

# “If it’s not there for you, you’re not going to go looking for it”

A qualitative assessment of the sexual health needs of people who inject substances

Preliminary Report Briefing



## Background:

The purpose of this research project is to understand the intersectional sexual health needs of people who inject substances (PWIS) in Glasgow and to address gaps in the provision of sexual health advice and support for this population.

PWIS experience high levels of sexual risk taking and extremely low engagement with sexual health services. This dynamic is compounded by intersecting socioeconomic factors including gender, gender-based violence and sexual coercion, mental health and associated trauma, housing insecurity, and the combined stigma of substance use and the sexual transmission of sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and blood-borne viruses (BBVs).

The first stage of the project aimed to ascertain PWIS’ relationship with sexual health; including their knowledge levels and understandings of risk, as well as their experiences of sex education and sexual health access. Thirty interviews were conducted with PWIS by a group of peer researchers with lived experience of substance use, who were trained and supported by Waverley Care.

## Findings:

The preliminary findings of this report showed **distinctive gaps in PWIS’ understandings of sexual health and their perceptions of risk**, as well as confusion and a lack of cohesion surrounding the delivery of sexual health advice and support for this population.

The research found that participants had good levels of knowledge surrounding STIs, HIV and contraception, but had almost no awareness of Pre- and Post-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP/PEP). They also demonstrated mixed awareness on what constitutes STI and HIV risk, as well as how to assess the risk of transmission.

Preliminary findings also showed that participants generally expected to obtain sexual health information, advice and support through engagement with health and social care services; however, nearly a third of those interviewed had not been provided with sexual

health advice from health and social care practitioners. Furthermore, 57 per cent of the cohort stated that allied "support workers had not mentioned sexual health."

Most participants had never accessed sexual health services and less than a quarter had attended a sexual health screening within the last two years. Accessibility also emerged as a key theme, with participants reflecting on a number of socioeconomic barriers which limited their engagement with sexual health clinics.

These preliminary findings emphasise the importance of developing a coordinated and proactive response to meet the distinctive sexual health needs of PWIS through integrating sexual health within wider service provision.

**"Without improving basic sexual health literacy and widening accessible contact points with sexual healthcare, the impetus to access sexual healthcare continues to be placed on individual PWIS in the context of living with multiple intersectional inequalities" (p. 38)**

By interviewing health and social care practitioners in this second phase of research, this project can more fully understand the barriers and facilitators to sexual health integration, and develop effective guidance for health and social care professionals working with PWIS: supporting them to incorporate sexual healthcare into their practice.

**"So, when you're going to see these people, it's all right them speaking about your addiction, a bit about your mental health, but what about your sexual health? I could be loaded up with something and that's affecting me in another way. If I had an infection it could be playing up things in my body, making me feel uncomfortable and I don't know. It could lead to other things, I'm trying to explain." (p 28)**