

Accessing support in the digital age:

The impact of WithYou's
webchat service

October 2023



withyou



Contents



Foreword	4
About our webchat	5
What is it?	
How does it work?	
Who uses webchat?	8
Webchat in numbers	
Age	
Gender	
Why people are accessing webchat	
Geographical distribution	
How people find us	
Majority of webchat users have never sought support before	
How is webchat used?	17
Type of support	
Availability of support	
Duration of chats	
Impact: What our data tells us	21
We are reaching people who don't normally access in-person services	
Webchat is an effective tool in reducing risk of drug and alcohol-related harm	
We help people overcome barriers to self referral	
We help support people to maintain recovery	
We provide a unique platform that provides support for friends and family	
We provide support that is instant and anonymous	
Our staff are overwhelmingly positive about working on webchat	
Our webchat is clear and very easy to use	
Case studies	29
Supporting people to find and access the right support in their local area	
Helping to address cultural barriers	
Resolving a prescribing issue at the weekend	
Sunday cocaine comedown clients	
Supporting a crisis intervention on Christmas eve	
Helping people overcome a negative prior experience with service providers	
Looking forward	32
How we would like to further our webchat offer	
Creating a sustainable long-term future for webchat	

The report was written by WithYou. You can access WithYou's webchat via www.wearewithyou.org.uk

WithYou is a charity that offers free, confidential support and treatment to people in England and Scotland who have issues with drugs, alcohol or mental health. We provide people with support in a way that's right for them, either in person in their local service, community or online.

WithYou would like to acknowledge the generous funding from the Scottish Government that has supported the delivery of our webchat service in Scotland.

WE ARE WITH YOU. We're a registered charity in England (1001957) and Scotland (SCO40009), and we're a private company limited by guarantee, incorporated in England & Wales with company no. 02580377. Registered office: Gate House, 1-3 St. John's Square, London, England, EC1M 4DH. Tel: 020 7251 5860.

Foreword



In our interconnected world, the manner in which we communicate, seek information, and access support has been transformed by the digital age.

The WithYou webchat service, introduced in 2017, is a testament to this evolution. Catering to the diverse and often urgent needs of those seeking guidance on alcohol, drugs, and mental health, the platform underscores the vital importance of accessible, instantaneous, and high-quality support.

This impact report offers an in-depth exploration of the significant strides made by the webchat service. Beyond mere numbers, it paints a vivid picture of lives touched, crises averted, and challenges overcome. It's not just about the individuals who directly seek help; it's also about the family members, friends, and loved ones who are indirectly affected, many of whom have turned to our webchat for guidance.

For many, the virtual nature of this service has broken down barriers to seeking help, making professional guidance accessible for those hindered by geography, work schedules, societal stigmas, or personal apprehensions. The data clearly indicates that this platform is reaching many who have never before sought assistance, illuminating its critical role in the broader landscape of health and social care.

However, the work is far from over. As we look ahead, the insights derived from this report will shape our ongoing efforts to enhance the effectiveness and reach of our webchat. We aim to refine our service based on user feedback, deepen our understanding of our users' needs, and broaden our accessibility to cater to even more individuals.

Steph Keenan
Contracts Manager Digital Operations, WithYou

About our webchat



What is it?

Launched in 2017, the WithYou webchat service is an online platform where anyone over the age of 13 can access advice and support for issues relating to alcohol, drugs and mental health.

Our webchat is an accessible and engaging service that provides a single front door to a range of drug, alcohol and mental health information and advice. The team offers brief interventions and brief treatment options, and can connect with wider provisions to offer a range of support options for in-person treatment.

How does it work?

We have a specialised team of 36 webchat advisors who run the service on weekdays from 9am to 9pm and on weekends (and bank holidays) from 10am to 4pm.

Webchat is completely anonymous and confidential with on-demand support from our experienced staff available every day of the year except Christmas Day.

We deliver an out-of-hours service to offer the opportunity to leave a message which will be answered the next day. We also redirect people in crisis to other support out-of-hours, including to NHS 24/111 or Samaritans

Each intervention and engagement is dictated by the individual themselves, with staff responding to queries and issues raised.

Our advisors are all trained and experienced staff from across the organisation, with at least three practitioners and a supervising manager online whenever the service is live. Not only does this ensure a minimum level of staff safeguarding and security, but it also allows the sharing of specialist information among the team. We have clear and effective governance and safeguarding in place to support high-standard and quality-assured delivery that reduces risk and harm.

Webchat requires different approaches, understanding and techniques than providing support both in-person or over the phone. This includes, for example, how to convey empathy and use paraphrasing and active listening skills via text-based channels. All webchat advisors complete levels 1, 2 and 3 of Helpline Skills professional development and we are registered with the Helplines Partnership, a membership body for organisations that provide information, support or advice via phone, email, text or online. As a minimum, webchat advisors are required to hold SVQ/NVQ level 3 in health and social care.

Interventions and support provided through webchat

We provide a range of interventions and support through webchat:



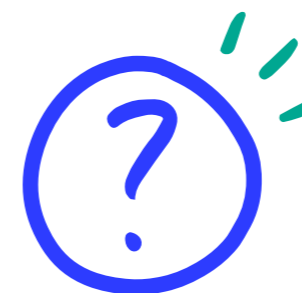
Brief interventions:

Some people don't want structured face-to-face support. Through webchat, we can provide people with a few brief interventions which are often enough for their needs.

Advice:

Providing clear advice from our trained expert advisors is one of the most important roles of webchat. However, not everyone needs a referral or wants ongoing support: one advisory chat could do the job.

We don't tell people what to do, we give them advice – it's all about informing them of their choices so they can feel empowered to act.



Signposting:

Our webchat plays a crucial signposting function helping people navigate what type of services they may want to access, how they can access a service, and what to expect at a service.

Emotional support:

Webchat allows people to connect with a compassionate, non-judgemental professional who provides a listening ear, reassurance, and guidance.



Who uses webchat?

Webchat in numbers

On average, we receive 16,870 chats a year. Between 2019 to 2020, when COVID-19 hit and in-person services were not as easily accessible, we saw a large increase in the number of people using this virtual service.

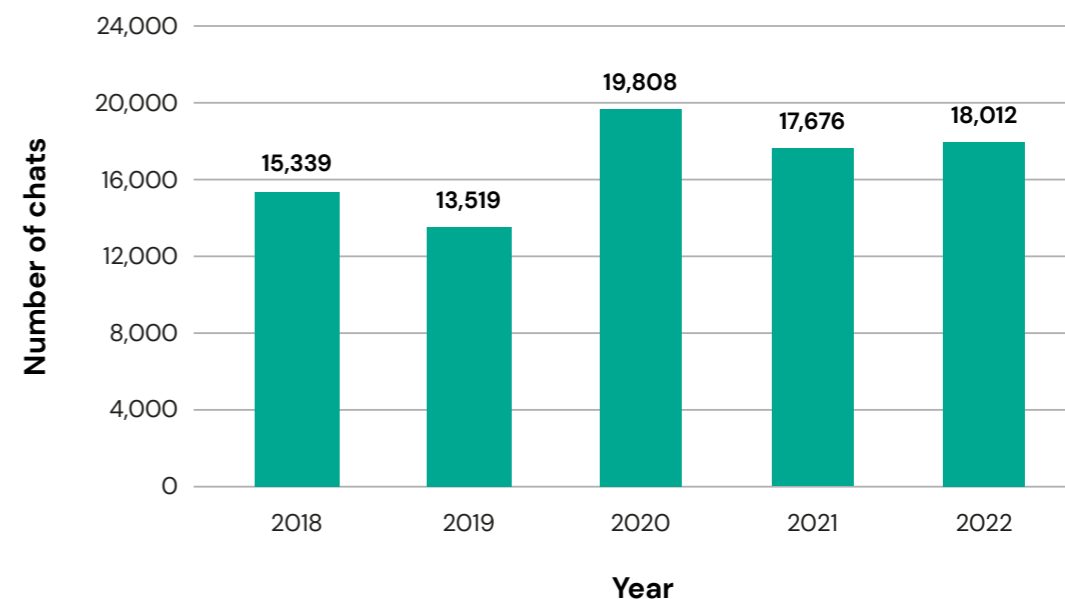


Figure 1. Number of webchat conversations between 2018–2022

The increase in the number of chats between 2019 and 2020 demonstrates the versatility of having the webchat platform, and the beneficial relationship it has with our in-person services – providing an important option for accessing support when people may otherwise not have received any. The number of webchats has continued to remain at this higher level following COVID-19.

