

Adfam submission to the AHA Commission on Alcohol Harm February 2020

Who we are

Adfam is the national organisation working with, and for, families affected by drug and alcohol misuse. We provide direct services for families, training and networking for practitioners, and campaign for more recognition of the needs of these families, and for more support to meet these needs.

This submission focuses on four of the Commission questions

- What recent evidence is there of impacts caused by alcohol consumption on family life, relationships and sexual behaviour?
- What challenges do alcohol treatment services currently face in supporting people impacted by alcohol harm?
- What current evidence is there of links between alcohol and violent behaviour and other crime?
- What policy changes would help to reduce the level of harm caused by alcohol?

The submission is based on evidence we have gathered from research, and from the testimonies of the many family members with lived experience who contribute to our work.

Commission Question 4 - What recent evidence is there of impacts caused by alcohol consumption on family life, relationships and sexual behaviour?

The impact on families is extensive

Families play a vital role in helping people with alcohol problems to recover. As a result, NICE clinical guideline 115 recommends encouraging families and carers to be involved in the treatment and care of people who misuse alcohol to help support and maintain positive change.¹ However, it is equally important to ensure that families receive support for their own needs.

A 2019 YouGov survey, commissioned by Adfam, revealed that almost one in three adults in Great Britain have been negatively affected by the substance use of someone they know, and one in ten describe themselves as currently affected.² The majority of these will be affected by someone else's alcohol misuse.

Alcohol misuse by a family member can have damaging effects on the well-being of the whole family including their physical and mental health; it can generate violence and abuse, relationship difficulties, financial strain, and stigma and prevent children from enjoying a safe and secure environment in which to flourish. It can also cause family members to become isolated from each other and their local community.^{3 4}

A single case study highlights the challenges involved for the family: Helen became truly aware of the extent of her daughter's alcohol problem when her grandson was born: "*She was frequently drunk when caring for him, so putting him at obvious risk.*" As a result, social services became involved, and he was put on the child protection register; "*he was going to be taken away from her, so I stepped in to take responsibility for his care.*" At first, Helen had "*no one to talk to, and felt no one would understand,*" including her own family. She was worried about their reactions and was scared that others would judge her – "*it became easier to not talk about it with other people, and I*

didn't want to burden friends with it." She was desperate to help her daughter, but when she tried to speak to services, "*no one listened, no one cared, and no one helped.*" Work helped to keep her mind off the stress of the family situation, but her own health was suffering: "*I was caring for my grandson and my daughter and working full time, with no support network.*"

However, problems can sometimes remain well concealed even between family members. One family member tells of her husband's problematic relationship with alcohol over the past fifteen years, saying it was hidden for about a decade and only came to light around five years ago. After the birth of their first child he started working night shifts and began to drink in the morning to help get to sleep during the day. Ten years later, when the family moved house, his wife discovered a huge quantity of empty bottles and cans stashed in the attic. This occurred long before his behaviour became obviously problematic.

Non-dependent drinking can also have an impact on families

The Alcohol and Families Alliance's report, of which Adfam is a founder member, "Like sugar for adults" (October 2017) has shown that the negative effects of alcohol consumption on the family are not confined to heavy and dependent drinking. The report examines the effect of non-dependent parental drinking on children & families. It highlights that:

- The negative impact of seeing parental drinking can begin from relatively low levels of parental alcohol consumption.
- Comparable effects are noted for children whether seeing their parents tipsy or drunk, suggesting the way in which parents and their children view episodes of 'tipsy' drinking is quite different from one another.
- It is wrong to assume that negative impacts of parental drinking are only associated with higher levels of consumption.⁵

More generally, non-dependent drinking allows families to downplay the impact that alcohol is having. This made it less likely that support was sought by the family:

- '*For many years she only drank at weekends. She would always sober up to open the shop and it was only when the business closed that we really noticed how reliant she had become on alcohol.*'
- '*In the last few years he has lost jobs. It's because of the way he treats people but he is blind to it. The fact that he is always able to make money for them justifies everything for him. He's always been able to keep it together enough to make money.*'⁶

