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YMCA WIRRAL

Alcohol Awareness HUB

Report: 1 January – 31 December 2023

Introduction

Alcohol-related harm is estimated to cost the NHS in England over £3.5 billion every year and costs an estimated £21 billion per year to society. In 2018/19 there were 358,000 estimated admissions where the main reason for admission to hospital was attributable to alcohol (narrow measure) [NHS UK data]. This is 6% higher than 2017/18 and 19% higher than 2008/09.

Alcohol is often used as a coping mechanism following mental health problems or traumatic events in a person's life. This can lead to both harmful and dependent drinking and anti-social behaviour. There are many factors that can lead a person into homelessness and into drinking excessively. This is partly because they cause a further loss of support networks. Alcohol misuse is both a cause and effect of homelessness (Shelter 2020). Research by John Moore's University, has shown that high levels of alcohol consumption present a major health risk among the homeless population and from our own work in YMCA Wirral we see this on a daily basis. People who are both homeless and have addictions face many difficulties in both finding housing and overcoming their substance use, which is due in no small part to both the stigma associated with homelessness and substance misuse and low levels of social support.

Problems with drugs or alcohol can be part of a person's spiral into homelessness, but not every homeless person has problems with drug or alcohol abuse. However, levels of drug and alcohol abuse are relatively high amongst the homeless population.

During 2021-2022, 41% of our clients reported problematic drug/alcohol use, with many stating that their drug or alcohol use was a reason for them first becoming homeless. Those who use drugs are seven times more likely to be homeless. Being homeless is deeply stressful and is a lonely depressing experience. There is also a high prevalence of mental health problems amongst the YMCA Wirral homeless cohort. It is not uncommon for those traumatised by homelessness to seek solace in drug or alcohol.

In the past few years there has been an increase in the use of new psychoactive substances (formerly known as 'legal highs') amongst the homeless population. In 2016 the government passed legislation (the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016) which made it illegal to sell substances that are capable of producing a psychoactive effect, but this has not limited its availability.

The YMCA Wirral Alcohol Awareness HUB was formally known as the Controlled Drinking Environment (CDE). It was renamed because it was felt that the former CDE name sounded rather controlling and the title Alcohol Awareness HUB not only has a positivity in its name, it also embraces the ethos of the project. The HUB uses a range of different methods to engage with service users and help support them in their journey away from street drinking and excessive alcohol consumption, with an overall vision to inspire clients into treatment and ultimately get them ready and enter detoxification services.

The YMCA Alcohol Awareness Hub, aims to offer a range of activities and a structured programme to inform service users about the risks of alcohol and other drug use and give them practical skills to make decisions that minimise harm to themselves and others, while all the time the overarching aim, of reducing a person's use of alcohol and sometimes other drugs, or discourage them from using at all. For many, deciding to access any form of alcohol treatment can be a scary prospect, so our service delivery is done in a low-key befriending way, with dedicated staff who have an empathy and professionalism about getting the right help and support for our client groups.

The HUB operates using programmes based around harm reduction, reducing alcohol strengths and consumption levels and raising awareness in dependent drinkers. Much of the programmes are focused around "Diversionary Activities" and providing a safe comfortable place where service users can socialise and consume monitored drinking.

Working with partner organisations, including Merseyside Police, the YMCA Wirral HUB provides first line interventions to alleviate any health implications addiction causes, as-well as preventing crime and breaking cycles of reoffending by addressing underlying problems such as their alcohol and drug dependency.

Locally, street drinking was a serious issue in Birkenhead Town Centre and led to the creation of the first CDE, which proved very successful leading to a 60% reduction in Police arrests in the Town Centre retail

area, for alcohol related anti-social behaviour and criminal activity, in its first year of operation. But the problems of street drinking and alcohol addiction are not just limited to Wirral.

Nationally, alcohol-related crime in England and Wales is estimated to cost society around £11.4 billion per year. The equivalent cost of drugs is £20 billion per year. Every month, a number of people are released from local prisons, but accessing accommodation presents an immediate barrier to life beyond offending and inevitably many relapse into re-offending. Part of our work at YMCA Wirral, and in the HUB is based upon breaking these cycles of offending and rehabilitating people into meaningful outcomes and lives.

