

Executive Summary

People with lived experience of co-occurring mental ill health and substance use shared their stories of trying to access support, and how drug and alcohol services and mental health services can work better together to improve the care people receive.



Substance use and mental health go “hand in hand” with one another. For some, substances were used as an escape from their ill mental health and/or trauma. For others, their substance use predated their ill mental health, and found their mental health deteriorated due to their overconsumption of substances.



Accessing support for mental health and substance use at the same time is challenging. Many were not given mental health support until they had stopped using substances. Participants called for mental health services to allow people using substances to access support for their mental health.



Communication between drug and alcohol and mental health services needs to be improved. The majority found that drug and alcohol services and mental health services are fragmented and do not communicate with patients or with each other. Many were passed “back and forth” between the services.



Care and support need to be holistic. Many felt the care they received looked at their substance and ill mental health in isolation, meaning their issues were treated individually despite being related to one another.



Mental health and drug and alcohol services work well individually. Participants shared that they received high-quality care from services when they accessed either mental health services or drug and alcohol services separately and generally had positive experiences.

Recommendations

The findings draw attention to many positive experiences of people with co-occurring mental health and substance use. However, many faced significant challenges in getting support for their mental health whilst using substances. They found that drug and alcohol services and mental health services often do not collaborate or communicate effectively. To help improve services, the following recommendations have been proposed:

Recommendations for the Co-occurring mental health and substance use programme:

Address stigma and misinformation:

- Improving awareness of the intersection between mental health and substance use amongst all health and care professionals
- Reducing and addressing stigma associated with ill mental health and/or substance use, ensuring people feel able and comfortable to access the care they need
- Introducing drug and alcohol training for mental health services

Increase awareness of drug and alcohol and mental health services:

- Raising awareness of drug and alcohol and mental health services available amongst professionals
- Encouraging GP practices to play a more proactive role in referring patients to drug and alcohol services

Recommendations for mental health and drug and alcohol services:

Improve collaboration between services:

- Ensuring feedback is shared between mental health and drug and alcohol services
- Improving joint-working between mental health and drug and alcohol services, in particular between the two key service providers, HPFT and CGL
- Establishing multi-disciplinary meetings between mental health and drug and alcohol services to discuss an individual's care and needs
- Ensuring the co-occurring mental health and substance use protocol (previously named the dual diagnosis protocol¹) is effectively recognised and acted upon. Once complete, review and update the associated leaflet.

Provide holistic care to people with co-occurring mental health and substance use:

- Adopting a personalised, holistic approach to care, ensuring substance use and ill mental health are not looked at in isolation.

¹ Dual diagnosis protocol is a set of procedures used to support those with poor mental health and substance use ([Dual diagnosis – Spectrum Drug and Alcohol Recovery Services](#))

Ensuring carers are appropriately involved and communicated with:

- Improving carer involvement in their loved one's care (taking into consideration confidentiality).

Recommendations mental health services:

Improve mental health support for people with co-occurring mental health and substance use:

- Improving access to mental health services for people using substances, ensuring they are not denied care and support because of their substance use
- Ensuring healthcare professionals working in mental health services have drug and alcohol training

Suggestions were made by respondents regarding improving access to drug and alcohol services and the support provided by these services. These recommendations have been incorporated into our other reports, with action plans put in place by Public Health. You can read the reports and recommendations on our [website](#).

"I'd like to thank everyone who took part in the focus groups and interviews and the organisations involved for their support.

"Public Health is leading a multi-agency programme of work with health and care organisations to improve access, pathways and outcomes for people with co-occurring mental health and substance use (MHSU) needs. This engagement report is a key part of that programme to ensure that we are focusing on the right areas. The focus groups identified areas of improvement, linked to, stigma and misinformation, increasing awareness of mental health and substance use services, improving joint working between services, carer involvement and improving mental health support for people with co-occurring mental health and substance use.

"The findings from this report will help inform our ongoing co-occurring MHSU programme of work which is aligned to the Drug and Alcohol strategy."

Sarah Perman, Director of Public Health, Hertfordshire County Council