The impact on children is of particular concern

The impact on children is of particular concern. There are an estimated 200,000 children living with adults who are dependent drinkers and 1,000,000 children are being affected by a parent's drinking.⁷ Dependency impacts on the lives of children with significant and long lasting effects. Alcohol can be a major factor in causing or exacerbating parental conflict and violence, which can lead to a range of poor outcomes for children including damaging their education, employment and health.⁸

Between 2011 and 2014 parental alcohol misuse was recorded as a factor in 37% of cases where a child was seriously hurt or killed.⁹ A Department for Education census showed that in 2016 to 2017 18% of cases where there was an assessment of a 'child in need' were affected by alcohol.¹⁰

Perhaps of most concern is the children of parents with alcohol dependency are more likely to become dependent themselves in adulthood.¹¹ Adfam believes that preventing future alcohol related harm will require action to help families today.

Family support services are poorly developed

Families need support to overcome the challenges of caring for a family member with an alcohol problem. A 2012 Adfam report showed the social value of these services. Every pound invested in support services leads to the creation of £4.70 of social value. Most of the value (60%) is created for clients of the service. However, the return to the state alone is higher than the investment in the service, suggesting that the investment is good value for money for the government even before the health and well-being benefits of clients and substance users are taken into account.¹²

However, cuts to treatment services are impacting on family support services because many family support services are integrated into substance misuse services.¹³

To explore the current state of the family support sector, Adfam surveyed 115 practitioners working in family support services in England between December 2018 and February 2019. Beyond the issues of funding, our research highlighted three key issues:

- **Families are rarely signposted towards help for themselves** - There is insufficient awareness amongst professionals on the needs of families affected by drugs and alcohol. Families report approaching their GP for advice for themselves or to alert the GP to the problematic drinking of a loved one, and most suggested the outcome of this contact was generally very poor. Experiences at specialist alcohol services were often similar.
- **The variety and quality of support for families is insufficient** - Families tell us that the services they access are mostly a self-help model and extremely beneficial, but service availability is limited in terms of times, locations, and the range of available options. One size does not fit all in family support, and counselling, information provision, helplines and training courses would all be useful for families who are not comfortable with the mutual aid model.
- **Binge drinking can cause significant problems for families** - Many relatives of the family members in Adfam's study, could be classified as binge drinking but not necessarily alcohol dependent. However, this appeared to make little difference to the levels of stress and difficulty reported. Families reported that GPs and alcohol services did not regard non-dependent binge drinking as 'serious enough' to merit any intervention, which was a cause of frustration and division within families.

Kinship care is an important part of family care

Kinship care is a very specific part of the alcohol and families agenda. In some families, the substance misuse of parents means that they are no longer able to adequately care for their children. Other family members (most frequently grandparents) will then step in and take on the care of these children. This is a role that requires considerable support to ensure that the new carers are able to deal with problems ranging from the distress of the children to the funding and finance implications. Adfam is currently running a kinship care project in Peterborough. In

developing the response to alcohol misuse it is important to remember that this is a potential element in the range of services to be provided.

Commission Question 3 - What challenges do alcohol treatment services currently face in supporting people impacted by alcohol harm?

Cuts to the funding of substance misuse services impact on family members. Adfam's primary role is to advocate for the needs of family members. However, families require there to be not just services for themselves but also for their loved ones with alcohol problems. It is clear from the family members with whom we engage that local alcohol treatment services are under-funded and under-provided. This impacts on the opportunities for the drinking family member to engage in recovery focused help.

Adfam is clear that the evidence presented by Alcohol Change UK in their report "The Hardest Hit" is an accurate reflection of the current situation: services which are facing repeated cuts in funding which is impacting on their ability to care for people with alcohol problems which then impacts on family and carer well-being.¹⁴

Commission Question 7 - What current evidence is there of links between alcohol and violent behaviour and other crime?

