

Challenging stigma around drugs and alcohol

Healthwatch Hertfordshire was commissioned by Public Health at Hertfordshire County Council to engage with residents to inform a new campaign that raises awareness about the stigma around drug and alcohol.

The goal of the campaign is to reduce myths and improve understanding around drugs and alcohol and give residents, carers, and professionals tools and information that can help them support people who are facing drug and or alcohol-related challenges. Feedback from residents will also be used to support the creation of a brand-new website.

This summary details the views of people with a lived experience of substance use, public awareness of drugs and alcohol, and suggestions for reducing stigma.

108 people shared their views with us. Thank you for your insights and contributions.


Awareness of drug and alcohol use:


Myth buster





To understand public awareness of drug and alcohol use, respondents were asked whether they believed the following statements were true or false.


 **"Most people who reported drinking in the past week were aged 18-30"**
11% said this is **true**, 70% said this is **false**, and 18% were **not sure**.


 **"Drinking 2 medium glasses of wine most days is within the recommended limits."**
19% said this is **true**, 69% said this is **false**, and 12% were **not sure**.


 **"People take drugs just to experiment or fit in."**
37% said this is **true**, 50% said this is **false**, and 10% were **not sure**.

 **"It's okay to have 1 or 2 glasses of alcohol when pregnant."**
13% said this is **true**, 88% said this is **false**, and 10% were **not sure**.

 **"Most people who reported drinking in the past week were aged 45-64."**
58% said this is **true**, 15% said this is **false**, and 27% were **not sure**.

 **"In England, alcohol misuse costs the NHS almost £3.5 billion a year and society £21 billion a year."**
70% said this is **true**, 2% said this is **false**, and 28% were **not sure**.

 **"Alcohol misuse is the top cause of health problems, early death, and disability for people aged 15-49 in England."**
57% said this is **true**, 16% said this is **false**, and 27% were **not sure**.

 **"Most drug users who seek treatment have mental health problems."**
71% said this is **true**, 19% said this is **false**, and 8% were **not sure**.

 **"People who are addicted (or dependent) often know it, but don't want to seek help."**
48% said this is **true**, 41% said this is **false**, and 10% were **not sure**.

Use of drug and alcohol services



- **20%** of respondents have been concerned about their use of drugs and/ or alcohol but have not accessed support services.
- **25%** of respondents have received help from drug and alcohol support services.
- **55%** of respondents have never been concerned about their own use of drugs and/or alcohol.

Key Findings: Respondents who have been concerned about their substance use but have not accessed support



20% of respondents have been concerned about their drug and/or alcohol use but have not accessed support services.

Barriers to accessing services

These respondents were asked what has prevented them from getting support:



I didn't think I needed help (**55%**)



Fear of being judged (**45%**)



I didn't know about services (**35%**)

Other reasons included not knowing what to expect from treatment (**20%**), other mental health issues (**20%**), previous negative experiences with services (**20%**), long waiting lists (**10%**) and the location of services (**5%**).

Key Findings: Respondents who have used or are currently using drug and alcohol services



25% of respondents have used or are currently using drug and alcohol services.

Accessing services

23% were referred to services by a family member/friend, **31%** by a professional and **46%** made a self-referral. Respondents were asked what stopped them from seeking support sooner:

- 1** Denial
- 2** Stigma
- 3** Not feeling ready to stop
- 4** Lack of information about the support available

"I was in denial at first, also didn't want to stop."

"The stigma around admitting I had a problem."

"Lack of awareness of the support available."

Respondents were also asked what helped them to seek support:

- Most respondents said they had "hit rock bottom" and that their physical and/or mental health had been drastically impacted.

"Had enough, too many problems in my life, worsening mental and physical health issues."

"Was at rock bottom. It was either kill myself or ask for help."

"I had liver failure, was told I had to stop and inevitably drunk again after not getting support."

- Others had experienced a breakdown in their relationship or were encouraged to get help by their family and friends.

"My relationships with my family had broken down and I wanted to avoid that becoming irrevocable."

Key Findings: Experiences of stigma

Respondents who have been concerned about their drug and/or alcohol use were asked about their experiences of stigma.



68% of respondents have felt judged or treated differently because of their substance use.

Respondents shared that this made them feel stigmatised, humiliated, belittled and impacted their confidence and self-worth:

“I have been spat on in the street, I felt worthless.”

“Being humiliated, belittled, judged, mistrusted.”

“I felt like and was treated like a nuisance to society.”

Some shared that they had concerns about experiencing stigma at work. Others felt isolated and excluded from society.

“I am a medical professional so didn’t feel I could say I had a problem.”

“I’ve been excluded from lots of things in my recovery and often feel very conspicuous when I don’t drink at events.”

55% of respondents received support from family/friends for their substance use. **35%** said they have not received support but have not wanted/needed it, while **10%** said have not had support from family/friends but would like to.

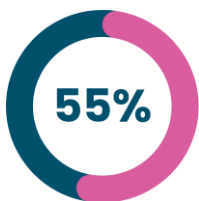
Of those who received support, many said they helped them emotionally, making them feel loved, understood and accepted. Others shared that their family/friends provided practical support such as transport and financial assistance.

