

Stigma is silencing loved one's accessing help

We want concerned others to be a recognised group of people within their own right and adequately supported to help improve the health and wellbeing of themselves and their loved ones.



Who are concerned others (CO)?

A CO in substance use is anyone that is affected by someone else's drug or alcohol use. This could be a child, young person or an adult and is inclusive of anyone who is at risk of being affected. An individual's substance use can have a ripple effect within their own family and community, which can lead to significant turmoil and burden placed on loved one's. While many traditional substance use treatment services often operate within restricted hours, CO rarely have the luxury of stepping away from either being a support network, or adversely affected by someone's use. They are often a CO 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

However, there is a significant lack of recognition for CO in Wales, in relation to them as people and having dedicated services readily accessible to meet their respective needs. There is currently no national protocol for support for CO meaning support is often inconsistent and diverse in its level and quality, across Wales. [1]

What does the evidence suggest?


Almost 1 in 3 people, a total of 15.7 million, across the UK have been negatively affected by someone else's substance use, at some point in their life, while 5.2 million are currently affected. [1] Consequently, this results in people affected by someone else's use experiencing knock on harms including poor mental health, violence and abuse, isolation, and financial strain. An additional 2 million CO have experienced stigma and judgement because of someone else's substance use. [1]


Subsequently, the financial impact of the harms experienced by CO amounts to an annual figure of around £1.8 billion. In addition to this, the care that CO often provide to their loved one's results in an annual cost saving to the state of around £750 million. [2] Such financial figures show both the toll experienced by CO, as well as the significant support network they provide to their loved ones without any recognition within wider policy.


Around 50% of children currently living in kinship care are doing so as a result of parental substance use. Between 2021-22, a total of 5,155 children accessed specialist support from substance use treatment services in Wales due to parental substance use. [3] Many of these children have suffered significant adverse experiences including neglect, physical and emotional abuse, which could increase the likelihood of them developing long term issues including use of substances and poor mental health. [1,4] In turn, this places considerable financial burden and stress upon those caring for such children, often grandparents. [1]


Helping CO cope effectively with their supportive role via available and effective support, enables them to improve their own health and wellbeing, enhance productivity in work and consequently save the state money. [1,5]

Key facts

 15.7 million, across the UK have been negatively affected by someone else's substance use.

 2 million CO have experienced stigma and judgement as a result of someone else's substance use.

 The harms experienced by CO amounts to around £1.8 billion per year.

 Around 50% of children currently living in kinship care are doing so because of parental substance use, many of whom have suffered from multiple adverse childhood experiences.

Why now?

The landscape of substance use in Wales is steering towards a public health crisis. Wales recorded their third highest drug-related death figure, with a total of 318 people losing their lives to a preventable drug-related overdose, in 2022. The three highest annual figures associated to drug-related fatalities in Wales have come in the last five years. [6] Additionally, 2022 saw a record number of people die because of alcohol use across Wales. [7] The effect this leaves behind on loved one's is often insurmountable and the true extent of the grief is rarely captured accordingly.

As an organisation, Barod have seen an 7.5% increase in people being referred in for structured substance use treatment between 2022-23 compared to the year before. [8,9] In addition, there has been a 5.8% increase in people being assessed within specialist substance use treatment services in the last four years. [3]

With such data leaning towards more people using substances and consequently experiencing adverse effects, given the lack of research in Wales associated to the impact on CO, it can only be assumed that this is ever increasing too. It is likely that more people are becoming affected by someone's else's substance use across Wales, and therefore are suffering consequently and feel like there is nowhere to turn, or at least, don't know where or how to access dedicated support relative to their need and wants.

Barod proudly offers Parent and Carer Training (PACT). PACT is a treatment programme that is delivered through group work and in one-to-one sessions developed for concerned others who are experiencing difficulties with someone else's drug or alcohol use. Barod also deliver the Gwent Drug and Alcohol Family Service [10], yet many dedicated CO support services for substance use, have since been absorbed into treatment services primarily geared towards supporting people who use substances.

Why do we need to look at the bigger picture?

There is a distinct lack of research and data available in relation to the number of people affected by someone else's substance use and respective harms in Wales. Consequently, there is a gap that can help formulate evidenced-based policy and set standards and needs required, to provide effective support for CO. CO deserve help and support in their own right due to the significant harms they experience from other people's substance use. Subsequently, they are at higher risk, compared to families who do not have loved one's affected by problematic substance use, to be diagnosed with their own medical condition. [5]

Effective support made readily available to CO can help build their own resilience and skill set in supporting their loved ones. In turn this can improve the outcomes for the person who uses substances by engaging with and accessing support from treatment services, maintaining their recovery, and subsequently engaging productively in society. [1] Current evidence deems the impact of someone else's substance use on CO a major public concern.

What do we want?

- We call on the Welsh Government to fund innovative research that identifies the true scale of the impact of substance use on loved ones and concerned others in Wales and provide recommendations aimed at reducing the turmoil experienced by such individuals.
- We also call on the Welsh Government to fund a national campaign highlighting the burden placed on those affected by someone else's substance use, raise awareness of support available and challenge the stigma associated to substance use that can often silence concerned others due to fear of judgement.
- Welsh Government to review and update the relevant substance use delivery plan and to update the treatment framework for 'Carers and Families of Substance Misusers', to bring it in line with best practice and current needs of concerned others.
- Specialist services to be funded to provide grief and loss support to those affected by drug or alcohol deaths.

References

1. Adfam (2020) [One in Three: Adfam's Manifesto for 2020 and beyond](#)
2. UK Drug Policy Commission (2012) [Adult Family Members Affected by a Relative's Substance Misuse: A UK-wide survey of services for adult family members](#)
3. Public Health Wales. [Data mining Wales: The annual profile for substance misuse 2021-22](#)
4. Ashton, K., et al. (2016) [Adverse childhood experiences and their association with health-harming behaviours and mental wellbeing in the Welsh adult population: a national cross-sectional survey](#)
5. Adfam. [Supporting families affected by drug and alcohol use: Adfam evidence pack](#)
6. Office for National Statistics (2023) [Deaths related to drug poisoning by selected substances, England and Wales](#)
7. ONS (2024) [Alcohol-specific deaths in the UK: registered in 2022](#)
8. [Barod Annual Report 2022-23](#)
9. [Barod Annual Report 2021-22](#)
10. [Gwent Drug and Alcohol Family Service](#)