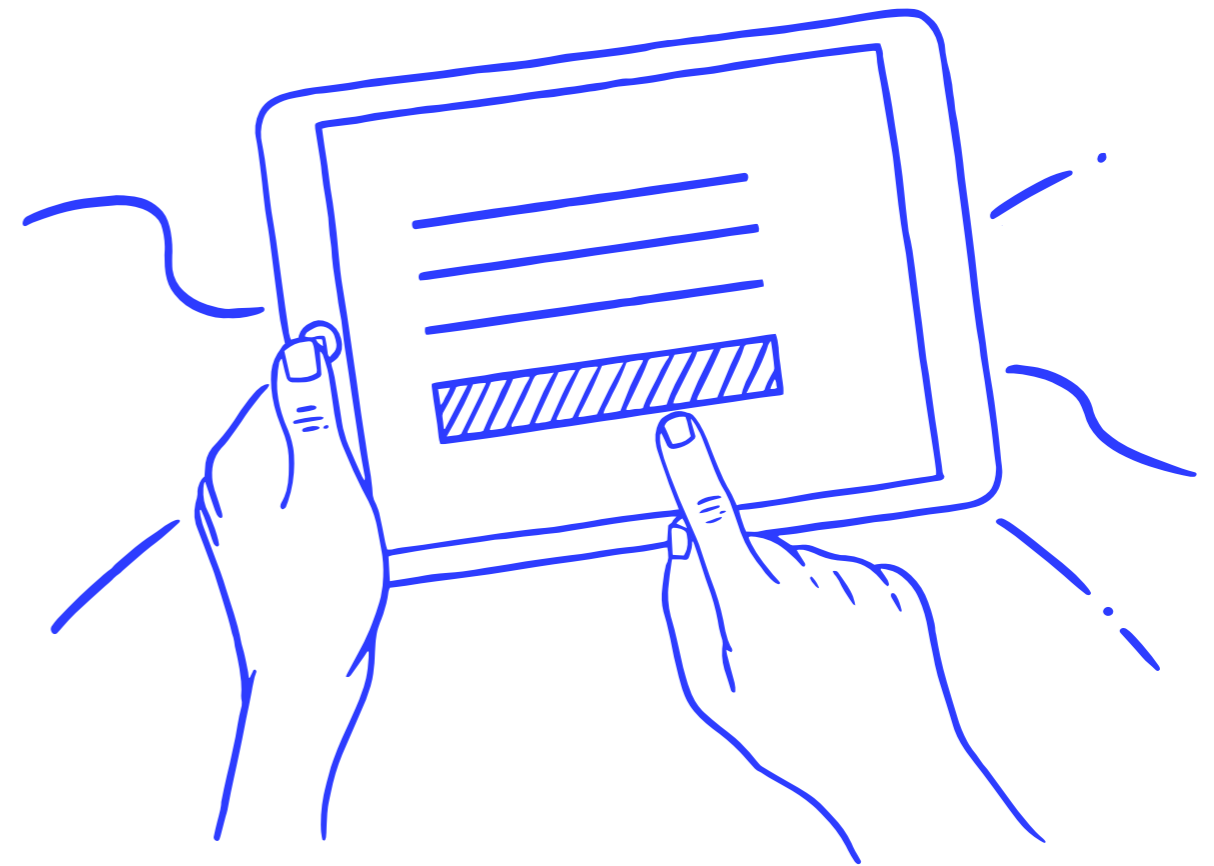
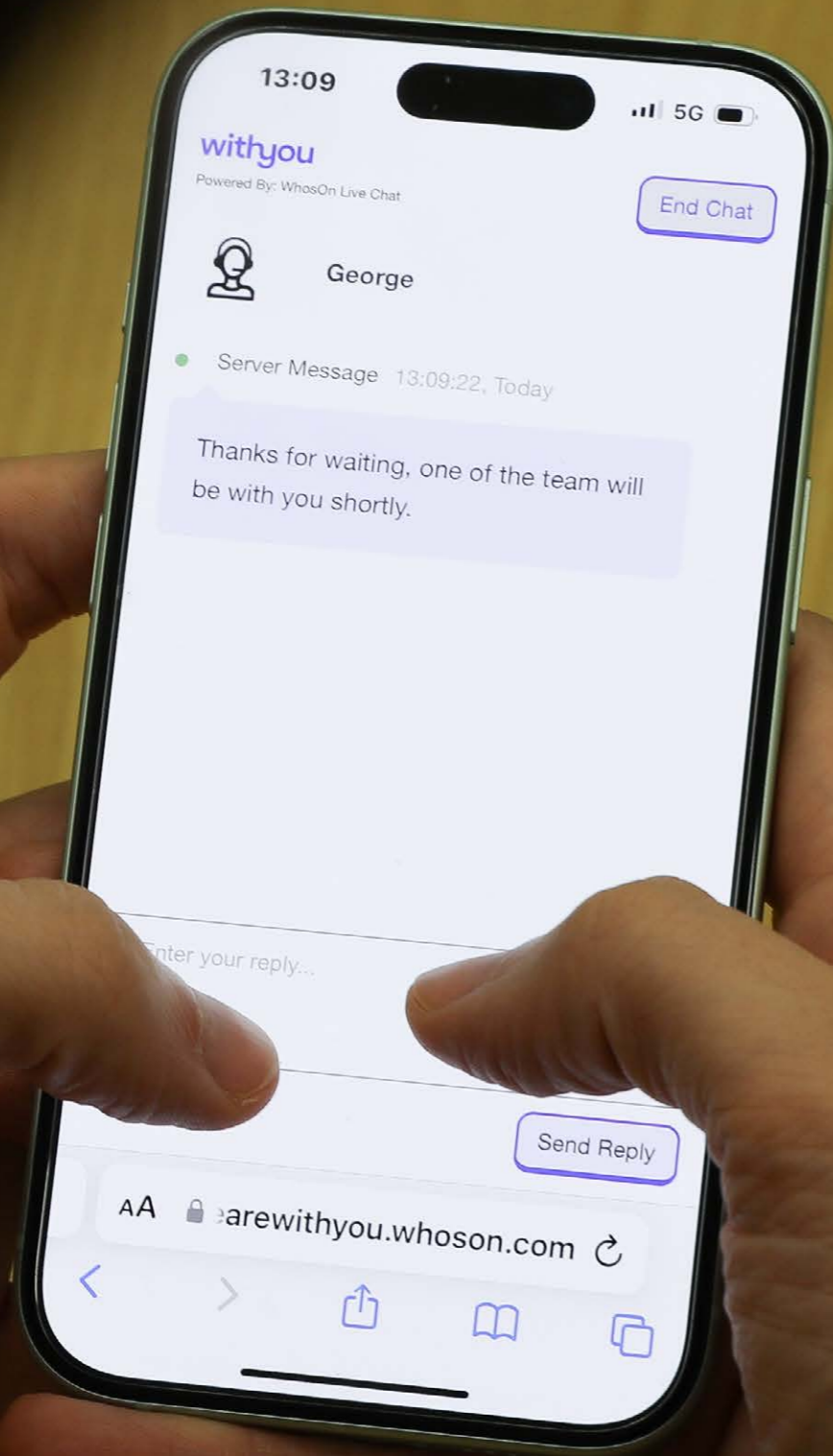


We have **36 qualified webchat advisors** providing drug, alcohol and mental health support weekdays (9am–9pm) and weekends/bank holidays (10am–4pm).

Since 2017, **84,354 people have chatted with one of our webchat advisors.**

67% of webchat users have not previously reached out for support (either from WithYou or other third sector organisations) for their drug, alcohol and/or mental health issues.

20% of our support is provided outside of regular working hours when most in-person services are not available.



Age

Our webchat service is used by a diverse range of people. The most common age range for people using webchat is 31-50 years old who make up 49% of all conversations, followed closely by 19-30 years old age group, which makes up 30%.

We know many of the people who use webchat are professionals, or are in employment, and may not be able to engage during working hours. Our out-of-hours service, from 5pm-9pm on weekdays and 10am-4pm on weekends, is an important feature that attracts users in the 31-50 age bracket.

