Drinkaware organised a very interesting conference in February looking to understand how people can be nudged into better behaviours, what the motivations for drinking to drunkenness are and providing compelling arguments for parents to delay the acceptability of drinking among teenagers.

**The adolescent brain and alcohol**

Sarah-Jayne Blakmore, Professor in Cognitive Neuroscience at UCL presented good evidence of the physical and medical reasons why parents should avoid giving their teenagers access to alcohol. The brain loses grey matter as it matures, from age 4 until age 21, with a peak of grey matter at puberty, before it declines rapidly in volume - this is called synaptic pruning in adolescence when some synapses are strengthened and some become obsolete. The pre frontal cortex (PFC) is the last area to develop - this helps explain teenage risk taking as the PFC is responsible for self control, planning, inhibitions, self awareness, social attraction and problem solving for example. There is strengthening evidence that adolescent alcohol use leads to a smaller brain volume and less grey matter.

The conscious brain ‘knows’ what we should do but the unconscious brain drives automatic and repetitive behaviour as the human brain is a ‘habit machine’. Hence if we wish to change behaviour, we have to change what people do rather than what they know and disrupt regular habits and routines, what are known as habit chains.

Fiona Seymour and Simon Christmas reported on motivators for drunken nights out and looked at the contrasting patterns of drinking among different age groups. For example, under 24s drink as much as 44 year-olds, but those over 40 drink little and often whilst those under 35 are more likely to drink heavily on one night of the week and not at all in between and their motivation for drinking is to get drunk. 42% of those who go out pre drink with friends before they go out - but this is lead by women - 48% pre load with friends versus 35% of men and looking at research, Christmas suggests that up to 22 units will be drunk at the end of a night out on the town.
We must not forget that the young people also enjoy these nights out where extreme behaviour is permitted... but certain rules apply; you look after your mates and you try and walk away from trouble. Christmas suggests that you need to change the acceptability of the consequences of drunkenness (sexual advances, violence and accidents) but few solutions were offered as to how to change the required drunkenness and what could replace the social bonding mechanism and controlled loss of control sought by those engaging in such behaviours.

As a result, not surprisingly, 38% of those who drink at least once a week were unable to remember what happened the night before. This rises to 62% of those who get drunk every time they go out.

22% of those who drink at least once a week have injured themselves. This rises to 43% of those who get drunk every time they go out and 45% of those who pre-loaded. 19% of those who drink at least once a week have got into a fight or argument, rising to 42% of those who get drunk every time they go out and 23% of those who pre-loaded.
Results of 2 pilots

Could a campaign featuring lower alcohol choices nudge people into healthier choices at point of purchase?

An interesting pilot took place in several ASDA stores to ascertain whether posters and signage featuring lower alcohol choices could nudge consumers into choosing lower alcohol products. The pilot did not show any effect and in fact revealed resistance to nannying advice and interference by consumers.

Piloting of know your units packs in pharmacies across Berkshire

A partnership gave consumers free packs containing a unit measure, calories and unit wheel and information leaflets via pharmacies. The kit contained a questionnaire that asked if recipients had changed their behaviour as a result of using the kit. The trial results were not measured formally and relied on those who returned forms voluntarily, but suggested that recipients found the kits useful, surprising and if they were drinking too much, it encouraged them to think about their glass size and the number of units in their drinks, suggesting extension of the programme would be useful, perhaps via Doctors surgeries.

drinkaware.co.uk/media/226320/blakemore_