

ASCERT Service User Survey on Impact of Coronavirus Pandemic: *First Report*

Introduction

The current Covid-19 emergency is something none of us has ever experienced. For people who are vulnerable and experiencing problems with issues related to alcohol or drugs the challenges are unknown. Following the government lockdown, ASCERT conducted a survey of service users to establish how the coronavirus pandemic was affecting them.

The survey targeted people who had engaged with ASCERT services¹ because of alcohol or drug use. The survey was completed by the service user using an online survey tool or by their worker administering the survey with the service user.

The findings below represent our first report from survey responses collected between 8th April and 4th May 2020 and we are repeating the survey again in May.

The data analysis has been provided by Dr Anne Campbell, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, School of Social Sciences, Education and Social work, Queen's University Belfast.

¹ The survey was administered to ASCERT service users in the following services: Drug and Alcohol Intervention Service for Young people (DAISY), Steps to Change step 2 community based intervention service for adults (WHSCT area only), PBNI Regional Rapid Response Addiction Service and Dry January Programme participants.

Demographics

The cohort (n=97) was comprised of 73% (n=71) males and 27% (n=26) females. The mean age of the cohort was 32 years with minimum age 15 years and maximum age of 64 years.

Figure 1 Gender

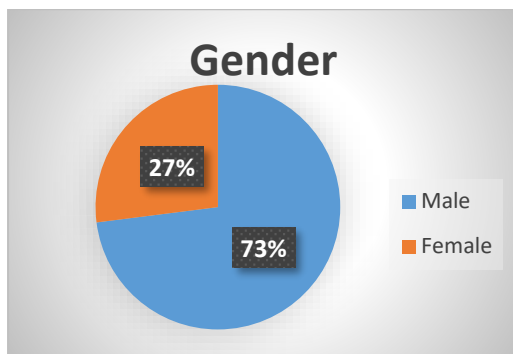
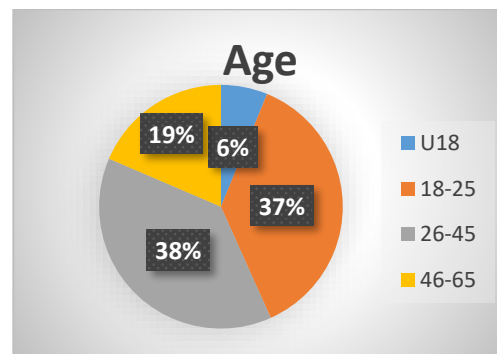
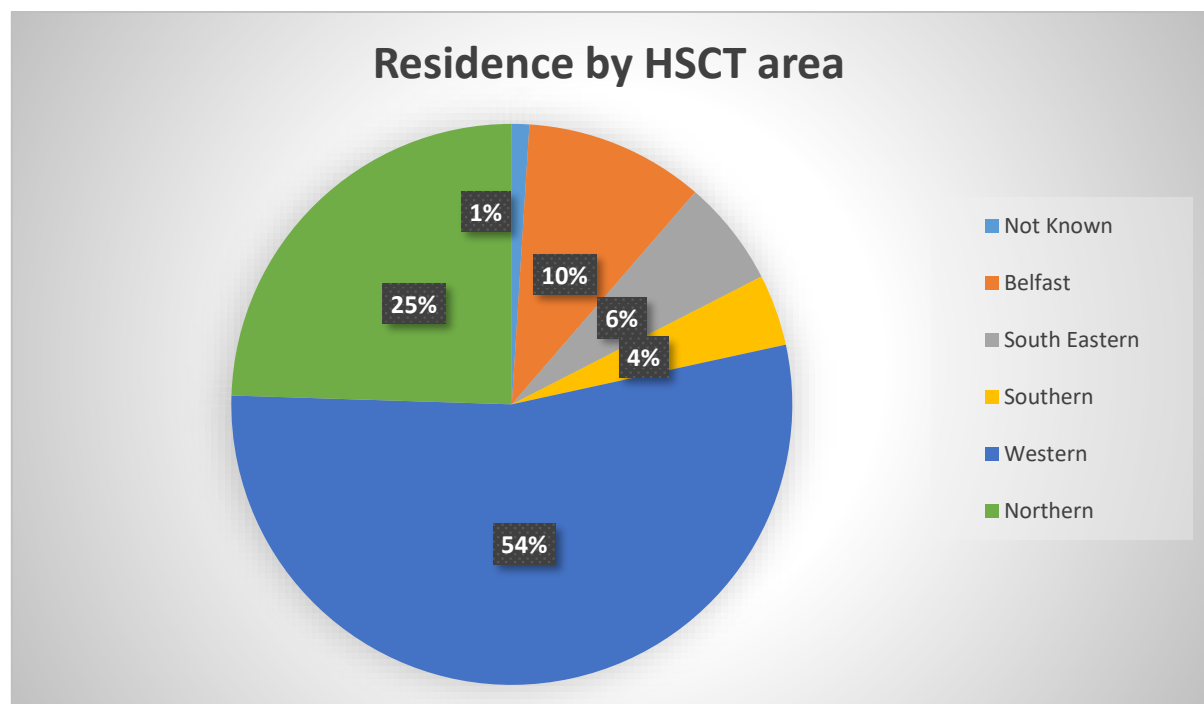