'I have stopped drinking super strength lager and ciders and started reducing the amount I drink and I feel better in myself and am sleeping better – it might sound daft but even food tastes better these days'

Service user

Diversionsary activities in recovery from addiction

Diversionsary activities are a broad range of different individual and group activities that service users find enjoyment in taking part in, or find interesting or have considered doing to keep their mind off of their addiction. YMCA Wirral's diversionsary activities have helped to curb relapses by shifting attendees focus from their thoughts and often habitual activities back outside the YMCA. By working on activities or hobbies, their concentration, thought processes and attention, are diverted away from triggering thoughts and feelings. Often outside recovery and treatment services, encourage clients to find hobbies or engage in alternative forms of therapy that can help them focus outside of themselves, and it is this same philosophy that the HUB utilises.

Sometimes, service users can get mentally and physically entangled in a web of overthinking about many bad thoughts, which trigger them reaching to alcohol for comfort and refuge. They can also have a difficult time working through any negative thoughts they may have. The Alcohol Awareness Hub gives service users, time and space to "think-through" those feelings and thoughts, either on a one-to-one basis with the Alcohol Engagement Worker, our collectively in group sessions working together helping support each other.

Service user's roads to recovery, often require utilising varying means of coping with their thought processes, feelings and emotions. By having some preferred activities to work on, they help a person stay the course during their contemplative stages of their recovery.

Diversionsary activities: Hobbies

Service users often do not have any interests or hobbies or may have limited interests beyond their current lifestyle and addictions. They can also use their addictive behaviours as a way of diverting negative or upsetting thoughts. There are so many possibilities and service users have a chance to learn so many new things about themselves, others around them and skills and new interests. Some diversionsary activities involve varying degrees of skills and are therefore more complex, while others are fun things that our clients like to do. Some of the things our service users have access to are:

Crafts and puzzles, gardening (now located in the garden the HUB sits in a pleasant and inspiring location), creative writing, poetry and songs, drawing, listening to music, reading group sessions, listening to podcasts, watching films, cooking activities, fitness and wellbeing such as basic exercise - going for a walk, volunteering, themed anniversary projects like the Titanic study week in April and any hobby or interest that they are personally interested in pursuing!

Alternative therapies as diversionsary activities

The team at YMCA Wirral know only too well that for many service users, their recovery is about learning a new way of living their lives and that can be a daunting prospect for many clients. During recovery, they are on what can be perceived as a scary journey learning to help themselves by firstly reducing their addictions and ultimately stopping them, enabling them to build a sustainable, healthy and positive future lifestyle.

Mindfulness and expressiveness

Mindfulness activities are used to help clients calm and focus themselves at times when their thoughts are overwhelming them. Meditation and other stress reduction breathing activities take place regularly along with expressive therapies, which can often help those struggling with expressing painful and difficult emotions. This is done by using art or music and a number of service users discover a new talent or interest or uncover a lost skill they have not enjoyed for many years.

Exercise and getting outdoors

Encouraging our service users to take care of their physical health is an important part of our engagement with a client in their recovery journey.

Exercise routines, such as walks and other group activities, take place throughout the year and help our service users to get active and in part address some of their physical and mental health needs.

Outdoor and adventure activities therapy

Getting out into the countryside and being part of nature is an amazingly therapeutic for the body, mind, and soul. Adventure therapies, like our narrow-boating activity days help our clients build self-esteem and resilience in their recovery. It also acts as a unique and safe platform on which to base a day away from the normal routine and explore new things and improve skills such as team-work, communication, socialising, self-esteem and self-confidence, while getting outdoors doing something new and exciting.

Once service users are no longer engaging in addictive habitual behaviours, their time for meaningful and positive activities opens up. Recovery becomes a time for them to grow and thrive, change, and self-improvement. They discover hidden talents and skills that had remained dormant during their many years of struggling with addiction.

A key part of the HUB's work is to enable clients to explore new interests and hobbies, or reignite past ones, try alternative therapies, and rebuild their life.

Diversions activities have a real relevance in helping a person avoid relapses while they create a new life on their recovery journey and it is for this reason, we use them so much in our day-to-day work.

