Drugs and alcohol – young people

Introduction
Drug and alcohol misuse pose a significant risk to a young person’s physical and psychological health and development. The use of legal and illegal drugs by young people is associated with immediate and long term risks to their health and wellbeing, particularly the relationship between drug use and mental health. Over time drug users increase the risk of dependence.

The chief medical officer (CMO) advises that the healthiest and best option is ‘an alcohol-free childhood’. Alcohol use at a young age, particularly heavy and regular drinking can result in physical and mental health problems including:

- Over 60 medical conditions including alcohol poisoning, cirrhosis of the liver, psychiatric, neurological, gastrointestinal, cardiovascular condition and several types of cancer.
- Impaired brain development.
- Inability to work and socialise; truancy, unemployment, relationship breakdown.
- Violence and anti-social behavior including youth offending.
- Unprotected sex leading to unplanned teenage pregnancy, and sexually transmitted infections.

Among young people in drug and alcohol treatment in England, Cannabis is the most used drug and its use among young people is on the increase in the last four years. Alcohol is the second most used substance among young people in drug and alcohol treatment and its use is decreasing among young people in treatment. Despite the downward trend in alcohol use among young people in England, the level of alcohol consumption in England is still higher than in most other European countries.

Figure 50: Trends in illicit drug use among young people.

Substance in use by young people in treatment in England

Source: Public Health England (PHE)

Tackling the root causes of drug and alcohol problems and reducing the long term negative effects on health, wellbeing and quality of life is key and part of the national strategy on drug use.

Risk factors and vulnerable groups
The majority of young people who seek help for substance misuse have other emotional or social problems, such as self-harming, offending and family issues. They are also less likely to be in
education, employment or training. There is greater risk of problem drug and alcohol use amongst children and young people who are:

- In local authority care.
- Truant or excluded from school;
  - Facing challenges in their academic study.
  - Who are not in education, employment, training (NEET).
  - Peer pressure.
- Experiencing abuse or neglect.
- Offenders and are involved in anti-social behavior.
- Experienced early sexual activity.
- Exposed to parental substance misuse.

This has important implications for effective co-ordination, interagency working and information sharing.

**What is the evidence base?**

NICE has produced guidance on interventions to *reduce substance misuse among vulnerable young people* and recommends that local areas should have a strategy to reduce substance misuse in vulnerable young people in their area. Services and professionals should identify young people at risk of using drugs, and refer them to services that can support them. These services should include family based support and parental skills training.

NICE has also published a range of guidance covering the causes and consequences of drug misuse.

Public Health England has produced good practice prompts for planning comprehensive interventions. The pack includes above about early intervention, specialist services and the workforce required to deliver effective interventions.

**Local picture**

In Luton, there are almost 12,000 young people under the age of 18 who live with parents who misuse alcohol and or drugs. 57% of adults in drug treatment have children living with them and 64% of adults in treatment for alcohol use have children living with them.

**Drug use:**

In Luton, there are 47 young people under 18 (14-17 years old) in drug treatment. 91% of the young people are in treatment for cannabis use, 60% for alcohol use, and less than 5% of them are being treated for cocaine use.

**Alcohol use:**

The following data from Public Health England demonstrates the extent of drug and alcohol treatment for young people across Luton during 2012/13 and was published in 2013/14:

The crude rate per 1,000 population of young people in Luton aged 15-24 who use opiates and/or crack cocaine is 8.1 whereas in Birmingham, one of Luton’s direct comparator areas, it is 5.3. (2012/13). The crude rate per 1,000 population for young people in Luton who are currently receiving structured drug and alcohol treatment is 1.8 whereas Birmingham recorded 3.9. (2012/13).
This indicates that Luton has a greater prevalence of opiate and/or crack cocaine use among young people aged 15-24 and fewer young people access drug and alcohol treatment when compared with comparators. A considerable improvement in the level of treatment uptake among young people in Luton who use opiates and/or crack cocaine is required.

Of those young people in drug and alcohol treatment in Luton, 73% are aged 15 and under, 57% of these are young men and 51% of those in treatment were recorded as white British.

The most commonly used drug among young people in treatment is cannabis and 83% recorded cannabis as the primary drug of choice. 66% recorded that alcohol was their main problem substance.

**Drug and alcohol related offences**

The Luton Youth Offending Service (YOS) records show that during 2013/14 there were 51 young people charged with drug related offences, 45 for possession, 6 for drug supply and 24 young people received a deferred decision.

**Drug/alcohol-related admissions**

The latest publication from the National Child and Maternal Health Intelligence Network shows hospital admissions due to alcohol-specific conditions for young people 18 years and under is decreasing in Luton, while admissions due to drug use in young people aged 15 to 24 years has increased. This is shown in Figure 51 and 52 and is similar to the national pattern and amongst statistical neighbours.