Figure 2 Age



The highest number of service users were from L'Derry (27%) followed by 10% from Belfast, 8% from Ballymena and 8% from Omagh. Figure 3 shows residence of respondents by HSCT area. This is broadly representative of ASCERT's service configuration, with the highest number of respondents in the Western HSCT, where in addition to its regional services ASCERT is the local provider of the PHA's regional Step 2 drug and alcohol intervention services for adults.

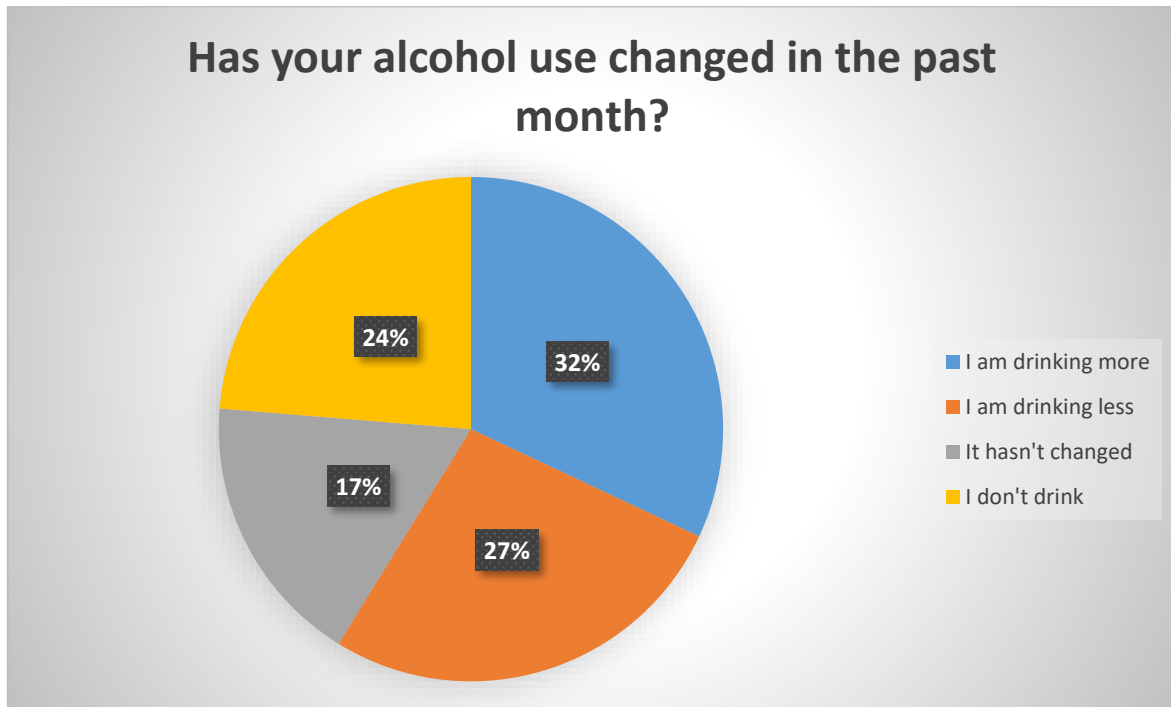
Figure 3 Residence



Changes in Drug and Alcohol Use

Respondents were asked to report their level of alcohol use in the last month. Thirty-two percent stated they were drinking more, whilst 27% stated they were drinking less over the last few weeks (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Alcohol Use



Many of participants reporting that their drinking had reduced were abstinent prior to the COVID situation. Others were choosing not to drink for reasons associated with the lockdown.