Alcohol is a key contributory factor in domestic violence. While not the cause of domestic violence, alcohol misuse increases the likelihood and potential severity of violence. Research into Domestic Homicide Reviews by Alcohol Concern and Action on Violence and Abuse showed that alcohol was a factor in 69% of a randomly chosen sample of reviews.¹⁵

This work also highlighted the specific challenge of couples where both partners have chronic drinking problems. These clients are particularly challenging to work with and have a very high rate of serious violence. 38% of couples in the Alcohol Concern study fell into this group.

Commission Question 10 - What policy changes would help to reduce the level of harm caused by alcohol? Are there policy responses from other governments (including within the UK) that have been successful in reducing harms caused by alcohol that could be implemented in the UK?

In November 2019 Adfam launched a new manifesto, setting out 5 key points we'd like to see the Government address to diminish the harms described above and to provide families with the opportunity to thrive. Families are currently sorely neglected in policy and provision and we believe these five steps will help redress the balance.¹⁶

1. Funding must be made available for every Local Authority to provide dedicated support services for those affected by a loved one's substance misuse. Current provision is very patchy. Effective support in every local area will enable families to improve their health and wellbeing, stay in work, participate in society and build and maintain positive relationships.

2. Family members who assume roles as kinship carers should be supported financially to ensure they are able to fulfil their responsibilities without fear of entering poverty. Research by Grandparents Plus has found that 50% of children living in kinship care do so due to parental substance misuse. Kinship carers must be given the same rights and benefits as foster carers to give

them the financial support they desperately need and to safeguard the emotional wellbeing of them and the children in their care.

3. Money should be ring-fenced for children's social care services to identify and provide ongoing support for children affected by parental substance misuse to ensure they are given opportunities to recover and thrive. These children can experience neglect, physical and emotional abuse which often leads to more serious mental health problems and other negative outcomes in the future. More funding will enable children's social care services to better identify these children and give them the support they need.

4. Central Government money should be made available to start a national conversation to improve public understanding on the impact of substance misuse on others and tackle stigmatising attitudes. Two million adults in the UK have experienced stigma or judgment as a result of a loved one's substance use and this can be a barrier to them speaking out or seeking support. A national conversation is needed to change the public's understanding and recognition of this issue.

5. The Health and Social Care Select Committee should launch a public enquiry into how substance misuse contributes towards mental ill-health and poverty in families. 5.7 million adults in the UK have experienced mental health problems such as anxiety or depression, whilst 2.8 million have experienced financial impacts such as debt as a result of someone else's substance use. The Government needs to take action to understand how substance use contributes to a wide range of harms to families.¹⁷

¹ NICE clinical guideline 115 recommends encouraging families and carers to be involved in the treatment and care of people who misuse alcohol to help support and maintain positive change.

² <https://adfam.org.uk/files/one-in-three.pdf>

³ "Like sugar for adults" - The effect of non-dependent parental drinking on children & families – Adfam - October 2017

⁴ https://adfam.org.uk/files/docs/whyinvest_slides.pdf

⁵ "Like sugar for adults" - The effect of non-dependent parental drinking on children & families – Adfam - October 2017

⁶ Ditto

⁷ https://adfam.org.uk/files/docs/whyinvest_slides.pdf

⁸ Department of Health and Social Care - Funding to Provide Support for Children of Alcohol Dependent Parents (CADeP): Guidance for Applicants - 2018

⁹ Ditto

¹⁰ Ditto

¹¹ E.g. Chalder M. et al. Drinking and motivations to drink among adolescent children of parents with alcohol problems – Alcohol and Alcoholism - Alcohol & Alcoholism Vol. 41, No. 1, pp. 107–113, 2006

¹² https://adfam.org.uk/files/docs/Adfam_SROI_report.pdf

¹³ E.g. CGL's Newham service with which Adfam worked between 2016-2019

¹⁴ Ward M. – The Hardest Hit - Alcohol Change UK - 2018

¹⁵ Alcohol Concern & AVA - Change resistant drinkers and domestic violence - 2017

¹⁶ <https://adfam.org.uk/files/one-in-three.pdf>

¹⁷ <https://adfam.org.uk/files/one-in-three.pdf>