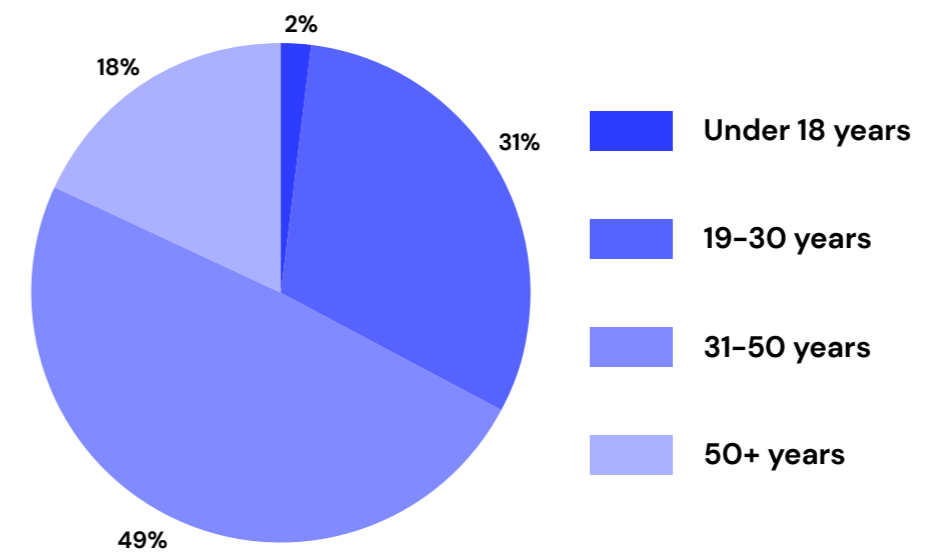


Figure 2. Age distribution of people using webchat

Gender

Although we know men are more likely to use drugs and alcohol than women,^{1,2,3} women make up the majority of the people who use our webchat service.

Since 2020, the gender split has remained fairly consistent, with a slight increase in the proportion of men. Women often require services that provide flexibility to cater for their holistic needs, and webchat is unique in providing accessibility and anonymity compared to in-person services.

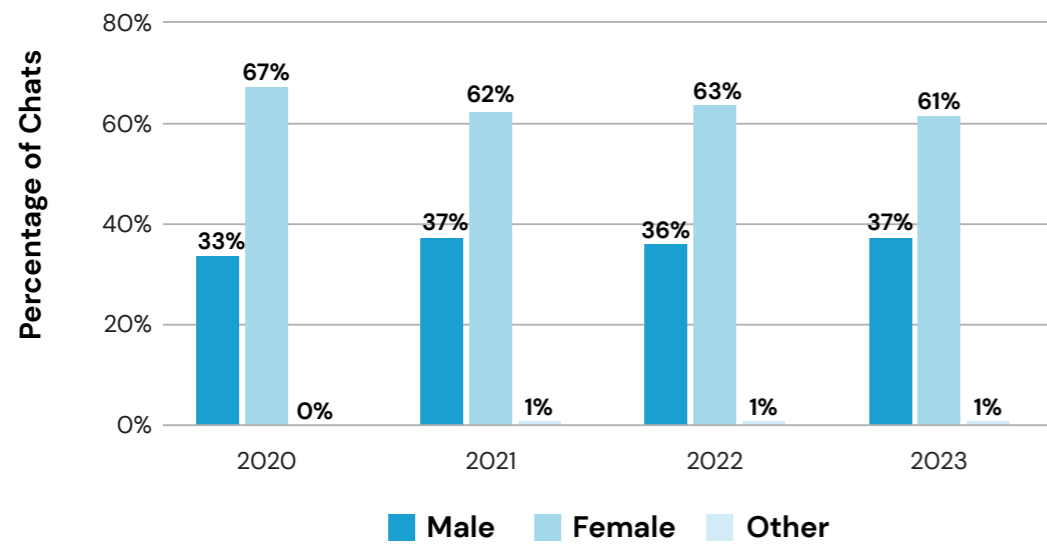


Figure 3. Percentage number of chats over the last five years, broken down by year and gender

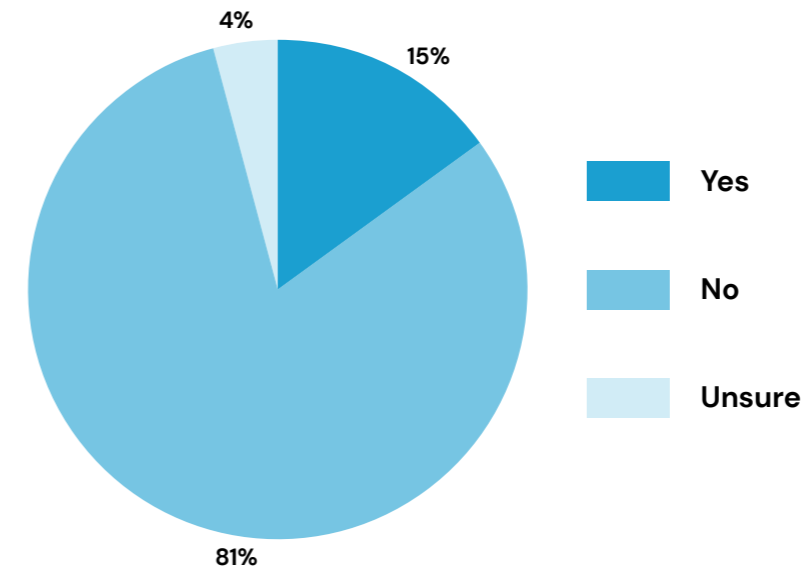
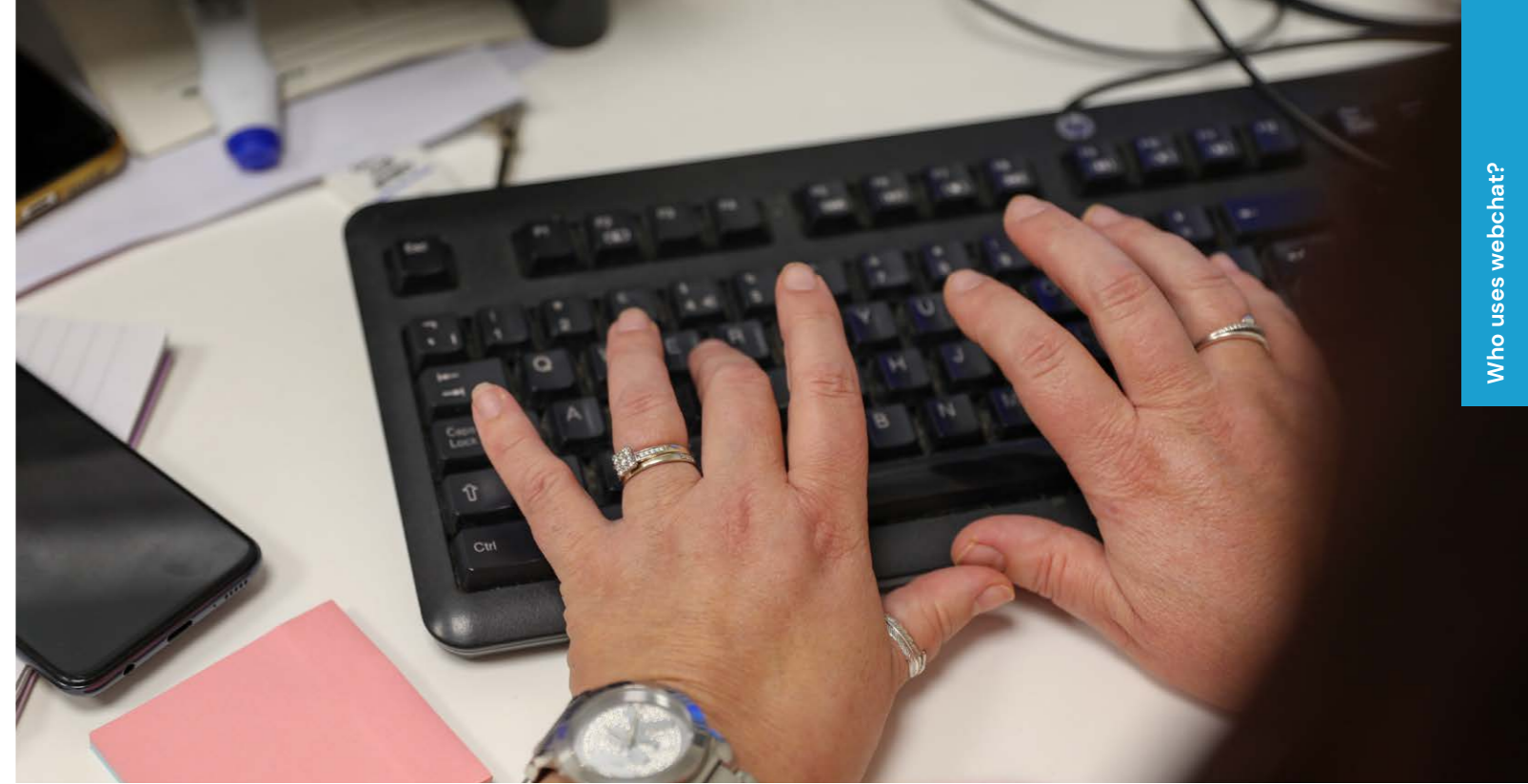
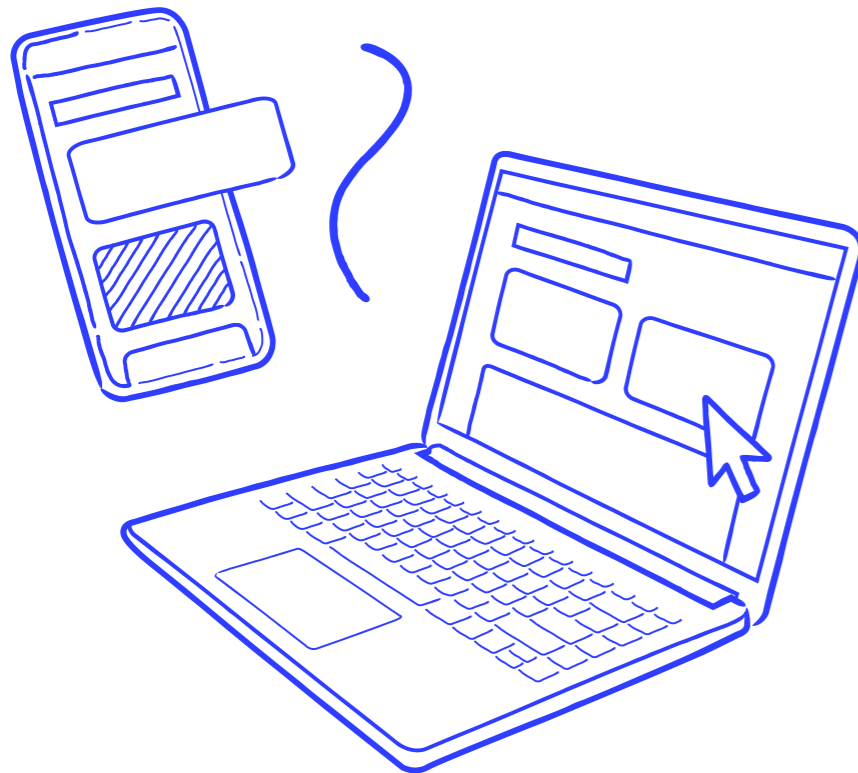


