Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England in 2005

Edited by Elizabeth Fuller

A survey carried out for The Information Centre for health and social care by the National Centre for Social Research and the National Foundation for Educational Research
This booklet is a summary of the report *Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England in 2005*. It is also available on The Information Centre website, as is the main report: http://www.ic.nhs.uk/pubs/youngpeopledruguse-smoking-drinking2005. An anonymised dataset will be lodged with the ESRC Data Archive at the University of Essex. Reports and data files from earlier surveys in the series are also available (see page 28).
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Background and targets

This is the latest in a series of surveys of secondary school children in England which provides the national estimates of the proportions of young people aged 11 to 15 who smoke, drink alcohol or take illegal drugs. The first survey in the series, carried out in 1982, provided estimates of the prevalence of smoking among pupils and described their smoking behaviour. Similar surveys were carried out every two years until 1998, and annually since then. Questions on drinking alcohol were included for the first time in 1988, and the 1998 survey was the first to include questions about drug use.

Each survey since 1998 has included a core section of questions covering the following:
- Smoking status, and the number of cigarettes smoked in the last week;
- Drinking status, and alcoholic drinks consumed in the last week; and
- For individual drugs, awareness, whether tried and when last used.

Since 2000, additional questions have focused in alternate years on drug taking (in 2001, 2003 and 2005) or smoking and drinking (in 2000, 2002 and 2004). This long-established series of national surveys acts as an official measure of progress towards targets for reducing smoking and drug use among young people.

The Updated Drug Strategy\(^1\) (December 2002) reasserted the government’s commitment to reducing drug use among young people but with a new emphasis on vulnerable young people. Key performance targets are measured by this survey series against the 2001 baseline for 11 to 15 year olds. These include reducing the use of Class A drugs and the frequent use of any illicit drug amongst all young people under the age of 25, and especially by the most vulnerable young people.

The current target for reducing children’s smoking was set out in Smoking Kills, A White Paper on Tobacco\(^2\) and is measured against a 1996 baseline of 13% of 11 to 15 year olds. The target is to reduce regular smoking among children to 11% by 2005, and to 9% or less by 2010.

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Sample design

The survey was conducted in schools by asking pre-selected groups of pupils to complete a confidential questionnaire. Both the schools and pupils were selected randomly so that every eligible child had an equal chance of inclusion in the study.

The survey population (that is, the coverage of the survey) is pupils in school years 7 to 11 in England. Therefore, those taking part are mainly aged 11 to 15. Schools with any pupils in these school years are eligible for selection, with the exception of special schools. All other types of school, state and independent, are included. More detail about the survey design can be found in Appendix A of the main report.

In total, 305 schools agreed to take part in the survey out of the 450 selected, a response rate of 68%. Fieldwork was conducted in the autumn term of 2005. Within each school approximately 35 pupils from across all classes in school years 7 to 11 were selected to take part. The response from selected pupils in participating schools was 89%, yielding a total of 9,202 completed usable questionnaires. The product of the school and pupil rates gave an overall response of 60%.
Prevalence of drug taking

The prevalence of drug use among pupils aged 11 to 15 has remained steady since 2001. In 2005, 11% of pupils had taken drugs in the last month, around the same proportion as in 2004. Nineteen percent of pupils had taken drugs in the last year, and 28% reported having ever taken drugs, both slightly increased from 2004.

In 2005, boys and girls were equally likely to have taken drugs. The prevalence of drug use increased with age. For example, the proportion of pupils who had taken drugs in the last year rose from 6% of 11 year olds to 34% of 15 year olds, and there were corresponding rises for the prevalence of any drug use and drug use in the last month.
Types of drugs taken in the last year

Cannabis was the most commonly used drug. In 2005, 12% of pupils had taken it in the last year. Cannabis use was at lower levels in 2004 and 2005 than between 2001 and 2003.

In 2005, 7% of pupils had sniffed volatile substances such as glue, gas and solvents in the last year, and 4% had used poppers. Other drugs had been used by no more than 2% of pupils in the last year. For most drugs, levels of use have remained steady since 2001. Between 2004 and 2005, the proportions of pupils who had taken volatile substances in the last year increased slightly and the same was true of cocaine. The proportion of pupils who had taken any Class A drugs in the last year (4%) has not changed since 2001.