“It was invaluable to have my hand held as I came to terms with the fact I’m an addict and to know help and support is available.”

“By being non-judgmental, seeing the best in me, treated me with dignity.”

“Giving me lifts to appointments and attending appointments with me.”

Key findings: Respondents who have never been concerned about their own drugs and/or alcohol use



55% of respondents have never been concerned about their drug and/or alcohol use.

57% felt comfortable about starting a conversation with someone about their drug and/or alcohol addiction. **18%** would not feel comfortable and **25%** were not sure. Positively, **79%** knew where to direct someone if they needed help with their drug and/or alcohol use.

However it is worth that some of the respondents have a loved one who uses drugs and/or alcohol, meaning they may feel more comfortable having these types of discussions.

Respondents were asked what information would help them start a conversation with someone about their drug and/or alcohol use. Key suggestions included:

- Guidance on how to support someone and how to start a conversation
- Information on the services and support available
- Information about the health implications of using drugs and/or alcohol

"Health fact sheets, what help is available and where to go."

Some respondents shared what has helped them to speak to someone about their substance use:

- Being open, transparent, supportive and non-judgmental
- Approaching with empathy and focusing on the individual, not the substance
- Using infographics and sharing lived experience

"Information on how to support someone without feeling judged or shamed."

"The most important thing is to be supportive and not confrontational otherwise the conversation will be counter-productive."

"Knowing what to say to start the conversation to help the person feel confident to open up honestly without feeling shame."

Awareness and education



Respondents who have been concerned about their substance use were asked what they think people misunderstand about those who use drugs and/or alcohol. Their responses included:

- People do not understand that addiction is not a choice nor a moral failing or lack of willpower, but an illness.
- People are unaware that underlying traumas/mental health issues are often the cause of addiction.
- People tend to have a stereotypical image of what someone who uses drugs and/or alcohol looks like, and do not understand that addiction can happen to anyone.
- People negate how difficult it is to stop using.

"That it's an illness not a moral failing/lack of will power."

"Anyone can be a victim of drug or alcohol abuse, whatever your class or culture."

"They often think that it is their choice, they are stupid, they are feckless, that they could stop without help if they wanted to, they are criminals."

These respondents were asked what people could do to get a better understanding of the experiences and challenges of those with addiction. Their suggestions included:

- Speaking to people with a lived experience
- Challenging stigma and being less judgmental
- More education – including in schools and workplaces
- More information about addiction – including posters in public spaces
- Promoting the services and support available

"Information in GP surgeries/hospitals – people read whilst waiting. Short videos in GP/hospital waiting rooms."

"Talk to someone in recovery from addiction, they are the professionals."

"Listen to and be supportive when they are ready to reach out for the help. Research what services are available in your area."

Shaping the campaign



To help Public Health at Hertfordshire County Council build an effective campaign to reduce stigma around drugs and/or alcohol, respondents were asked to feedback on how Public Health could educate the public.

Respondents shared the methods which have been effective at getting their attention and giving them useful health information:

- Conversations with people: **65%**
- Information on a website: **48%**
- Posters in public places: **38%**
- Webinars or online workshops: **33%**
- Email newsletters: **20%**
- News articles and videos sharing people's lived experience: **51%**
- Facts, infographics and short videos on social media: **40%**
- Brochures and leaflets: **33%**
- Talks/workshops held in public spaces: **33%**
- Interactive online content: **18%**

Residents were also asked how Public Health could educate the public so they can support people who face drug and/or alcohol challenges. Suggestions included:

- Advertisement and promotion, including TV campaigns, social media, and posters in public spaces
- Using different language so drug and/or alcohol challenges are not seen as a choice or moral failing
- Sharing stories and successes from people with a lived experience
- Educating public services on how they can support people
- Raising awareness and increasing education, including in schools/colleges
- Promoting services and support available
- Promoting support for carers/loved ones

"Taking the same out of being an addict by thinking more about the language that is used surrounding it."

"Hear and learn from people with lived experience. Personal recovery stories are most powerful."

"It should be talked about more in schools, colleges, start awareness early in life. How to help someone if you think they have a problem."

Respondents were asked which campaign strapline they preferred, with **55%** voting for: **"Drug and alcohol addiction is a health condition – words, actions and understanding matter. Speak up and let's talk."** Some respondents gave their own suggestions which have been shared with Public Health.

Conclusion

108 people shared their views with us and their insights will inform what tools and information should be included in the new campaign so that local residents, carers and professionals can all play a part in supporting people who are facing drug and alcohol-related challenges.

By hearing from people with a lived experience of drug and/or alcohol use, this engagement revealed the stigma they have faced and the impact this has had.

68% told us they have felt judged or treated differently because of their substance use, and has significantly impacted their confidence and self-image, with many feeling isolated and excluded from society. They highlighted the misconceptions surrounding addiction, and how often the public see substance use as a choice, negating how difficult it is to stop. They also shared how the public is unaware of underlying traumas/mental health issues associated with addiction.

Those with a lived experience also emphasised the importance of challenging stigma around drug and/or alcohol use and shared valuable suggestions for how this could be addressed.

Likewise, those without a lived experience shared what would help them to start conversations, how Public Health can better inform and educate local residents.

We would like to thank local residents for their contributions.