Figure 4. Number of people who identify as LGBTQ+

Alcohol and drug use among LGBTQ+ groups is higher than among the general population, irrespective of gender, or the different age distribution in the population.⁴



Our data shows that **15% of all webchats are with people who identify as LGBTQ+.** This is a significantly higher proportion than we see in in-person services.⁵

Why people are accessing webchat

Over half of the people using webchat are individuals looking to receive support or advice for themselves.

Almost 20% of webchats are with concerned family or friends. We often signpost or give them advice to share with their loved ones.

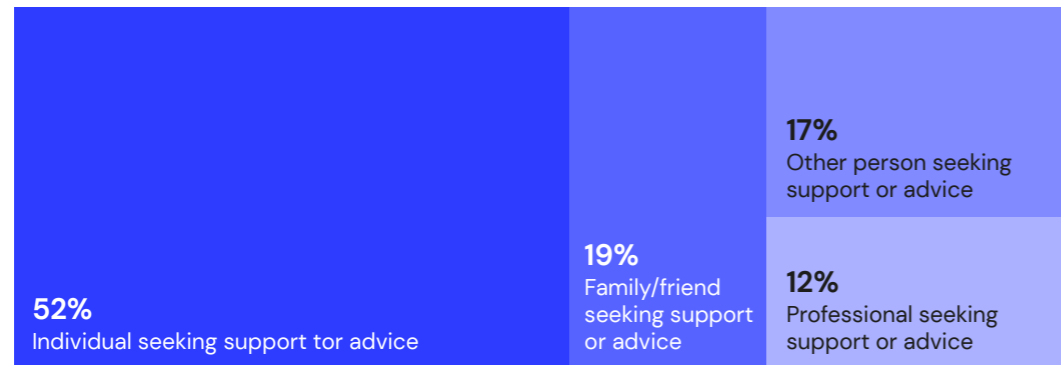


Figure 5. Type of webchats

Geographical distribution

Almost all of our webchat conversations are with people in England, Scotland and Wales. As can be seen below, there is a wide geographical distribution across the regions.