**Figure 51: Hospital admissions due to alcohol specific conditions (aged 18 yrs and under)**

![Graph showing hospital admissions due to alcohol specific conditions](image-url)
Figure 52: Hospital admissions due to substance misuse (aged 15-24)

Drug and alcohol treatment

In 2013/14, 100% of people referred for treatment to the Luton Young Person’s Drug and Alcohol Service were seen within three weeks, with 55% of the referrals coming from the Justice System.

21% of those in treatment spent 12 weeks or less in treatment. PHE states that for treatment to be considered as effective it needs to have lasted more than 12 weeks or be successfully completed within 12 weeks. The average length of time in treatment in Luton is 44.73 weeks, therefore the majority of young people are considered to be in effective treatment.

The treatment outcome for this cohort was: 28% of young people in treatment discharged as drug free and 39% discharged as occasional users.

New Psychoactive Substances

Luton has experienced an increase in problems recently with new psychoactive substances, ‘legal highs’. Young people have been taken to hospital as a result of their use and they are seen as a problem on the streets and their use contributes to anti-social behaviour.

What is being done locally?

In 2012, a Local Alcohol Use Needs Assessment was completed and informed the 2012 – 2015 Luton Alcohol Strategy; the primary aim of which is to prevent young people from being harmed from alcohol use by:

- Continually improving the quality of prevention services for young people and ensuring support for the most vulnerable
- Exploring the use of the national Community Alcohol Partnership framework for use in wards or discreet areas of the town that have evidence of high rates of under-age drinking
- Increasing the promotion of support services available to children living with adults who use alcohol harmfully.
A Young Person’s Drug and Alcohol Needs Assessment is currently being undertaken which will inform a new Young Person’s Drug and Alcohol Strategy which will be completed in 2015.

In delivery of the strategy, a number of workshops on drugs and alcohol have been delivered in Luton schools through various community groups where parents are also encouraged to attend. They provide advice focused on dealing with problems of drug and alcohol among young people.

SNAP is a young people’s service provider in Luton and offering a creative arts drop-in for vulnerable young people and sessions in schools for young people who are vulnerable and at risk of school exclusion.

To restrict supply, Trading Standards runs a number of ‘secret-shopper’ exercises during the year that specifically target the off-sale trade. A scheme called Challenge 25 is a retailing strategy that targets anyone under the age of 18 who needs to carry ID when buying alcohol. It also encourages retailers to request proof of age before a purchase is made. The scheme builds on the successes of the Challenge 21 scheme developed by the Retail Alcohol Standards Group in 2005 and is regarded as an effective tool to tackle underage purchases.

There are various drug and alcohol services in Luton commissioned to firstly prevent drug and alcohol use by young people across Luton whilst dealing with problematic drug and alcohol use through the provision of effective support and interventions for young people and their families.

The young people’s drug and alcohol service in Luton, SAFE (Support, Advice, Facts and Education) has been commissioned and for young people up to the age of 25 which includes support for young people transitioning to adult services. The services provided include:

- Structured intervention for young people who use drugs and alcohol to support them to become drug and alcohol free or an occasional safe user, for example, controlled drinking
- Brief interventions provided for young people and their families, especially for young people who are most vulnerable and at high risk
- Workers supporting AandE services between midnight and 5.00 am on Friday and Saturday nights providing information and brief interventions for young people and their families admitted following excessive alcohol use
- Drug and alcohol worker in YOS who provides advice, support and interventions for young people.

Young people who use drugs and alcohol often face additional lifestyle issues such as smoking and sexual health problems. Referrals can be made to services such as Brook, GUM and stop smoking services. These referrals can be made through self-referral, GP or through the YP Drug and Alcohol service.

The council wishes to be proactive about legal highs to ensure Luton is as resilient as it can be to the changes in the drug landscape and that young people and others are not harmed by these substances. A blanket ban on the sale of some substances which is aimed to reduce availability is currently being considered nationally.
**Perspective of public/service users**

Informal conversations with service users suggest many young people’s initial access to services is via supporting a friend. There is a lack of knowledge among young people on the side effects of increasing alcohol intake while taking medication or increasing medication as a substitute for lack of alcohol.

Young people report that peer pressure can play a significant factor in their drinking. Consequently, it is often felt there is a lack of things to do once drinking had reduced, therefore a need to provide alternative activities for young people to do once drinking has reduced.

**Priorities**

Central to the recommendations is the implementation of the Luton young person’s drug and alcohol strategy which will aim to reduce the impact of drugs and alcohol on young people in Luton, specifically:

1. Increase the number of young people accessing targeted services by changing service provision.
3. Increase the successful completion rate of young people exiting interventions by 10% by changing the delivery model.
4. Reduce the number of drug and alcohol related hospital admissions for young people by investing in early intervention and prevention.
References