'This place has been a life saver for me. It has made me realise that what I used to drink was killing me and making me a horrible person. Here I can not only try to reduce the amount and what I drink, but no-one judges me like outside.'

Service user

Who can use the Alcohol Awareness HUB?

Service users from YMCA Wirral's residential accommodation, Night Triage Provision and Rough Sleepers, have the opportunity to drink inside in the HUB in a safe and supervised, controlled area, which is far less detrimental to the service user and equally importantly, the wider community, as opposed to drinking on the street.

In 2023 YMCA Wirral's alcohol awareness HUB has engaged with a total of 19 service users. There has been 11 Male and 8 Female different service users accessing the HUB with 1 detoxification and rehabilitation entrant.

'I have felt safe and enjoyed the group work I've done while using the Alcohol Awareness HUB... I am a little fearful about the possibility of going to Transforming Choices, but now know what to expect because of using the HUB.'

Service user

Partnership working

Much of the work of the HUB is thanks to strong partnership working towards our local "shared outcomes" that meet the needs of the communities in Wirral. We collaborate with several external agencies, CGL/Wirral Ways to Recovery - Drug and Alcohol Services, Tomorrow's Women, Crisis, Denise Lewis, Mental Health Practitioner, Kerry Greenop, Clinical Nurse for Hostel/Homelessness, Dr Katie Gregson Whetstone Lane Surgery and local probation teams. This collaborative "person centred" approach has many benefits and often involves multi-agency meetings with the service user, YMCA Wirral keyworker, CGL keyworker/s and the Alcohol Awareness HUB engagement worker. This approach leads to a more focused better-informed services delivery, with shared goals and interests to improve the outcomes for the service user.

During 2023 the total alcohol consumption which has been consumed within the alcohol awareness HUB has totalled 7,996.40 units. This would ordinarily have been consumed on the streets. As a result, the alcohol HUB has been able to offer a safe environment for those that would normally be excluded from mainstream services. The alcohol awareness HUB has become a foundation for many services users to use as a pathway to treatment through Wirral Ways to Recovery and other external service providers. It has been a vital part of positive engagement for chronic drinkers entering both detoxification and rehabilitation. Additionally, it has reduced the quantity of noticeable street drinking, litter and linked anti-social behaviour in the Birkenhead area.

Case Study: Gary Warnock

Gary, has been a dependent drinker for more than 40 years and has lived within hostel settings for over 20 years. Gary has dropped in and out of the Alcohol Awareness HUB, and has previously undergone multiple detoxes from alcohol, but has never really worked through the issues connected to his drinking and has found himself returning to drinking to deal with them time and time again.

During the last few months, we have worked together and he has become a regular attendee at the HUB and participated in the group work and during these sessions, identified areas of his drinking that have been extremely detrimental to both his health and his relationships with his children. In conversations and key working, Gary expressed he has found this hard to deal with and often would drink excessively in order to block out any difficult emotions he had surrounding the situation he found himself in.

In the last few months, Gary and I have worked together and he has attempted to work through some expressive therapy, opening up and explaining his inner feelings and emotions more effectively, allowing him to process them in a more positive manner. Through the process of him identifying this key issue, in the work undertaken in the Alcohol Awareness HUB, Gary has now come to the decision that he is finally ready for a fully committed detoxification and rehabilitation for which he has undergone assessment by Transforming Choices in Liverpool, who offer a 12-week detox and rehabilitation programme with the aim to the client remaining abstinent when they leave and a life free from alcohol.



Since taking on the role of the Alcohol Engagement Worker it has not been without its challenges. From the outset I made it my purpose to not only deliver quality structured sessions and information in both one to one and group settings, but to also implement a strong person-centred approach in the work I do with each service user. This starts with a diagnostic approach to identify any underlying issues, beyond the obvious alcohol abuse, that may be resulting in the manifestation of excessive drinking.