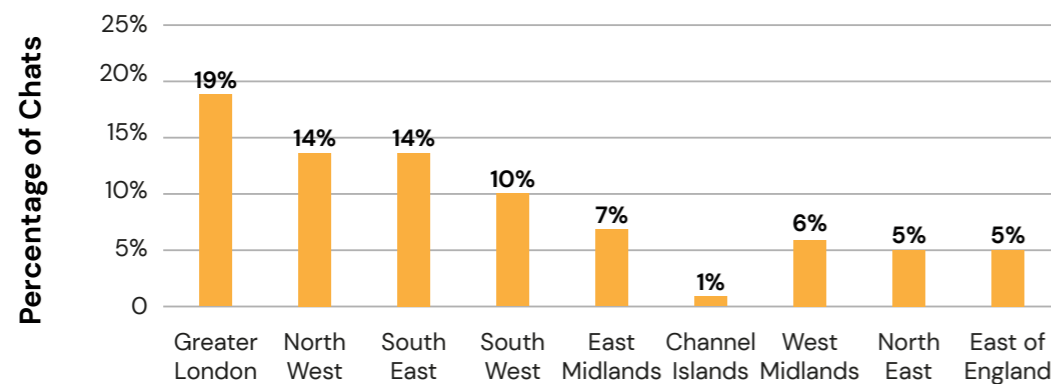


Figure 6. Geographical distribution of webchats across England

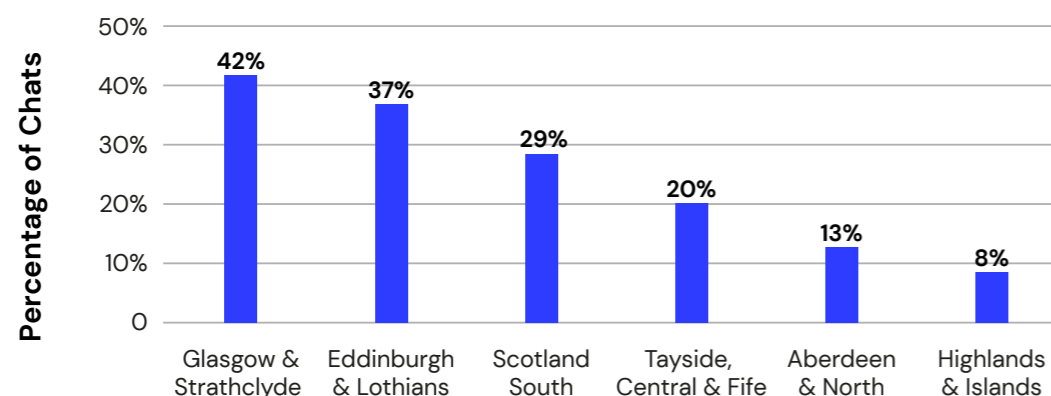


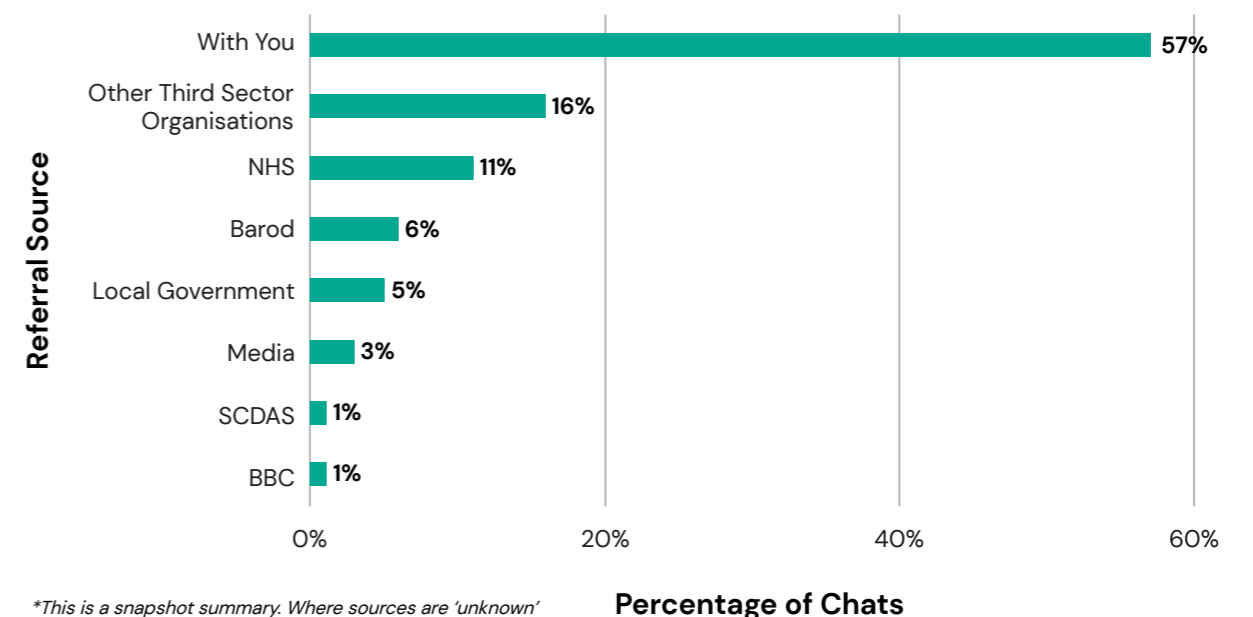
Figure 7. Geographical distribution of webchats across Scotland



How people find us

The majority of people come to our webchat service from our website, with similar third party sector organisations second. Our connections with the NHS and local government, and our investment in our social media platforms, all contribute to signposting individuals to our webchat service.

Understanding the referral source is a really important way in which we can direct future marketing engagement to help us reach and help even more people.



*This is a snapshot summary. Where sources are 'unknown' this data has been omitted for the purpose of clarity.

Figure 8. How people find our webchat service

The majority of webchat users have never sought support before

We know there are a range of factors which may hinder an individual from seeking support from an in-person service such as accessibility, cultural barriers, and uncertainty around what to expect.

More than half of the people that reach us have never previously sought support for their drug, alcohol or mental health issues before, with numbers for women 8% higher than for men.

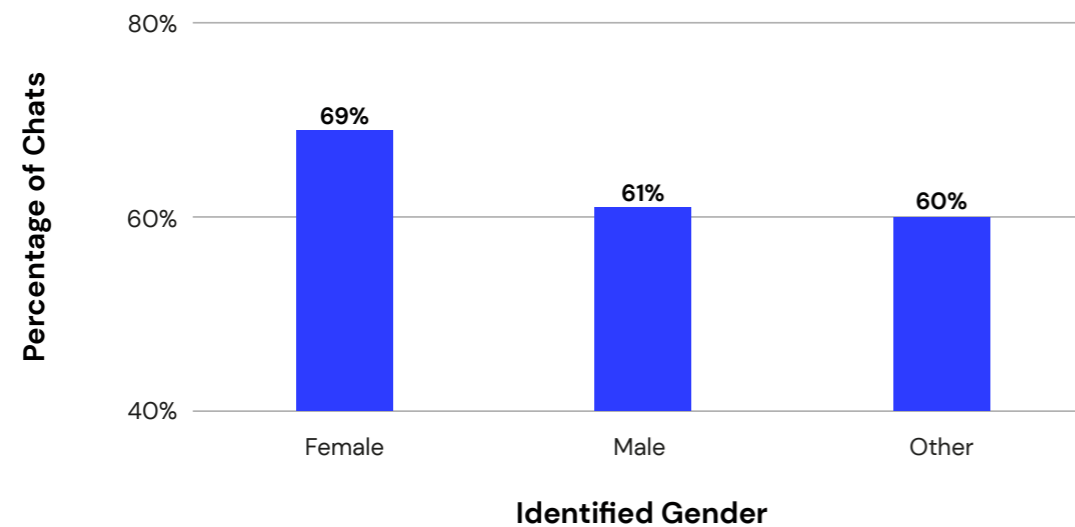


Figure 9. Percentage of people who have not previously sought support for their drug, alcohol or mental health issues, broken down by gender

Of those who identified as LGBTQ+ in our pre/post-webchat questionnaire, 64% stated that they have not previously sought support for their drug, alcohol or mental health issues. We know that they are less likely to seek out and attend in-person support and that they are less represented in our in-person services where representation is at around 2%.

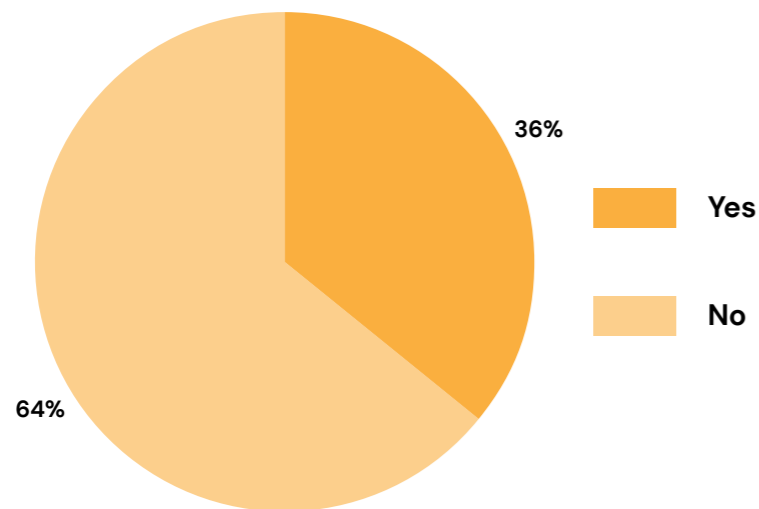


Figure 10. Percentage of people who identify as LGBTQ+ by whether they have previously sought support

How is webchat used?

Type of support

Support and advice for alcohol-related issues are the most common type of issue we receive through webchat, followed by drugs, then mental health.

“We provide support for a wide range of drug-related issues with high numbers of conversations related to cocaine and cannabis.”