### Whether 15 year olds had used individual drugs in last year: 1998-2005

*Cannabis*

*Cannabis* was the most commonly used drug. In 2005, 12% of pupils had taken it in the last year. Cannabis use was at lower levels in 2004 and 2005 than between 2001 and 2003.

*Poppers*

In 2005, 7% of pupils had sniffed volatile substances such as glue, gas and solvents in the last year, and 4% had used poppers. Other drugs had been used by no more than 2% of pupils in the last year. For most drugs, levels of use have remained steady since 2001. Between 2004 and 2005, the proportions of pupils who had taken volatile substances in the last year increased slightly and the same was true of cocaine. The proportion of pupils who had taken any Class A drugs in the last year (4%) has not changed since 2001.

*Glue, gas, aerosols or solvents*

*Glue, gas, aerosols or solvents* was sniffed by 4% of pupils in 2005, and 2% of pupils in 2004. The proportion of pupils who had sniffed volatile substances in the last year increased slightly between 2004 and 2005, and the same was true of cocaine. The proportion of pupils who had taken any Class A drugs in the last year (4%) has not changed since 2001.
Usual frequency of drug taking

In 2005, 6% of all pupils said that they usually took drugs once a month or more. Among pupils who had taken drugs in the last year, 37% said they took drugs at least once a month, including 7% who said they took them most days. Just over a quarter (26%) of pupils who had taken drugs in the last year reported that they had only ever used drugs once.

Older pupils were more likely to have taken drugs and did so more frequently than younger pupils.

Usual frequency of drug use, by age

Pupils who used drugs in the last year

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Once or twice a month</th>
<th>At least once a week</th>
<th>Most days</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11-12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reactions to taking drugs

Pupils were more likely to report a good experience than a bad experience the first time they took drugs (46% and 14% respectively). Two in five pupils (40%) who had taken drugs said that they felt no different the first time they did so. Pupils were more likely to report a good experience on the most recent occasion; 65% said they felt good the last time they used drugs, 10% felt bad and 25% said they felt no different.

Pupils whose first experience of drug use was positive were more likely than those who had a bad or indifferent experience to have taken drugs in the last year and to have taken them more than once.
Reasons for taking drugs

Pupils were most likely to have taken drugs for the first time ‘to see what it was like’ (57%). Other common reasons for trying drugs the first time included ‘to get high or feel good’ (22%) and ‘because my friends were doing it’ (18%).

The reasons pupils took drugs on the most recent occasion were not the same. Pupils were most likely to have taken drugs the last time ‘to get high or feel good’ (44%), followed by ‘to see what it was like’ (31%), because they ‘had nothing better to do’ (20%) and ‘because my friends were doing it’ (17%).

Why took drugs on first and last occasion

(First occasion) Pupils who had taken drugs
(Last occasion) Pupils who had taken drugs in last year and taken drugs more than once

- See what it was like
- Get high/Feel good
- Friends were doing it
- Nothing better to do
- Offered drugs
- Forget problems
- Dare
- Cool

Percent

First occasion
Most recent occasion (not first use)
Who pupils took drugs with

Pupils were most likely to have taken drugs on the most recent occasion with friends (89%), and unlikely to have taken drugs alone (8%). Girls were most likely to have been with a group of friends of both sexes (53%), while boys were most likely to have taken drugs with same sex friends (50%). Younger pupils were more likely than older pupils to have been alone on the last occasion they took drugs (13% of 11 to 13 year olds compared with 5% of 15 year olds).

Who took drugs with on last occasion (last year, not first occasion), by sex

Pupils who took drugs in last year, and have taken drugs more than once

- Girlfriend/boyfriend
- Same sex friends
- Opposite sex friends
- Friends of both sexes

Percent

Boys
Girls
Whether pupils have been offered drugs

In 2005, 39% of pupils had ever been offered drugs, an increase from 36% in 2004. This proportion has remained broadly stable since 2001, between 36% and 42%. In 2005, as in previous survey years, boys were more likely than girls to have ever been offered drugs (41%, compared with 38%).

