


Accessing Substance Misuse Treatment Services in rural & coastal Devon: a case study by Devon Communities Together



1 The what

Public Health Devon  VCSE research partner, Devon Communities Together (DCT) to ...

- Identify the barriers to accessing drug and alcohol treatment services in rural and coastal communities.
- Make recommendations for actions to alleviate barriers.

2 The why

Deaths from substance misuse are rising in Devon.

From 2021-23, **201 people died from drug poisoning**, compared to 176 from 2018-20.

3 The how

Public Health, clinical research partners and DCT **co-designed** research methodology framework. DCT led on qualitative research, as community partner:

- a) 74 **local support agency** contacts compiled
- b) 3 **focus groups** in Ilfracombe, Okehampton and Dawlish with professional agencies, people with lived experience, local VCSE groups and Town Councillors
- c) 25 **interviews**, including 16 with people with lived experience. 22 interviews used Most Significant Change (MSC) methodology
- d) **Panel meeting** to discuss MSC themes



“Our team spoke to a great variety of people today, including those with lived experience, at Belle’s Place. One even got a mini-focus group style conversation going in the café area. They used a relaxed, conversational approach so people felt at ease to speak about their experiences.”

Natalie Campbell, Funding Development Manager, Devon Communities Together

5 The challenges

- Finding hidden service users** - fear of stigma and standing out in rural communities makes finding service users more difficult to find
- Framing questions** so people could respond in a non-trauma-informed way
- Lack of trust in system** - needed to go through existing VCSE services HOWEVER, lack of provision in rural areas made this difficult
- Managing expectations** that change would not happen immediately

4 The benefits of community-led research

- ✓ DCT’s rich knowledge of – and links to – community partners and interviewees
- ✓ Engaged hard-to-reach people
- ✓ VCSE’s reputation as trusted supporters of those with lived experience, their families and other supporters
- ✓ VCSE’s ‘whole person-centred approach’ to support rather than specialist treatment agencies

6 The findings

MSC themes identified by the panel were:

- ◆ Vital role of **community-led support**
- ◆ Challenges of **navigating services**
- ◆ Importance of **informal networks** in helping people access structured assistance (if they have the correct, up to date information)
- ◆ The **impact of addiction on family and significant others**.

Other factors that should be addressed are:

- Transport barriers – availability and affordability
- Lack of co-ordination between agencies – people struggle to find the right support
- Changing drug trends – requires more adaptive treatment pathways
- Community-led solutions: non-judgmental spaces like community hubs and cafés where other services are available create new social links, reduce stigma and build trust
- Support gaps for men 20-65
- Workforce stability – high staff turnover and workload in services prevents meaningful long-term engagement.

7 The recommendations

Actions with biggest impact will be:

Community-driven support models and better coordination between services

Also important are:

- Peer-to-peer support
- Sustaining the Community Hub/Café model
- Engaging the wider community e.g. encouraging businesses and organisations to be aware of available support so they can signpost

8 Our reflections

Involvement of local VCSE agencies identified key gaps in treatment and support services – and highlighted how VCSE groups need to be included in the commissioning process for treatment services to encompass the ‘whole person’ and other interconnected issues with related barriers e.g. housing, mental health and debt.

Public Health remained engaged and responsive throughout the process, feeding in perspectives to interviews, focus groups and panel meeting – made for a more flexible and enriching research process.

MSC methodology and panel meeting helped to focus the research on the most significant issues, and bring out key themes and recommendations for action.

“A really transparent process. You kept me informed throughout.”

Richard Merrifield, Devon County Council Public Health Commissioner