My approach aims to work with the service user and to empower and enable them to want to make positive changes to their lives and either reduce and have some element of control over their drinking or want to move on and lead a life free from alcohol. I firmly believe that by working with external agencies, such as CGL/Wirral Ways, and facilitating weekly meetings where these professionals come onsite to meet with our service users within the service users familiar environment of the Alcohol Awareness Hub, not only reassures the service user leaving them feeling safe and comfortable, but enables strong working partnership dialogue between YMCA Wirral, Wirral Ways, other external agencies, something I would like to further develop in the coming year.

After a lot of work, one service user entered detox and rehabilitation and has successfully gone on to remain abstinent from alcohol. There were also two service users referred into detox and rehabilitation. One of which was accepted, but due to unforeseen circumstances was unable to attend. For many we work with the choices are stark and often extremely difficult. Some succeed and sadly some lose their fight against their addiction.

With this in mind, it is pleasing that after a huge amount of dedicated hard work, one of the HUB's long attenders, will be starting a 12-week detox and rehabilitation programme at Transforming Choices in Liverpool on the 8th January 2024. Gary Warnock, pictured in the centre of the front-page photograph, has been a dependent drinker for over 40 years and lived in hostel environments for the past 20 plus years. He has battled many obstacles and now stands poised to accomplish his biggest hurdle in his life and we will stand by him with the professionals at Transforming Choices to encourage and support him in this important part of his long recovery journey.

Into 2024, YMCA Wirral and the Alcohol Awareness HUB will continue to collaborate with both internal staff, and all external agencies with the aim of delivering the best possible "person centred" approaches to each individual who turns to us for help, to identify or highlight any issues of concern, or areas for development, focus on harm reduction, with an aim to long term sobriety and a life free from alcohol.

Total number of dependent individual visits

Month	
January	189
February	118
March	97
April	105
May	154
June	137
July	98
August	153
Spetember	86
October	73
November	89
December	91
TOTAL	1,390

Number of alternative drinks - juices/beverages

Month	
January	101
February	97
March	102
April	87
May	172
June	167
July	111
August	208
Spetember	94
October	69
November	104
December	68
TOTAL	1,380

‘The CDE helps me make better use of my time. Because it’s there, I don’t want to go out drinking on street corners. It gives me somewhere where I feel relaxed and comfortable – and I do drink less when I’m there because of the soft drinks and coffee I can drink, in place of continual alcohol’

Service user

Title???

Month	Lager Normal	Lager Strong	Cider Normal	Cider Strong	Wine	Other	Totals
January		360.00	300.00				660.00
February	164.00	268.00	164.00				596.00
March	198.00	70.00	164.00				432.00
April	158.00		164.00				322.00
May	143.00	91.00	287.00				521.00
June	57.60	158.70	109.00	97.00			422.30
July	24.30	375.30	11.80	110.80	49.50		571.70
August	41.70	382.30	78.40	566.70	7.50	8.10 Vodka	1084.70
Spetember	48.40	785.40	5.00	785.40	17.40	1.80 Vodka	1643.40
October	21.00	669.60	26.40	459.60		18.50 Vodka	1195.10
November		281.50	58.00	199.70		9.00 Vodka	548.20
December	23.40	350.50	1.30	323.90	3.90		703.00
TOTAL	856.00	3441.80	1367.60	2219.20	74.40	37.40	7996.40

Alcohol HUB service users that completed a detoxification or rehabilitation

Name	Month	Pathway
Anthony Brown	July	Transforming Choices

Total referrals made to: CGL/Wirral Ways to Recovery or other services

Month	
January	4
February	4
March	4
April	5
May	4
June	
July	
August	
Spetember	1
October	1
November	
December	1
TOTAL	24

Total clients attending Extended Brief Intervention/ Alcohol Course with CGL

Month	
January	
February	
March	
April	
May	3
June	
July	
August	2
Spetember	2
October	
November	1
December	
TOTAL	8

Supported appointment attendance: Doctors, Hospital and other appointments

Month	Doctors	Hospital	Other
January	3	1	4
February	2	2	4
March	4		4
April	5		5
May	3	1	4
June			0
July	5		5
August	6	2	8
Spetember	9	1	10
October	9	1	10
November	9		9
December	7		7
TOTAL	62	8	70

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Charity Reference Number: 1000601
Company Registration Number: 2534811



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YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.