Pupils were most likely to have ever been offered cannabis (25%), followed by volatile substances (18%), poppers (12%), and magic mushrooms (11%). Less than 10% of pupils had been offered any other drug.
Reasons for refusing drugs

Four out of five pupils who had been offered drugs had refused them on at least one occasion. The most common reasons for refusing were ‘I just didn’t want to take them’ (40% of pupils who had been offered drugs), ‘taking drugs is wrong’ (32%), ‘I didn’t want to get addicted’ (32%), and ‘I thought they were dangerous’ (31%).

![Graph showing reasons refused drugs among those ever offered drugs: 1999-2005](image)
How easy pupils think it would be to obtain drugs

A third (33%) of pupils thought it would be easy to obtain any illegal drugs, 18% thought it would be easy to get cocaine or crack and 12% thought it would be easy to get heroin. The proportion of pupils who perceived obtaining illegal drugs to be easy increased with age.

About half of all pupils (47%) did not know how easy or difficult it would be to obtain illegal drugs.

Pupils were more likely to think that it would be easy to get drugs if they had ever been offered them. For example, 57% of pupils who had been offered cocaine or crack thought that they would be easy to obtain, compared with 12% of pupils who had never been offered those drugs.
Beliefs about smoking, drinking and drug taking

Pupils were inclined to overestimate how many people of their own age smoked or drank alcohol, but likely to underestimate how many took drugs.

Pupils’ beliefs were related to their own behaviour. Those who had recently smoked, drunk alcohol or taken drugs were likely to believe that the same behaviour was more common among others in their age group than those who had not smoked, drunk or taken drugs. For example, 24% of 15 year olds who had never taken drugs thought that half or more people their age took drugs, and this proportion increased to 38% of those who had taken drugs but not in the last year, 54% of those who had taken drugs on one to five occasions and 68% of those who had taken drugs on six or more occasions.

### Perceived number of people of 15 year old pupils’ age who take drugs, by number of occasions ever taken drugs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pupils aged 15</th>
<th>Never taken</th>
<th>Not taken in last year</th>
<th>1-5 occasions</th>
<th>6+ occasions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half or more</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England in 2005 13
Attitudes to smoking, drinking and drug taking

Pupils were asked whether they thought it was OK to try different behaviours once, and whether it was OK to do them once a week. Drinking alcohol was the most acceptable – 63% of pupils thought it OK to try drinking alcohol once, and 44% thought it OK to drink once a week. Smoking and getting drunk were less acceptable. Forty four percent of pupils thought it was OK to try smoking, 22% to smoke once a week, and 28% thought it OK to get drunk once, 18% to get drunk every week. Relatively small proportions of pupils approved of trying cannabis (12%), glue sniffing (9%) or cocaine (4%), or of using these drugs once a week (8%, 4% and 2% respectively).
Family attitudes towards drug taking

Almost all pupils felt that, if they took drugs, their families would either try to stop them (84%) or try to persuade them not to (14%). Just 1% said that their family would do nothing about their drug taking, and less than 1% said that their families would encourage them to take drugs.

Pupils’ perceptions of their families’ attitudes were related to their own drug taking experience; the more times pupils had taken drugs, the less likely they were to think that their parents would take a hard line about drug taking. For example, 87% of pupils who had never taken drugs thought their parents would try to stop them doing so, compared with 61% of those who had taken them on more than ten occasions. Similarly, 9% of those who had taken drugs on more than ten occasions thought their parents would do nothing to stop them compared with less than 1% of pupils who had never taken drugs.

### Perceived family attitudes to taking drugs, by number of occasions ever taken drugs

_Pupils who expressed an opinion_

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Try to persuade</th>
<th>Try to stop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never taken drugs</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not taken drugs in last year</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5 occasions</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 occasions</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than 10 occasions</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Information about drugs, smoking and alcohol

Pupils felt that television (78%), parents (76%) and teachers (70%) were the most helpful sources of information about smoking, alcohol and drugs, followed by newspapers or magazines (62%) and friends (54%). Pupils were least likely to have obtained helpful information on smoking, alcohol and drugs from the government’s information and advice campaign, FRANK\(^3\) (21%) or from helplines (20%).

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3 The government set up Talk to FRANK, an advice and information campaign, in 2003. Talk to FRANK is targeted at 11 to 21 year olds and the parents of 11 to 18 year olds in England and Wales. Its resources include a website (www.talktofrank.com), a telephone helpline, advertising and resources for drug professionals.

