TURNING POINT SCOTLAND

BECAUSE PEOPLE MATTER

How to Implement a Harm Reduction Café

The South Lanarkshire Model

Respect Compassion Inclusion Integrity

What is a harm reduction café?

A harm reduction café is distinct from a recovery café in that it welcomes people who are still using alcohol and other drugs. Recovery cafés have traditionally been set up as safe spaces for people who define as being 'in recovery' and are either alcohol and other drug free or working towards this.

People who use alcohol and other drugs report not feeling welcome in recovery-oriented spaces: recovery is often synonymous with abstinence (or progress towards this). Those who are still using alcohol and other drugs describe feeling 'less than' in these spaces characterised by stigma, exclusion and pressure to move towards abstinence or to reduce use.

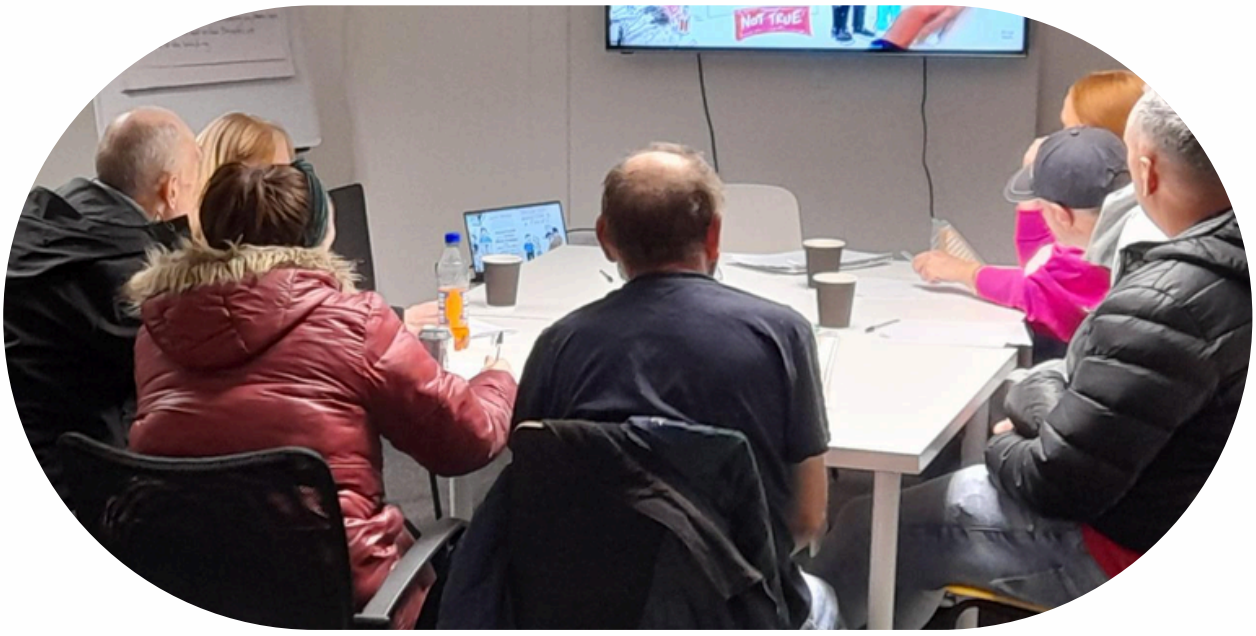
Recent efforts to create a more inclusive definition of recovery (i.e. through initiatives such as low-threshold recovery cafés) have been helpful, however there is a question as to whether you can maintain the safety of both people who are working towards abstinence and those who are currently using alcohol and other drugs, in the one space. While a low-threshold recovery café offers more inclusivity for people who have not yet reached the degree of 'stability' required in traditional recovery cafés, the environment is problematic in that it promotes (even if subtly) reduction or cessation of use as the best way forward. Further, these spaces reward recovery-oriented behaviours rather than the focus being on behaviours that reduce harm. For people who are not in a place to take on this message, such action-oriented techniques will prove counter-productive[1].

There are 2 key issues here: firstly, the term 'recovery' excludes people who don't see themselves as either wanting or able to make changes. Secondly, if they do end up attending, they are likely to experience stigma and shame because other people are being rewarded for making progress and moving forward.

What is a harm reduction café?

Harm reduction cafés are primarily aimed at people who are using alcohol and other drugs in a risky way but are not choosing to approach or use mainstream alcohol and other drug services. We know these people are at greater risk of overdose. A true harm reduction café genuinely meets people where they are at, accepts their drug use without an expectation that reducing or stopping will improve their lives, and upholds people's right to bodily autonomy.

To be a true harm reduction café it must not exclude people who have used alcohol and other drugs prior to attending or need to use during the time the café is on. However, under Section 8 of the Misuse of Drugs Act it is an offence to "permit or suffer" the use of a controlled drug on premises. In practice the law may deem a person running a harm reduction café and not taking proactive steps to prevent use on the premises as being in breach of this law. The café should allow people to use drugs away from the premises and return there but must not use or offer to supply illicit drugs whilst on the premises.