“I am not drinking at the moment. I have been sober since February. The Coronavirus has a small impact in that I don't want to bump in to other people”.

“Trying to keep healthy in case I need my strength to fight the coronavirus.”

“Drinking less, because of this lock down, it dawned on me how scary all this is when I was queuing, I realised I was putting my health in Jeopardy and I don't want to do that for a drink.”

Comments, which highlighted an increase in alcohol consumption, focused on the boredom induced by the COVID lockdown.

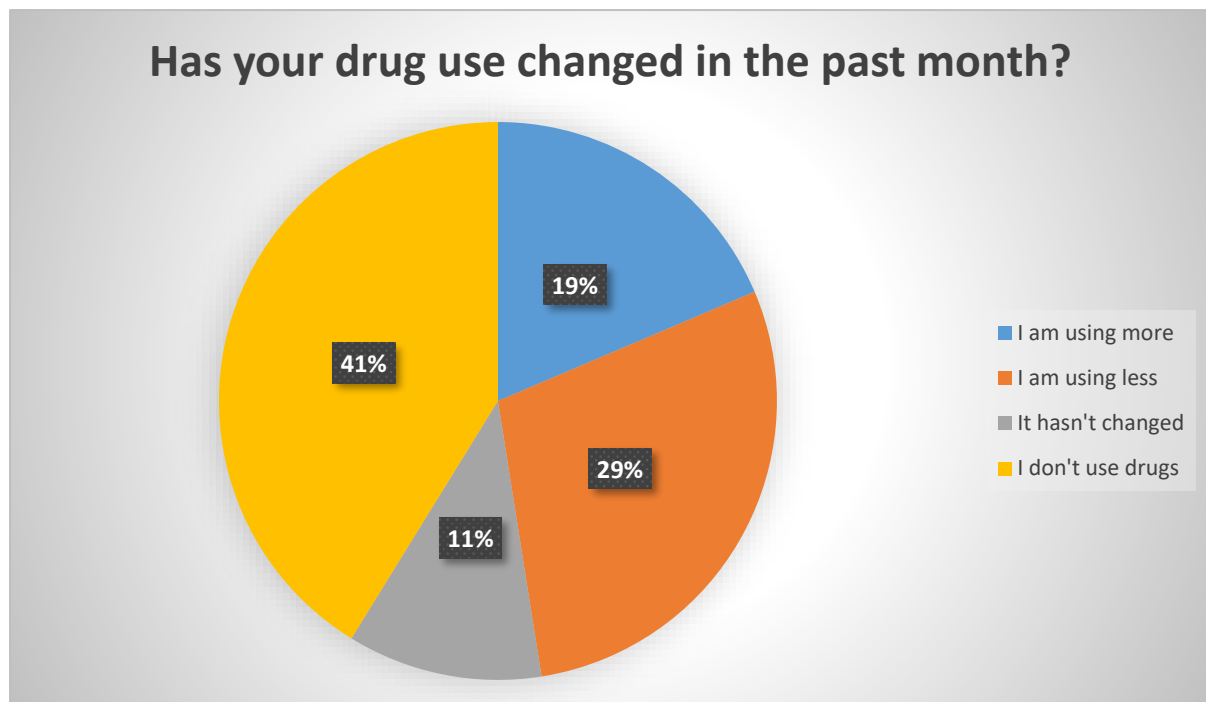
“Being at home regularly, my alcohol consumption has increased”.

“Boredom, nothing to do ..Can’t get out ...it’s the morale and my mood goes down”.

“I am bored and I am drinking more to relieve stress as I miss seeing my family”.

Respondents also reported on drug use in the same period. Nineteen per cent reported an increase in use, whilst 29% stated that consumption had decreased (see Figure 5).

Figure 5. Drug Use



Types of substances being used

Respondents were asked whether the types of alcohol or drugs they were using had change. Sixty-two per cent stated that the type of alcohol and drugs had not changed over the last month, whilst 38% reported that the type of alcohol and drugs had changed over the same period (see Figure 4). A number of comments underlined more reliance on cannabis and prescription medication, whilst others indicated that

they had difficulty getting their normal supply. Comments included reduced availability of cannabis and more availability of pills and cocaine.

“Trying more random stuff that dealers offer in exchange for other things”.

“Can't get the ones I normally take.”

“We've been given promotional offers for mushrooms. The temptation is there to try them due to the "offer" and the fact weed is harder to get.”