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Sources of helpful information about smoking, alcohol and drugs

*All pupils*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TV</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers or magazines</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other relatives</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The internet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other adults at school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siblings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GP</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FRANK</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helplines</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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16 *Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England in 2005*
School lessons about drugs, smoking and alcohol

Around two fifths of pupils recalled lessons about smoking, alcohol or drugs in the last school year; 59% of pupils remembered having lessons about drugs, 58% recalled lessons about smoking, and 54% recalled lessons about alcohol.

Pupils who had received lessons about drugs were asked how they had helped them. Pupils were most likely to say that these lessons had helped them think about the risks of taking drugs (94%), helped them find out more about drugs (88%), and helped them realise that taking drugs is against the law (81%).

Recall of lessons on specific topics: 1986-2005

*Percentages for drugs lessons from 1996 to 2003 relate to recall of lessons about 'drugs in general'.*
Prevalence of cigarette smoking

One of the aims of this survey is to measure progress towards the government’s target of reducing the number of children aged 11 to 15 who smoke regularly (defined as usually smoking at least one cigarette a week) from a baseline of 13% in 1996 to 11% by 2005 and 9% by 2010. In 2005, 9% of pupils aged 11 to 15 were regular smokers. The proportion of regular smokers has fluctuated since 1982, but has remained stable since 1999 at between 9% and 10%. A further 6% of pupils say they smoke occasionally.

Girls are more likely to smoke regularly than boys; 10% of girls, and 7% of boys are regular smokers. The prevalence of regular smoking increased with age, from 1% of 11 year olds to 20% of 15 year olds.
Prevalence of drinking alcohol

The proportion of pupils who had drunk alcohol in the last week, 22%, had not changed from 2004. This proportion has varied between 20% and 27% since 1988.

In 2005, boys and girls were equally likely to have drunk alcohol in the last week. This was the pattern in 2004 as well, but in previous years boys were more likely to drink than girls. The proportion of pupils who had drunk alcohol in the last week increased with age from 3% of 11 year olds to 46% of 15 year olds.

Seventeen percent of pupils reported that they usually drink alcohol at least once a week, the same figure as in 2004. One percent of both boys and girls reported drinking almost every day, a figure which has remained constant since 1999.
Trends in alcohol consumption

The mean alcohol consumption of pupils who had drunk in the last seven days has remained at similar levels since 1998 (between 9.5 and 10.7 units per week) and in 2005 was 10.5 units. This has increased since 1990, when it was 5.3 units. Average weekly consumption continues to be higher among boys (11.5 units) than girls (9.5 units), and to increase with age (from 8.2 units for 11 to 13 year olds, to 11.8 units for 15 year olds). A quarter of all pupils who had drunk in the last week had consumed 14 or more units.
Types of drinks consumed in the last week

Pupils were most likely to have drunk beer, lager and cider (73% of pupils who had drunk alcohol in the last week), followed by spirits (65%) and alcopops (63%). More boys than girls reported drinking beer, lager and cider (89% of boys who drank in the last week, compared with 56% of girls), and shandy (23% of boys, compared with 15% of girls). Girls were more likely than boys to have drunk wine (54% of girls, 33% of boys), spirits (71% and 59% respectively) and alcopops (73% and 52% respectively).

Since 1990, proportions of pupils drinking spirits in the last week have increased, as have those drinking alcopops (first asked about in 1996), whereas the proportions drinking shandy and fortified wine have decreased.
Patterns of smoking, drinking and drug use

The prevalence of smoking, drinking and drug use all increased with age. At the age of 11, 34% of pupils had tried at least one of these, compared with 90% of 15 year olds. Six percent of 11 year olds had done at least one of these things recently, compared with 55% of 15 year olds (recent use is defined as having smoked or drunk alcohol in the last week or taken drugs in the last month). Drinking was most common, then smoking, with drug use the least common behaviour among pupils.

Pupils who do one of these things are more likely to do another, with particularly strong links between smoking and cannabis use, smoking and drinking alcohol, cannabis and Class A drug use, and drinking alcohol and using cannabis. However, sniffing volatile substances was not strongly associated with smoking, drinking or taking other drugs.
Relationships between availability and use of drugs

Not all pupils who have been offered drugs will use them, and not all pupils who try drugs once will continue to use them. Among 15 year olds, two thirds (67%) of pupils who had ever been offered drugs had taken them, and this proportion had remained steady since 2001. In this age group, 63% of pupils who had been offered cannabis had taken it, and 29% of pupils who had been offered Class A drugs had ever taken any.