[1]Miller, W.R. & Rollnick,S. (2023) Motivational Interviewing: Helping People Change and Grow (4th Edition). Guilford Press NY.

Key Principals of the South Lanarkshire model

Harm Reduction



Harm reduction understands drug use in its social context and is a pragmatic and realistic approach. It acknowledges some people can lead rich, fulfilling and meaningful lives; physically safe and mentally well whether or not choosing to use alcohol or other drugs.

Harm reduction affirms people who use drugs as the primary agents of reducing the harms of their drug use and seeks to empower people to share information and support each other in strategies which meet their actual conditions of use. It promotes human rights including bodily autonomy. It recognises the realities of poverty, class, gender, sexism, racism, social isolation, past trauma, and other social inequalities can affect both people's vulnerability to, and capacity for effectively dealing with drug-related harm.

People who use drugs are exposed to discrimination, stigma and violence across multiple axes of their lives. Harm reduction cafes seek to actively challenge this stigma.

Citizenship

Citizenship[2] at Turning point Scotland is defined as a measure of the strength of an individual's connection to the 5 R's of rights, responsibilities, roles, relationships and resources of community membership. It seeks to engender a sense of belonging which is the feeling of being accepted, included and supported by a group, place, or community. Belonging is a fundamental human need that involves emotional connection, security, and a feeling of identity within a social environment. This drives connection and fosters healthy relationships founded on trust and empathy. People attending the café are met as equal citizens with a right to valued roles and responsibilities both within the café and in the wider community and opportunities to do so are encouraged and promoted. The identities and communities attached to drug use are accepted and recognised.

Key Principals of the South Lanarkshire model

Inclusion

A space that is inclusive of all adults who are currently using alcohol and other drugs, no matter their other identities (i.e. ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation). It is important to highlight the paradox of inclusion: sometimes you need to be exclusive to be genuinely inclusive (i.e. women's only spaces). If people who use the café want to pursue recovery goals it is recommended to move them through a planned exit strategy to an environment that is recovery focussed to protect the culture of the café.

Freedom & Power

"If you tell me not to, that makes me want to." - Any Human

Evidence confirms that when freedom is taken away, people react by being more motivated towards that behaviour[3].

Café Connect aims to give a voice to a group who often report feeling disempowered due to their drug use and lack of recovery status. People attending the café are met on compassionate ground by staff/peers who genuinely meet them as equals and resist the urge to fix or assume recovery goals for people as is the norm in alcohol and other drugs services. By truly honouring their freedom to choose, café participants are given influence and ownership over the café creating a sense of purpose and value. Within this space they find freedom and autonomy over their body and life choices.

Anti-Stigma

A commitment to challenging the stigma experienced by people who use drugs, including challenging stigma from within the drug using community and services (i.e. drink vs drug hierarchies, stigmatising language such as 'clean' and 'addict'). Normalising the idea that people who use drugs are capable and deserving of a meaningful life with purpose, opportunity and valued roles within their communities is central to this.

[2]Rowe, M. (2015) Citizenship and Mental Health. OUP USA
[3]Brehm, J. W. (1966).A theory of psychological reactance. Academic Press

Key questions to consider when setting up a harm reduction café

Nothing about us without us

-How are you going to ensure the whole process is led and informed by people using drugs in your local area who are not in contact with other services?

Safety

-How will you maintain a safe environment for participants?
-How will you ensure the integrity of the principles of harm reduction are upheld?
-Where will you direct people who are seeking a recovery-oriented environment to?

Features of the venue

-Is the space welcoming and accessible?
-Are there cooking facilities; is there a groupwork space; toilet access?

Time of the café

-What time of day would best meet the needs of the participants?
-Are you able to consistently deliver the café at the same time every week?

Partnership and community involvement

-How will you consult with key partners and stakeholders?
-How will you involve the local community and take them with you on the journey?
-How will you address any concerns?

Key questions to consider when setting up a harm reduction café

The right people

-How will you identify the person to lead the project with the right qualities to drive this change?

-How will you ensure the staff involved in running the café are committed to the principles and have appropriate attitudes, knowledge and skill base (i.e. groupwork, harm reduction, motivational interviewing)?

-What are the pros and cons of using people with lived experience?

-Are there roles for people with living experience?

Resources and Funding

-Will you run the café within an existing budget, or do you need to source funding?

- Do you have appropriate people resource in place to ensure a consistent service?

Involvement in the local community and challenging stigma

-How will you create opportunities for people to get involved and contribute to their local community?

-How will you challenge stigma towards people who use drugs and overcome barriers to their engaging with the local community?

Legal considerations

How will you ensure the service is delivered within the ethos of a harm reduction café and in accordance with the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971?



Thank you to everyone involved in the evaluation of the cafés and development of the guide.

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