Price of drugs

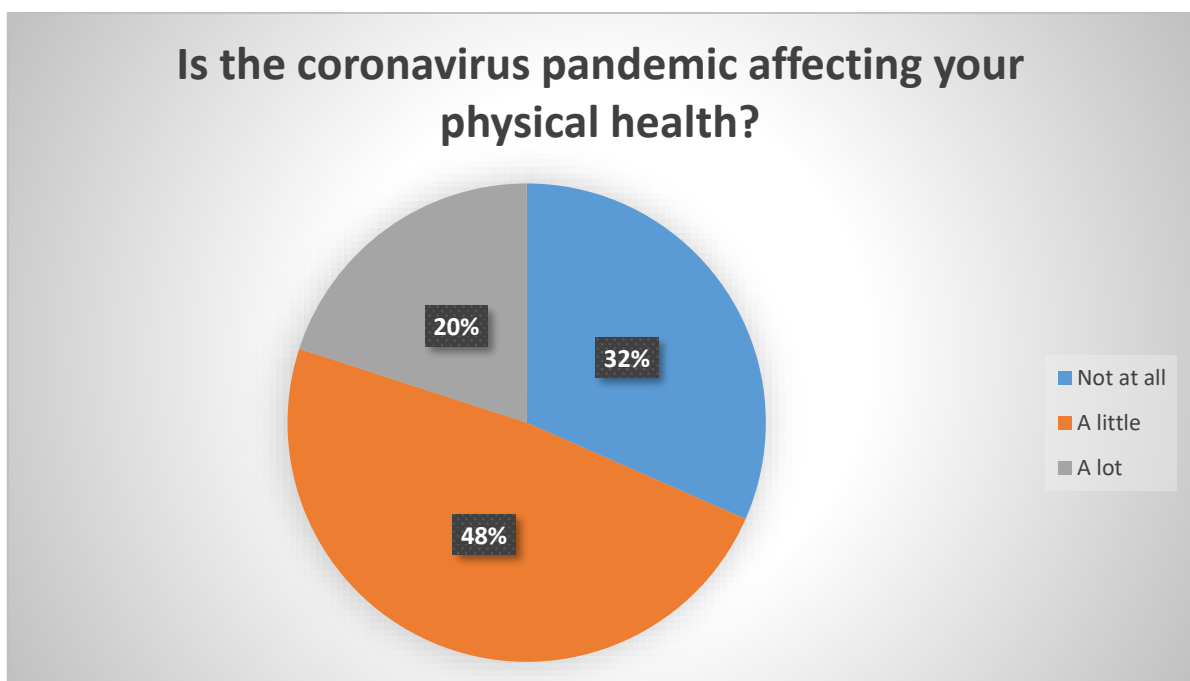
Respondents reported on the change in the price of drug use and 35% stated that this had fluctuated since the onset of the COVID crisis. Where it was indicated that price had increased this was not by a significant amount.

“Drugs has got more expensive, grass more expensive and harder to get. You get less for your money because of Coronavirus three quarters of the amount for the same money pre coronavirus.”

Impact of coronavirus pandemic on wellbeing

Service users were asked whether the current crisis was having any impact on their physical or mental health.

Figure 6. Physical Health



Sixty-eight per cent confirmed that the COVID -19 pandemic had affected their physical health (see Figure 6). The majority of qualitative comments focused on the lack of exercise, which exacerbated emotional well-being problems. Over eating was also cited as having a negative impact on physical health.

“I am eating more and exercising less, therefore my weight has escalated”

“I am getting no exercise...I would like to be out an about while I am off the drugs.”

