

Public Patient Engagement and Involvement

Project Specific Case Study

Project Title

Exploring older people's support needs for making healthier decisions about alcohol during COVID-19. Dr Beth Bareham (PI)

Project Overview

This project explored how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected older people's alcohol use, and how they can be supported to make healthier decisions about their drinking during and after the pandemic. This involved listening to older people's experiences of their alcohol use during the pandemic, through interviews with a diverse group of older people. In addition to a rapid evidence synthesis, with permission from the organisation's medical director, the project team also looked at recorded web chats from [Drink Wise Age Well](#)'s online support service, where older people had discussed concerns they had about their drinking with support staff.

The project aimed to:

- Understand how older people's views and use of alcohol have changed during COVID-19, given how their day-to-day routines have been affected, and the stresses they might face.
- Understand how older people's motivations to engage in healthy or unhealthy drinking might have changed because of the pandemic.
- Understand older people's ideas about the support they might need to make healthier decisions for their alcohol use during and after COVID-19.

The project ran from 01.02.21 to 30.09.21 and the final report was submitted on 13.08.21.

Engaging with and involving experts by experience.

Working with people with lived experience was prioritised throughout this piece of work, from research design development through to final delivery. Dr Beth Bareham (PI) had established relationships with members of the [Voice](#) platform who were aged 50+ and used alcohol through her previous doctoral study, as well as with Drink Wise Age Well as a result of earlier embedded research in the Glasgow service undertaken prior to this project (2019). Here, service users had formed an advocacy group to improve the recognition of, and work to address, harmful alcohol use amongst older people in the UK. As a result of this, the PI was able to work collaboratively throughout the project design stages with these groups, of which some members were in recovery from alcohol dependence and who were working as peer support workers for [With You \(Drink Wise Age Well's parent organisation\)](#). As experts by experience, they were able to contribute their insight and knowledge gained during the pandemic, how they had witnessed an increase in drinking amongst their peers, and supported the identification of the research topic as a priority. This had a direct influence on the project aims (as above) as well as ensuring the research delivered insight for policy makers that would lead to meaningful recommendations for this population group to inform post-COVID recovery.

Following this award, the PI broadened the membership of the experts by experience advisory group, drawing additional members from the Voice platform to work alongside the [Drink Wise Age Well advocacy group](#).

Enabling and supporting contribution to the project

- Co-development/design of the research focus, aims and objectives
- Co-development/design and contribution to the research study design, specifically to ensure it was acceptable given the study population's potential sensitivities, such as mental health themes which may arise during interviewing.
- Co-researchers supporting the analysis of web chat transcripts, to ensure confidentiality but also enabling recognition of roles and activity undertaken as part of the With You network
- Co-design of the interview topic guide, ensuring our questions broached the topic of alcohol and the pandemic sensitively, and in a way that prompted discussion, based on the invaluable experience of advocacy group members.
- Supporting recruitment, sharing flyers and promoting amongst personal networks.
- Supporting data analysis and interpretation through lived experience perspectives, and expertise as peer support workers.
- Co-presented at the end of project meeting with the funder (DHSC), specifically fielding questions, augmenting research based insight through on-the-ground experiences as peer support workers.

Benefits of working with experts by experience

The popularity of this study with prospective participants, and rich data collected, were a direct result of the advisory board's engagement and involvement throughout the project process – from aims and objectives through to delivery. The lived experiences shared during data analysis, including the expertise of peer support workers, enhanced the interpretation of interview transcripts. This aided understanding of older people's experiences, their alcohol consumption during the pandemic, and was invaluable in supporting analysis. The wider consideration of the support needs of older people and related impact of the pandemic helped shape the recommendations for policymakers, public health and healthcare services. This was especially in relation to preventing further alcohol-related harm amongst older populations, associated demand for healthcare services and considerations related to ways to promote the health and happiness of older people.

Overall impact and future development

Building upon our study findings, which highlighted increasing rates of co-occurring alcohol and mental health problems amongst older people in the UK, a further proposal was submitted and awarded via NIHR. An NIHR Three Schools Mental Health Fellowship was awarded to the early career PI - "*Co-occurring alcohol and mental health problems in the over 55s*", which aims to understand co-occurring alcohol and mental health problems amongst older people, and develop holistic, age-tailored and integrated approaches in local primary care and community alcohol and mental health services. The project will deliver a co-produced study to develop age-tailored, holistic and integrated initiatives in primary care and community alcohol and mental health support services to meet the support needs of this population in the wake of the pandemic.

As a result of this co-production/design and co-research experience the PI intends to continue to build on this and collaborate with experts by experience in this future planned project. As the focus of the new project has moved towards alcohol dependency and support services in the North East and North Cumbria, new experts by experience from local alcohol support groups in the North East, join the Drink Wise Age Well advocacy group in the co-advisory and research team. This time, offering enhanced levels of co-researcher involvement and engagement; in particular working as co-facilitators for interviews