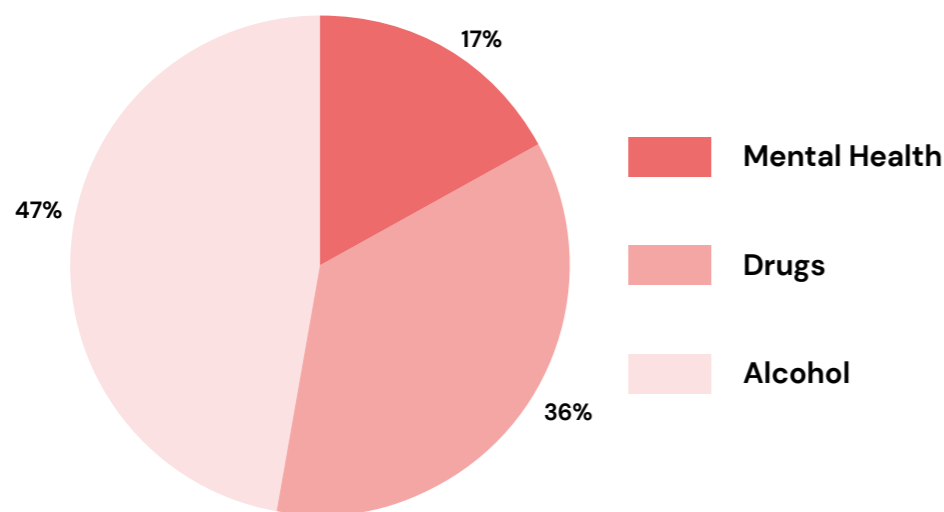
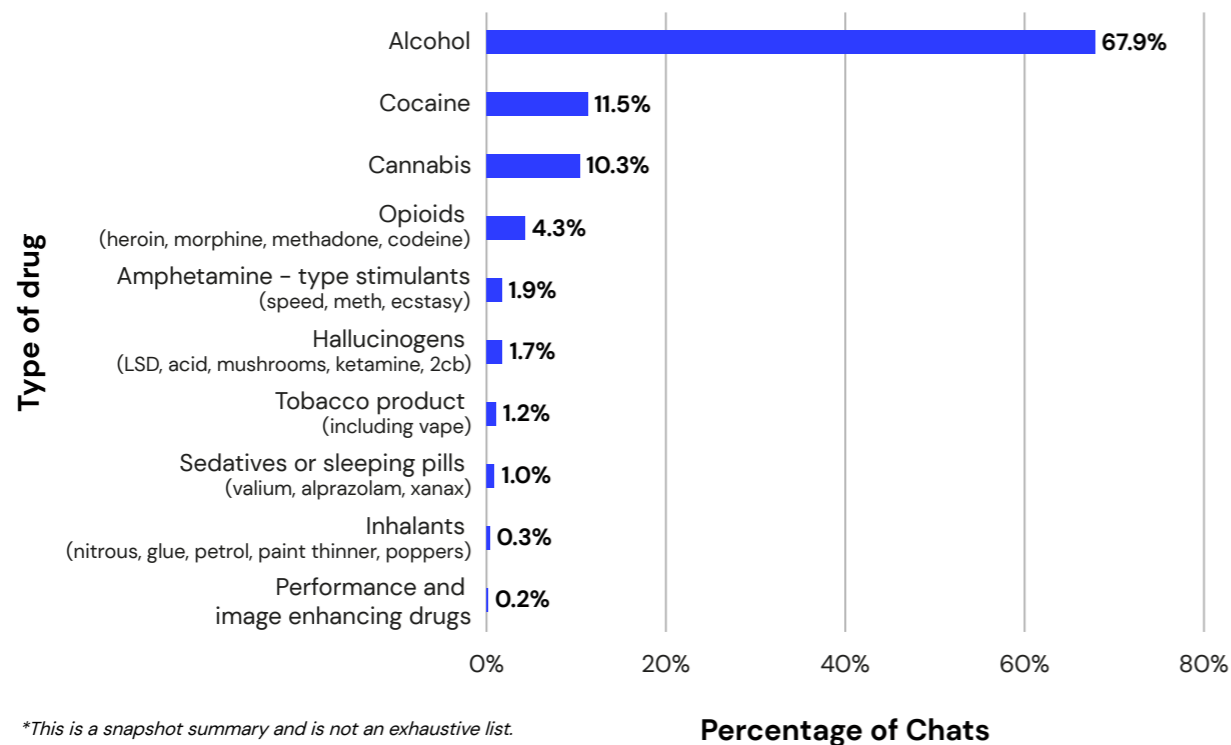


Figure 11. Distribution of support that we have provided



**This is a snapshot summary and is not an exhaustive list.*

Figure 12. Types of drugs people sought support for between 2020–2023

Availability of support

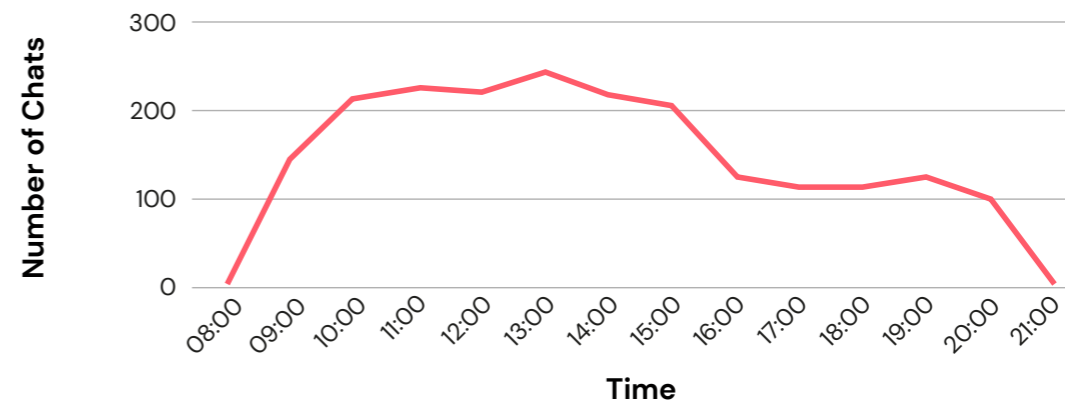


Figure 13. Average webchat engagement times between 2020–2023

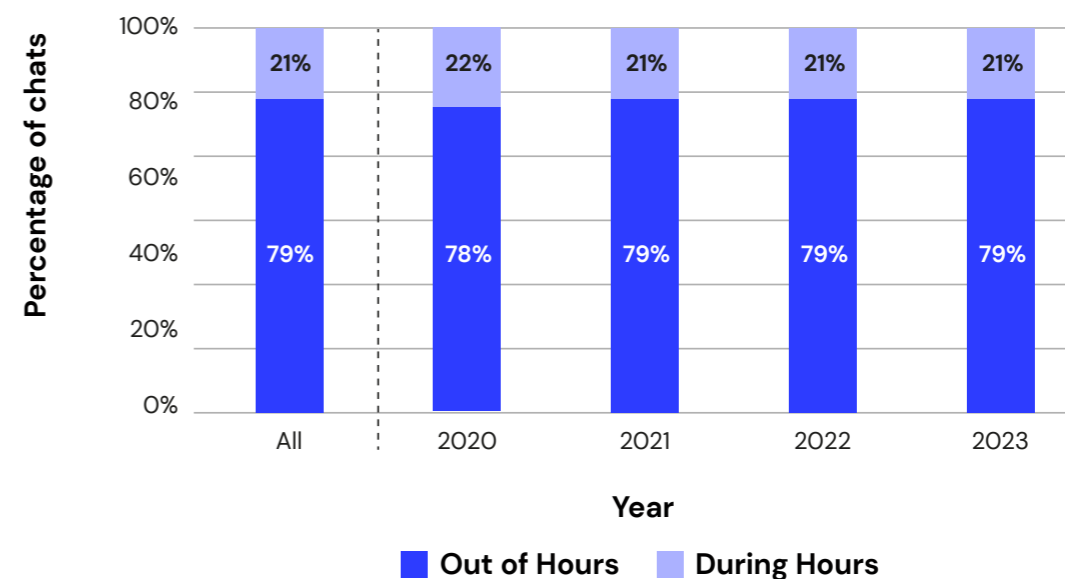


Figure 14. Average time of webchat engagements

In-person services frequently cater to people who are available on weekdays between 9am–5pm and those who are able to commute.

Our webchat provides a free, quick to access and comprehensive range of hours, taking into account people’s different and complex needs.



1 in 5 people who use webchat receive support outside of the regular 9am–5pm working hours, engaging with the service between 5pm–9pm during weekdays and 10am–4pm during weekends.

This has remained stable throughout the years. We know that there is a consistent client base for these out-of-hours times (around 21%) and that demand is at capacity.



Impact: What our data tells us

Duration of chats

The vast majority of webchat conversations last just under 30 minutes. However, there is no time limit for a conversation and we have seen some engagements lasting up to two hours in situations where people have needed more support or been in more complex situations.

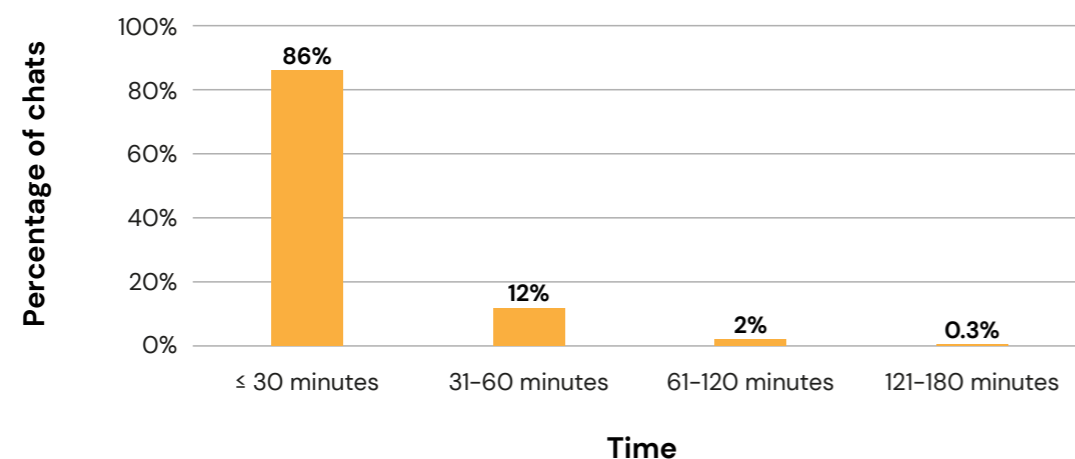


Figure 15. Duration of webchat conversations



Since 2020, **our average chat duration is 15 minutes and 30 seconds.**

This compares to the average chat duration of similar conversations in the virtual space of the healthcare sector of 8 minutes and 7 seconds.

