with one of the potential explanations for less drinking being an associated fear of social media and shaming.

## Young people advisory group

Although a different demographic from the NEET group they gave some support to the view that young people are drinking less although drinking still played a part in their own and friend's lives. For example:

*... was in hospital because her drink was spiked at a party*

*It is a lot easier to get into pubs and clubs now - some places just let you in*

*When we were 14-16 we had parties but now we go round town*

*Social media is important - I feel I am missing out when I see my friends on Snapchat.*

## Comment

There is some correlation between the professional focus group and the Advisory Group in that it is now apparently much easier to get into pubs under age than it was previously. This has removed the focus of young people drinking from the street towards clubs. It may be that NEET are consequently excluded by a lack of money which contributes to them both drinking less and drinking in the home. Overall the professional focus group and young person Advisory Group provide a level of triangulation of data and reinforce confidence in the interview analysis.

## Discussion

The starting point for both our original research which collected data ten years ago and our current follow up work is the notion of transition and drinking styles, in the move from childhood to adulthood and from education to employment, as being central to understanding young people's drinking behaviour. Little was and is still known about how the drinking patterns of those not in education or employment both men and women, develop over time. They are described as hard to reach regarding both service delivery and as research participants for good reasons.

Our original research concluded:

*The young people we talked to were drinking a lot of alcohol, most of them saw drinking as an important part of their social life and part of having fun. Drinking led to other activities from the risky but enjoyable 'messaging about', to being out of control, and more problematic behaviours including fighting, unprotected sex, and in some cases rape and death. (Nelson and Tabberer 2015:438)*

Our current research appears to indicate there have been changes in the drinking behaviour of young people described as NEET. Before exploring these changes it is important to add a word of caution as to whether we can be sure we have been talking to the same demographic group of people in both research projects. Changes in social and government policy outlined in the background to the report required different sampling processes with the consequence that we cannot be sure they are the same cohort of young people; some almost certainly are but others may not be.

In contrast to our earlier work where all but one of our interviewees were regular drinkers, many of the young people we interviewed in the current research drank little or no alcohol

and drinking played little part in their lives. In particular in our first study young women were drinking a lot, now they were not. Alcohol had been tried and drinking undertaken in an experimental and celebratory manner, often to excess, but this had taken place at an earlier age. Exposure to drunkenness and risky behaviour tended to occur in their early teens. By seventeen they had *grown up* and drinking and particular drunken behaviour and losing control was seen as *stupid*.

Where young people drank also appeared to have changed emphasis. In our earlier study the park and street drinking were central. Now drinking in the park occurred primarily only at an early age when drinking had to be hidden from parents. In our earlier research drinking in the park consisted of a group of mixed ages and included older young people who were old enough to drink legally but still chose the park or other public spaces. The predominance now of younger people drinking together and experimenting with alcohol perhaps for the first time, potentially increases the risk to that group early in their drinking career who no longer have the company of more experienced drinkers.

As the young people grew up street drinking was described as unsafe and undesirable with drinking mostly occurring in friend's houses where parents tolerated or even encouraged drinking. Parental involvement in young people's drinking was a recurring theme, whether that be hosting the drinking, encouraging early drinking experiences or buying alcohol. This may be an attempt to control their children's drinking regarding amount and place but as the focus group identified early exposure to alcohol is not linked to health benefits. Public health messages could usefully target parents alongside young people.

The apparent reduction in street drinking, and a reduction in alcohol use overall can be seen as contributing to a reduction in risky behaviour identified in the first study and improving wellbeing. However, for a group described as NEET and already socially and economically isolated, the removal of a community of drinkers potentially removes the one group to which they could belong, increasing isolation.

Certainly, the activities our interviewees undertook rarely involved socially going out to a pub or club. Isolated activities such as playing computer games or watching films predominated. For a group who described themselves as grown up at seventeen there was a curious mix of younger age activity such as riding bikes or playing football set against much rarer going out behaviour of a maturity beyond their years. One possible explanation is that NEET are perhaps drinking less and going out less because they cannot afford to drink in clubs. The change in benefit policy means they have no money and therefore cannot afford the cost of drinks in pubs or clubs. Consequently, when alcohol is bought it is from the corner shop or local off-licence, where it is cheap and most readily available for the under aged, and drunk at home with small groups of friends. This outcome perhaps gives some weight to the view that making alcohol expensive relative to income leads to reduced drinking amongst some sections of the community.

Potentially exclusion from access to alcohol through finance could make young people turn to different drugs, legal and illegal, which are cheaper and from which they can perhaps make money by selling on. There was some evidence in our sample of alcohol acting as a gateway drug and of young people using cheaper legal and illegal drugs. The use of other drugs appeared to be something that occurred after younger early experimental drinking. Initially alongside alcohol. The professional focus group certainly supported the view that drug use was now acceptable amongst young people and increasingly accepted by their parents.

Interestingly as public drunkenness was disapproved of so was losing control through drugs. Images of drunkenness and being out of control on social media as in real life were given as reasons to not drink rather more than being seen as encouraging drinking. Surprisingly to the researchers these young people overall used social media sparingly and over a limited range with Facebook the most common. The influence of social media in encouraging drinking was seen as being mostly on younger teenagers. It acted by making people feel left out and wondering why they were not having as much fun as those they saw on Facebook. Mainstream media and television were described by a small number as acting in the same way. As they became older the images were described less as fun and more as people looking stupid.

It is possible to surmise that some of the descriptions of behaviour seen on social media as stupid is perhaps a form of rationalisation. Young people who are NEET can see the drinking behaviour of others such as students and the more affluent but cannot join in for reasons of poverty and finance. The social divisions of the haves and the have not are made plain. Consequently alcohol, drunken behaviour initially thought of and described as fun alongside the social media platforms on which the images are represented, are not for them.

## Recommendations

There are perhaps messages here for both public health and individual interventions regarding safe drinking.

- Risky and harmful behaviours as a result of drinking alcohol are occurring at an early age and it seems unlikely this behaviour is restricted to those subsequently NEET. If interventions are to have impact they must target a younger age group; by thirteen it is perhaps too late.
- The overall message of young people drinking less should not obscure the small number drinking in a therapeutic manner who may require more targeted support.
- More research is required to identify the change agents leading to reduced drinking, so that appropriate interventions can be put in place to support positive trends whilst guarding against impacts on wider measures of wellbeing and social isolation.

## Conclusions

This project was an in-depth qualitative exploration of the drinking behaviours of young people described as NEET which sought to replicate a study where data collection occurred ten years ago, in order to identify changes in a group where the norms of transition to employment or study are lacking. The findings support the research literature about young people in general - young people described as NEET are drinking less than they were ten years ago. In particular in the original study young women were drinking a lot, now they are not.

There are of course exceptions, particularly those drinking for therapeutic or adaptive reasons to overcome, or help manage, previous adverse life experiences. Our original research described the NEET population as hard to reach and easy to ignore. In making statements about overall drinking behaviour it is important not to ignore those engaged in harmful drinking and to be mindful of their specific needs.

In a sense the young people we talked to describe themselves as simply losing interest in drinking. It was something they tried in early teenage years but is now something in which they no longer want to engage. It is difficult to point to any one specific reason for this apparent change in behaviour and it may in fact be a combination of social policy changes allied with more individualistic psycho-social influences which has brought about change. More research is required to identify the change agents, so that appropriate interventions can be put in place to support positive trends, whilst guarding against adverse impacts on wider measures of wellbeing and social isolation.

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