

## **Response from the National Children's Bureau (NCB) to the National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy consultation document**

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) works to identify and promote the well-being and interests of all children and young people across every aspect of their lives. We encourage professionals and policy makers to see the needs of the whole child, and emphasise the importance of multidisciplinary, cross-agency partnerships. We also believe that children and young people themselves should play an active role in developing the policies which affect them. The Drug Education Forum (DEF) is part of NCB, and is sending in a separate response to this consultation.

We welcome the publication of the consultation document.

### **Alcohol and the Family**

NCB agrees that the areas of enquiry identified in the document are the correct ones, with the exception of the omission of the category of 'family'. Alcohol problems do not always lead to 'public' disorder and in fact are often hidden, yet they have a direct impact on family dysfunction, and can lead to violence against children as well as other adults. There is some anecdotal evidence to indicate that an increasing number of admissions to the looked after system are due to parental substance misuse, sometimes combined with mental health problems.

The Government has placed great emphasis on the need to respond quickly to the ways in which poor parenting can lead to a child failing to attend school or becoming involved in criminal activity, or in extreme cases to a child protection investigation. And there is a great deal of attention paid to smoking, alcohol and drug taking among the young. However, though very much at risk, children affected by or caring for parents with alcohol problems receive little consideration in national drugs or alcohol policies. Yet the day-to-day consequences for children and young people who live with such parental behaviour patterns are profound, though the treatment services which are available remain designed to deal with adults in isolation from their family environments.

Research evidence shows that the effects of parental alcohol or drug use on family functioning can be acute, and that the children can show their distress in the following ways:

- Anti-social behaviour or conduct disorder;
- Problems in school including poor performance, increased aggression or truancy;
- Psychosomatic problems ranging from bed-wetting to low self-esteem, withdrawal and depression; and
- A higher incidence of their own involvement with alcohol and drugs somewhat earlier than their peers.

Additionally, the child in this home environment is at a higher risk from family violence; marital conflict; separation, divorce and the loss of a parent; and inconsistent or erratic parenting including neglect [1].

NCB recommends that the alcohol harm reduction strategy includes consideration of the needs of children growing up in these families or those entering the public care system due to parental substance misuse, and that specific multi-agency strategies be put in place to support them. In particular, children affected by parental substance misuse should be considered as *children in need* in order to trigger the appropriate assessments and access to services.

### **Use of 'legal' and 'illegal' substances and the development of a holistic Substance Misuse Strategy**

NCB understands that the development of a discreet alcohol harm reduction strategy helps to highlight the importance of tackling alcohol misuse. However, for young people especially, the Government should respond to underage drinking and illegal drug-taking together.

The latest Dept of Health survey includes intriguing information (para 11.4) which indicates that "smoking and drinking status were significant predictors for drug use . . . for both boys and girls, even when adjusted for age", as well as confirming that drug use is not only associated with smoking and drinking but also other risk-taking behaviours such as early sexual activity. NCB would like to see the alcohol strategy offer some steer through the oft-accepted but seldom analysed gateway theory – the hypothesis that alcohol, tobacco and soft drug use are predictors of hard drug use and criminal activity. For example, a recent Home Office study [2] has demonstrated the deficiencies and complexity of this argument, showing that alcohol and drug use and crime are more strongly linked to individual and social situations.

Risk-taking behaviours among the young are multi-faceted [3,4]; they need to be considered jointly in the context of children's lives within their family and community. A coordinated approach to policy development round alcohol and drug use is required to deal more holistically with elements ranging from prevention and education, to health promotion, to treatment – to respond to substance use as a public health, social care, educational and criminal justice issue. We know that current criminal justice measures do not act as a deterrent to drug and alcohol use among the young and that these need to be re-evaluated as a matter of urgency.

Recreational drug use among the young is common [5], and for the majority of young people, both drinking and drug use are social activities where the intention is to feel some immediate effect – intoxication, excitement, etc. And all of this activity is part of the experience of testing boundaries and taking risks in a 'safe place': with their friends.

Therefore, NCB would like to see the alcohol harm reduction strategy form part of a coordinated strategy to deal with substance misuse.

### **Alcohol Education**

Finally, we are happy to see that education receives such attention in the strategy. However, consultations undertaken with young people by the DEF demonstrate that the message being communicated is confused, and therefore confusing. Public awareness campaigns are targeted at those who can drink legally, so seem irrelevant to underage drinkers. Yet the statistics indicate that underage drinking is common. In addition to school-based drugs and alcohol education which rightly receive increased attention in the new Home Office updated drugs strategy, the Government

should consider whether there is a need for an intelligent reappraisal of ways to use the media to reach those young people who, regardless of legal deterrents, will drink.

**References:**

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[2] Pudney, S (2002). The Road to Ruin? Sequences of Initiation into drug use and offending by young people in Britain, Home Office Research Study 253.

[3] Green, E, Mitchell, W, and Bunton, R (2000) Contextualizing risk and danger: an analysis of young people's perceptions of risk. Journal of Youth Studies, vol.3, no.2 (Jun). pp109-126).

[4] Maggs, J L, and others (1997) Psychosocial resources, adolescent risk behaviour and young adult adjustment: is risk taking more dangerous for some than others? Journal of Adolescence, vol.20, no.1 (Feb). pp103-119.

[5] Dept of Health (2002) Drug use, smoking and drinking in 2001. TSO. Available at: <http://www.doh.gov.uk/public/sddsurvey01.pdf>

Lisa Payne  
Principal Policy Officer  
National Children's Bureau  
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