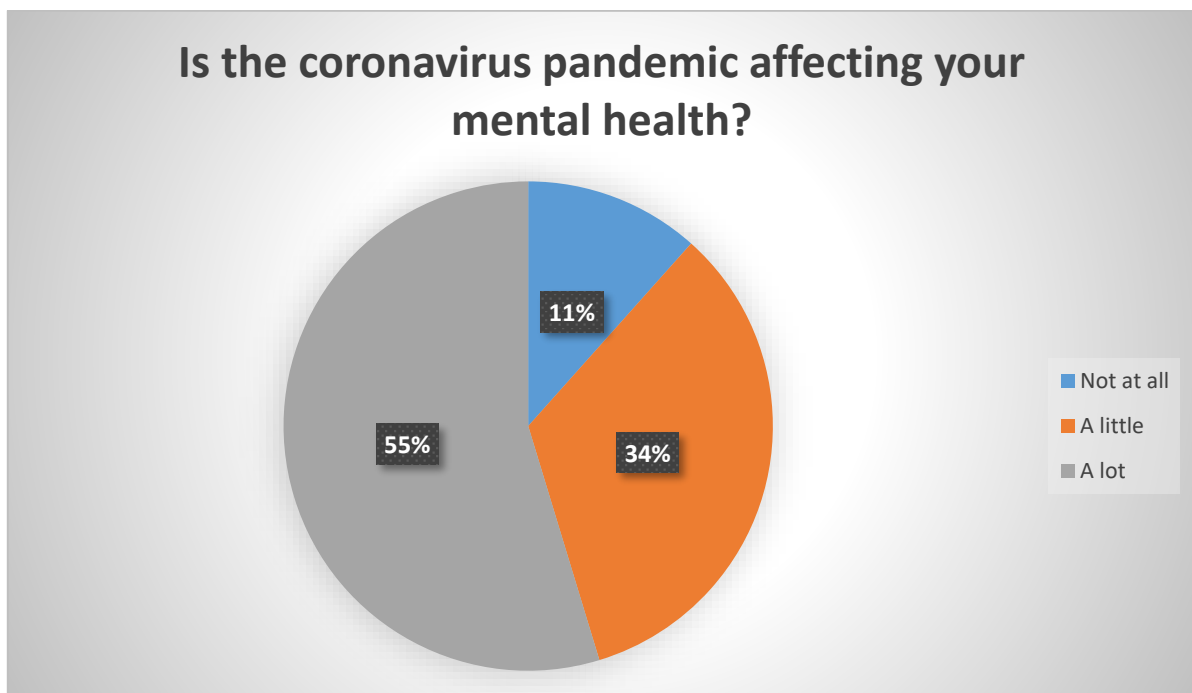
“I'm not getting to walk around work. Not taking my 1 walk a day as I'm working 10 hour shifts at home. I'm working 10.5 hours a day. It's affecting my ability to walk and is putting weight on too.”

A small number of respondents noted that it was difficult to access GP contact or obtain prescribed medication.

“I feel that I cannot seem to be able to contact my doctor.”

“I find it difficult to get my prescriptions and do not like to queue for them.”

Figure 7. Mental Health



89% confirmed that the COVID had affected their mental health (see Figure 7).

A number of respondents provided qualitative comments on the negative impact that COVID had on their mental health.

“Being void of social contact and isolation is have a huge impact on my mental health from lack of sleep, poor diet, lack of concentration and motivation.”

Many reported that anxiety levels had been exacerbated by the current crisis either directly due to fear of the virus or the impact of the lockdown on aspects of family life.

“I am more anxious and worried about myself or family getting the virus .

“I am more anxious, I deal with social anxiety on a daily basis and do not leave the house without support.

“I am not able to see my children who are fostered or adopted which makes me anxious”.

Others also reported depression and low mood.

“Because I’m stuck in unless I’m working and then my mood goes down and I get depressed”

One respondents stated that she / he had suicidal ideation”.

“Yes I feel trapped and I have thoughts of killing myself”.

Respondents were asked how they were coping in the current situation.

A number of clients underlined that ASCERT and other providers had proffered support and advice during the crisis, which had helped them to cope.

“I am having telephone conversations with my probation officer and weekly counselling sessions with ASCERT.”

“Counselling support from ASCERT is helping”.

“Calling my ASCERT, my psychologist and PO”.

“The weekly telephone calls, reassurance and counselling I get from ASCERT has helping me get through each week. I am receiving practical support regarding Covid 19 to help me cope with the stress”.

Others commented on their use of technology, social media, gaming and TV to assuage the boredom and provide a level of entertainment.

Supporting service users

Participants also provided feedback on how they could be helped further during the current crisis. A number were concerned that the number of intervention sessions available would be ending soon and underlined that they required extended follow up sessions.

“Unlimited sessions...I’m coming to the end of my sessions and I’m worried what to do after”

Some alluded to signposting of the service user to other services.

“Information passed on to link in with AA and NA support services reading material for AWARE and support services such as LIFELINE helpline”.

However, there were a number of respondents who highlighted a positive attitude as they looked towards the post COVID period.

“Currently researching starting a course to have a goal to work toward and a commitment to attach to with a view to getting back into a trade and work.”

“Getting completely off drugs. Stability, job, accommodation, car...Settle down (sick of partying, over it, and would like to start own family when have more stability).”