We are reaching people who don't normally access in-person services

There are many reasons people can't or don't access help, support and treatment for their drug and alcohol use. For some people, acknowledging that they have a problem can be daunting, and beginning a treatment journey can seem to be a challenge. The chances of someone reaching out for support can be negatively affected by multiple factors, some of which may seem minor.

Geography

For some people who want to access support, geography is a barrier – particularly for those in rural parts of England and Scotland. There may be no local services, they might struggle with travel costs, or they may have complex needs, with no appropriate support available.

Support hours (see figures 12 and 13)

Most services are provided during working hours/school hours, when many people have other commitments. However, many people need and do access support outside these times.

Stigma

Many people find the thought of attending a service in-person overwhelming, and may also be worried about the stigma of being seen. We know that there can be very real consequences or repercussions if others in their community discover that their colleague, teacher, family member or friend has a drug or alcohol issue.

Access to culturally sensitive and appropriate in-person services can also be limited, and those from marginalised communities may feel a particular service may not be suitable for them, depending on the substance they are using, their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion or disability.

Women (see figures 3 and 8)

Men make up the vast majority of the drug treatment population, with services often designed and centred on their needs. We know that for many women, drug services with male-dominated user populations are daunting and intimidating places.³ Women also face additional stigma as primary caregivers, and they often require services that provide flexibility to cater for their holistic needs.

Alcohol

Access to alcohol treatment and support is a significant issue that needs more attention. The majority of people who use our webchat service are looking for advice relating to alcohol use. However, the number of people accessing in-person services for alcohol support and treatment continues to trend downwards.⁶ Current estimates show that only 18% of dependent drinkers are in treatment.⁷

There are a number of reasons why access to in-person alcohol services has decreased. People who require support and treatment for alcohol have been found to be less likely to access integrated drug and alcohol services because of their own attitudes and the characteristics of the service. This includes a fear of stigma, preconceptions about drug users and a sense that their treatment needs were different to what the services offered.





Webchat is an effective tool in reducing risk of drug and alcohol-related harm

As a large provider of clinical and community drug and alcohol services, we understand the nuances of risk, and our webchat service provides a route to support for specific cohorts who are at higher risk of overdose or harm.

Overdoses are most likely to occur in specific situations, including; after reduced tolerance to opioids in the time after a prison release, a hospital discharge, an interruption of treatment, or after completing a course of residential detoxification. In all these examples, webchat support can be more accessible than in-person; for example, people may experience the consequences of stigma attached to completing a residential programme and needing additional support; or a person's prison release or hospital discharge can happen on a weekend, without any other support available.

Cocaine is one of the most common drugs that we find people reach out for help with. Individuals accessing this support are most often in work, with recovery capital available. However, they access our webchat service because in-person services are often open only during working hours, with a requirement to attend in person. We offer an alternative and more accessible option, therefore reaching more people whose risk may increase because they face barriers to other services.

Webchat can either act as durable support in its own right, or be a resource for someone to get support before they are able to access an in-person service.

“Not everyone needs a referral or wants ongoing support – one advisory chat could do the job.”



WEBCHAT ADVISOR, 2023

We help people overcome barriers to self-referral

Webchat provides the practical and emotional support that is often needed in helping people overcome barriers when referring themselves into an in-person service. We can also provide a warm handover to a service; if a person feels anxious about phoning the service and verbalising that they need help, they can communicate with us via webchat.

We help people get the right information at the right time, and correctly signpost them into the right service. This means they don't have to ring around different services and feel they are being “passed around”.

Unique aspects of the service, such as being able to speak to the same advisor, are a huge help to people. The virtual and anonymous nature of webchat plays an important role in helping people understand more about their issues and addressing concerns about what may be involved with a referral. This can help people come forward when they otherwise may not have by providing guidance and reassurance on the options that are available to them.

We help support people to maintain recovery

We found webchat also plays a crucial role in helping some people maintain their recovery, whether they are already engaged with in-person services, or have finished their treatment. Sometimes, a one-off advisory chat can provide the support and guidance that an individual may need to keep up their recovery work or bounce back from a relapse.

Our unique platform provides support for friends and family (see figure 5)

In addition to providing support to individuals through advice, signposting and referrals, webchat provides an important service to concerned others – such as family members and friends. Approximately 20% of the people who contact the service are family members or concerned others.

Many contact webchat because they need advice on how to best support a loved one. We know that family members and concerned others can be key in the support and recovery of individuals. All our staff are CRAFT (Community Reinforcement and Family Training) trained to allow them to effectively support loved ones and family members within best practice guidelines.



We provide support that is instant and anonymous

We have learned that there is a clear need for a service that provides people with instant and anonymous support. Standard national waiting times for someone with an alcohol or drug issue to receive professional treatment can take upwards of three weeks.^{9,10} This compares to an average waiting time of 51 seconds for a person to reach one of our professional webchat advisors. During busy periods when people may be added to a queue, it takes an average of 3 minutes and 26 seconds for them to leave the queue.

Our staff are overwhelmingly positive about working on webchat

With staff turnover within our webchat service being almost non-existent, we wanted to hear what made working on webchat service such a positive experience. We conducted focus group sessions with our webchat advisors to hear about their experiences delivering this service.

There was an overwhelmingly positive response about the culture and benefits of working online. We heard this type of role was less stressful than some other roles can be, stays within working hours, allows the worker to really focus on the user and interventions whilst also still working in a team, and having reflective practices to debrief on cases and learning from others around best practice.

Feedback also highlighted that since webchat is completely virtual, this reduces any potential stereotypes or bias that a person may have of a webchat advisor and vice versa. For example, a webchat advisor will only have their first name presented in the chat, with the visitor's ID kept anonymous, more easily facilitating an objective, honest and candid conversation.



It provides clear information and is very easy to use

Provides clarity on next steps

Following each conversation, we have an optional pre/post chat survey. Through the collection of feedback we are able to continuously improve our understanding of the people we serve and better understand how we can further support those who reach out to us.

When asked "After my chat today I am more clear on what to do next?", 88% of respondents stated that they either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement.

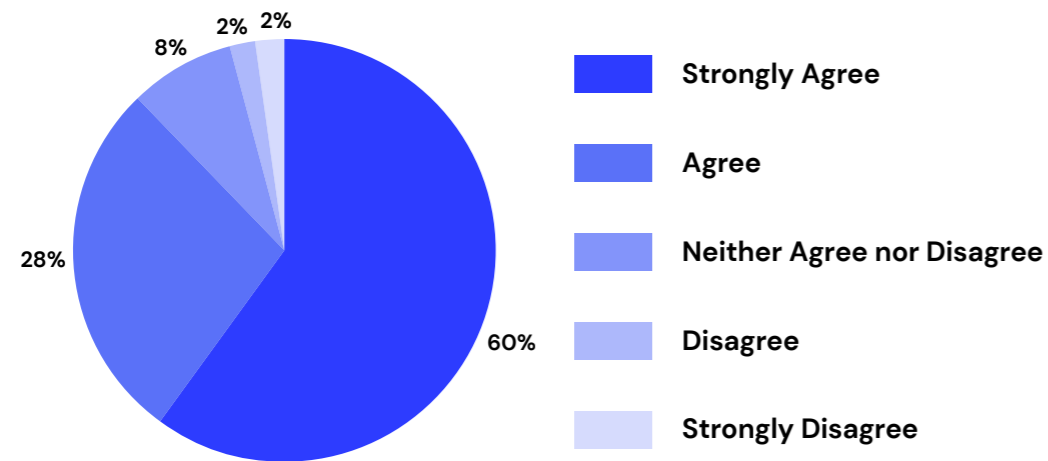


Figure 16. Clarity on next steps

Easy to use

When asked "How easy or difficult was the webchat to use?", 95% of respondents stated that the webchat service is either really easy or easy to use. Some people mentioned that honesty, patience, and non-judgemental service support were really important in making the individual feel valued and enough, and were reasons for why they felt they had a positive webchat experience.