Less than half (47%) of 15 year olds who had ever used drugs had done so in the last month. A similar proportion, 46%, of 15 year olds who had ever used cannabis, had done so in the last month. Continued use of Class A drugs was less frequent; 35% of 15 year olds who had ever tried Class A drugs had taken any in the last month.

### Whether pupils who had been offered drugs had ever used them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drugs</th>
<th>Never used</th>
<th>Ever used</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Any drugs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannabis</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class A drugs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Pupils aged 15 years who had been offered specific drugs
Smoking, drinking and drug use among pupils who have truanted or been excluded from school

The government’s *Updated Drug Strategy* emphasises the need to reduce drug use among vulnerable young people, including pupils who have truanted or been excluded from school. Pupils who have truanted or have been excluded are likely to be under-represented in the sample, since the survey takes place in schools. In 2005, 18% of pupils in the sample had ever truanted, and 11% had been excluded from school at least once. Six percent of pupils had both truanted and been excluded during their time at school.

Both truancy and exclusion were associated with increased likelihood of smoking, drinking and drug use. For example, 43% of pupils who had truanted in the last twelve months had smoked in the last week, compared with 7% who had never stayed away from school; similarly 37% of those who had traunted in the last year had taken drugs in the last month, compared to 6% of those who had never truanted.

**Whether pupils recently smoked, drank alcohol, used any drugs, used cannabis or used Class A drugs, by truanting**

*All pupils*

![Bar chart showing the percentage of pupils who have truanted or been excluded from school and their smoking, drinking, and drug use habits. The chart compares pupils who have never truanted, past truants, and recent truants.*]
Differences in behaviours by ethnic group

Pupils of White and Mixed ethnicity were most likely to be regular smokers, and were also the most likely to have drunk alcohol in the last week. Nine percent of both groups smoked regularly, compared with 5% of Black pupils and 3% of Asian pupils, and 25% of White pupils and 19% of pupils of Mixed ethnicity had drunk alcohol in the last week, compared with 9% of Black pupils and 5% of Asian pupils.

Pupils of Mixed ethnicity were more likely than any other group to have taken drugs in the last year (25%) and in the last month (16%). The prevalence of drug taking in the last month among other groups ranged from 8% of Asian pupils to 11% of White pupils; in the last year the proportions of pupils who had taken drugs ranged from 12% of Asian pupils to 19% of White pupils.

![Bar chart showing whether pupils had taken drugs in the last year by ethnic group and sex (age-standardised).](chart)

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*Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in England in 2005*  
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Differences in behaviours by receipt of free school meals

In 2005, 15% of pupils in the sample received free school meals, an indicator of low family income. Girls in receipt of free school meals were more likely than girls who did not receive free school meals to smoke regularly (15% and 9% respectively) and to have taken drugs in the last month (14% and 10%). However, boys and girls who received free school meals were less likely to have drunk alcohol in the past week (19%, compared with 23% of pupils who did not receive free school meals).

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**Whether pupils were regular smokers, drank in last week or took drugs in last year, by sex and receipt of free school meals**

_Pupils who drank alcohol in the last week_
School policies

All schools reported that they taught about drugs (illegal and prescribed) and alcohol, and almost all (100% after rounding) taught pupils about tobacco. Only 6% of schools did not have a policy on teaching about drugs (including illegal and prescribed drugs, alcohol and tobacco). These policies had been updated in the last year by 41% of schools.

The majority of schools had a policy covering smoking for adults (88%). Two thirds of schools (67%) reported that smoking was prohibited anywhere on school premises, 14% allowed adults to smoke in designated parts of the building, and 7% allowed adults to smoke in the school grounds but not inside the buildings.

### Smoking policy for adults

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Smoking policy for adults</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does not have a smoking policy</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking prohibited anywhere on school premises</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking permitted in grounds but prohibited in buildings</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smoking permitted in certain areas of buildings</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recent publications


http://www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/05/92/00/04059200.pdf

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The Information Centre for health and social care
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Fax 020 7250 1524
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