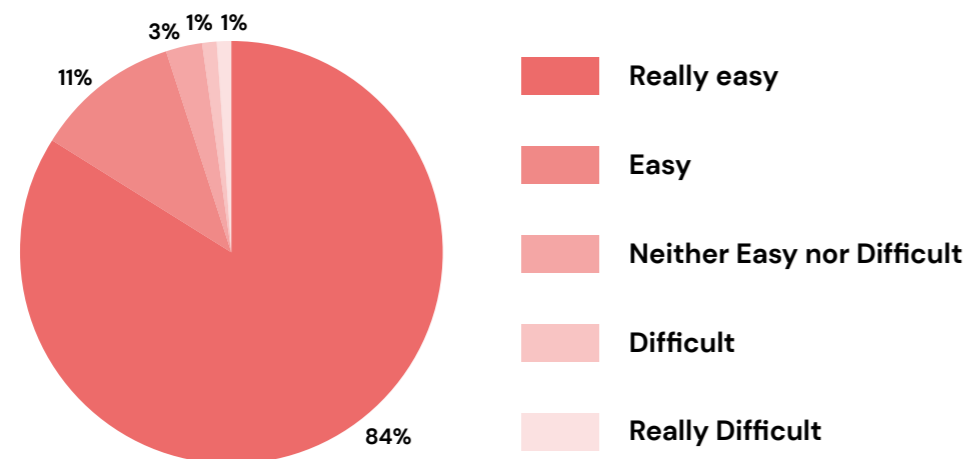


Figure 17. Usability of webchat

Case studies



We gathered a series of case studies from our webchat advisors. They provide examples (although by no means exhaustive) of the type of engagement and support we provide and highlight the many ways in which our webchat service has had a positive impact on people who need support with drugs, alcohol and mental health issues.

Supporting vulnerable people to find and access the right support in their local area

"A woman recently contacted our webchat service in a crisis. She was being evicted from a private residential rehabilitation centre because she couldn't afford the coming week's rent. At a critical point in her recovery she was facing the perils and stress of homelessness. She went to her local library and following a frantic scan of the internet started speaking to one of our webchat advisors.

"We were able to reassure her and sensitively ask about her situation, finding out who the local service provider was in the woman's area. The woman didn't have a phone so our webchat advisor called the provider and organised an appointment for her at their service that same day."

Resolving a prescribing issue out of hours

"We had a conversation with someone who was an existing client of one of our services. It was the weekend and the individual reached out to a webchat advisor since there was an issue with their prescription and with in-person services not open on weekends, the client had nowhere else to go.

"Since we operate on weekends between 10am - 4pm, the client was able to get the support of one of our webchat advisors who was able to call our out-of-hours clinician, who was then able to resolve the client's issue.

"Ordinarily, our client would have had to wait until Monday to get through to someone but with our out-of-hours service, we were able to provide help when they needed it most."

Sunday cocaine comedown

"A common and consistent cohort of individuals we engage are young people who use stimulants on a night out. The next day they tend to have high levels of health anxiety that they are dying. We have been able to provide reassurance to many people in this situation.

"For example, we recently helped to soothe an individual's anxiety. After this, we used motivational interviewing to ask questions about their social group, why they were using cocaine, and whether they will use again. We helped them to reflect on their choices."

Supporting a crisis intervention on Christmas Eve

"An advisor was having a chat with an individual on Christmas Eve who was expressing suicidal thoughts and we were concerned enough to call the police. The client provided us with their phone number so that we were able to reach them and as we were reassuring them via telephone, the police turned up at their door to help them.

"This is an excellent example of how the webchat service meant that this individual was able to get support exactly when they needed it and our advisor was able to alert the crisis team and send direct physical help to the individual's place.

"Following this incident, the individual was discharged a few weeks later and back online to update us on how they were doing."



Helping to address cultural barriers

"We had a Muslim lady who was detoxing from methadone and who had check-in appointments with a webchat advisor once or twice a week. Due to cultural sensitivities, the individual would, without virtual access, never have received support by going into an in-person service.

"Webchat enabled this lady to receive support for her treatment journey when other methods of access would otherwise not be an option for her."

Helping people overcome a negative prior experience with service providers

"We had an individual who was a long-term alcohol user who had used an external service a few times but had not had a good experience. The individual really wanted and needed help but didn't feel able to ring up for a referral.

"The individual asked one of our advisors if they could help them make a referral. Usually, the webchat service is predominantly there to help empower people to make the next steps to refer themselves to a service. However, given this context, the advisor called the relevant team and was able to speak with the manager and outline the situation, the risks, the lack of support and what the person wanted, and also outlined their concerns around engaging.

"After some conversation, the manager agreed to ring the person themselves, take a referral and also link in with other agencies (adult social care and mental health) that the individual clearly needed."

Looking forward



How we would like to further our webchat offer

This report provides valuable insights into the impact of our webchat service and the unique support it provides. We want to build on these achievements and learnings, and continue to further improve the support that we provide.

Fostering greater collaboration and communication between webchat advisors and in-person services is an important step that we can take to help bridge the gap between these services. A more joined-up approach will help to increase the sharing of knowledge and best practice, support the continuation of people's recovery and care plans, and positively contribute towards the overall streamlining of our clients' experiences. Further awareness raising of this platform and its impact, both internally and externally, will support this. It will also aid the ability to increase our monitoring and tracking of work outcomes as individuals move between the two types of support.

We also know that there is an interest in increasing the range and diversity of services that we provide through webchat. With this in mind, we are keen to explore ways in which we can offer more specific and scheduled online group support sessions. For example, this could be offering weekly or monthly drop-in meetings with a mental health specialist, or sessions focusing on a particular demographic group or drug. While referrals into in-person services are beneficial and necessary for some, this report has highlighted that sometimes a few brief intervention sessions can be more effective, appropriate and timely for those who might not require a formal referral.

Creating a sustainable long-term future for webchat

Webchat is an accessible, free and anonymous service that is a 'front door' for everybody who is in need of drug, alcohol or mental health support. It provides a consistent approach for access, removing certain barriers that hinder people from receiving in-person support and therefore helping us to reach these seldom heard and often marginalised groups.

We know that webchat delivers an impact that in-person services are not always able or built to meet. This report demonstrates that virtual webchat services are and should be a vital and standard part of services and should not be neglected or viewed as an add-on. Continuous support and funding into our virtual services can help us to continue to provide impact and support, further improve this offer and help us to reach even more people in need.

Endnotes



- ¹ Sex and Gender Differences in Substance Use | National Institute on Drug Abuse (2020). Available at: <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/research-reports/substance-use-in-women/sex-gender-differences-in-substance-use>
- ² CDC (2023). Available at: <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/mens-health.htm#:~:text=Adult%20Men%20Drink%20More%20than%20Women&text=Men%20are%20more%20likely%20to,during%20a%20binge%20drinking%20occasion>
- ³ We Are WithYou. (2021). A system designed for women? Available at: https://storage.googleapis.com/wearewithyou-production-media/media/documents/A_System_designed_for_women.pdf?Expires=1691060083&GoogleAccessId=wearewithyou-production-media%40website-v2-248907.iam.gserviceaccount.com&Signature
- ⁴ Substance Use and SUDs in LGBTQ* Populations. National Institute on Drug Abuse. (2017). Retrieved 17 August 2023, from <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/substance-use-suds-in-lgbtq-populations>
- ⁵ LGBT in Britain, Health Report. Stonewall. (2023). Available at: https://www.stonewall.org.uk/system/files/lgbt_in_britain_health.pdf
- ⁶ PHE (2018) PHE inquiry into the fall in numbers of people in alcohol treatment: findings - GOV.UK
- ⁷ PHE (2021). Available at: Public Health Dashboard - OHID
- ⁸ ONS (2022). Alcohol-specific deaths in the UK: registered in 2021
- ⁹ Scotland, P. (2023) National drug and alcohol treatment waiting times - 1 January to 31 March 2021 - National drug and alcohol treatment waiting times - Publications - Public Health Scotland, [PublicHealthScotland.scot](https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/national-drug-and-alcohol-treatment-waiting-times/national-drug-and-alcohol-treatment-waiting-times-1-january-to-31-march-2021/). Available at: <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/national-drug-and-alcohol-treatment-waiting-times/national-drug-and-alcohol-treatment-waiting-times-1-january-to-31-march-2021/> (Accessed: 2 August 2023).
- ¹⁰ Adult substance misuse services (2023). Available at: <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/resource/adult-substance-misuse-services-1>

withyou