

Building A Prevention Nation: Learning from the Welsh Tobacco or Health Network (WTHN) 2025 Event

Executive Summary

Wales is facing a growing and interconnected crisis of preventable harm. Smoking, hazardous alcohol use, drug dependence and gambling harms affect hundreds of thousands of people and their families each year. These issues rarely occur in isolation; they cluster and disproportionately impact those already facing significant social and economic disadvantage.

Services across Wales describe rising demand, widening inequalities, increasing complexity and ongoing funding pressures. Yet the people most affected by addiction and dependence consistently describe systems that are fragmented, difficult to navigate and slow to respond. Their experiences highlight the gap between how support is designed and how harm is actually lived.

Against that backdrop, in June 2025 the Welsh Tobacco or Health Network hosted “Tackling Addiction and Dependence Together” - a landmark event bringing together third sector and public health leaders, practitioners, academics and people with lived experience from across the full spectrum of addictions. The presence and leadership of lived experience contributors, shaped the discussions and grounded the event in real-world insight.

Specialists in smoking cessation, substance misuse, mental health, gambling harm, community safety, homelessness, youth services, family support and public health came together under one roof to address shared drivers of harm and the gaps within current systems. This level of cross-sector representation, combined with genuine lived experience involvement, is rarely seen in Wales and reflects a growing recognition: people do not experience addictions separately, and systems must be designed with people, not simply for them.

This report sets out the scale of the problem, highlights what people with lived experience and front-line practitioners say must change, summarises insights from expert speakers, and presents four strategic recommendations for a cohesive, integrated national response to addiction and dependence built on co-production, equity and system reform.



A Crossroads in Wales

Wales is at a critical moment. Preventable ill-health is rising, inequalities are widening, and pressures on services are increasing. Tobacco use, hazardous alcohol consumption, drug dependence and gambling harms continue to affect large numbers of people and, for many, these harms overlap and reinforce each other.

Across Wales, practitioners describe the same challenges:

- People presenting with multiple, co-occurring addictions
- Harms closely linked to poverty, trauma, stress, housing instability and mental health
- Early intervention opportunities often missed
- Segmented difficult to navigate services
- Geographical differences in service provision

We have people-based problems, but support systems built around issues.

The WTHN 2025 event brought together leaders and experts from tobacco control, alcohol and drug treatment, gambling harm prevention, mental health, public health, criminal justice, housing and homelessness, children's services, academic research and lived experience networks.

Together, they listened to lived experience, explored shared drivers of addiction, reflected on gaps within current systems, considered what a modern, joined-up approach could look like and identified opportunities to strengthen Wales's response.

The insights gathered offer a clear roadmap for how Wales can modernise its approach to addiction and dependence, rooted in the recognition that transformation must be designed with people who live with its consequences, not simply around them.

Key Speakers

**Dr Alan Curley, Programme Lead and Lecturer in Adult Health Studies,
University of the West of Scotland**

Mind Over Craving: The CBT Toolbox in Action

Dr Curley demonstrated how cognitive behavioural approaches help people understand cravings, interrupt habitual cycles and build healthier patterns of behaviour.

Key messages included:

- Craving is predictable and manageable
- Behaviour change requires understanding triggers and contexts
- Emotional and psychological factors are central to recovery
- Services must reflect real-life complexity

Elwyn Thomas, Co-production Lead, Kaleidoscope

The Impact of Addiction on Ourselves and Those We Love

Elwyn shared a powerful account of how addiction affects families and communities. He emphasised trauma, stigma and shame, the importance of relational and compassionate support, the value of peer support and the need to see people's full lives, not just their presenting issues.

Suzanne Cass, Chief Executive, ASH Wales Cymru

Beyond the Numbers: Tackling Addiction and Dependence Together

Suzanne presented an evidence-based overview of the current landscape.

- 320,000 people still smoke
- 17% drink at hazardous or harmful levels
- 8.8% report recent drug use
- 48% gambled in the last month

Inequalities:

- Smoking prevalence rises to 30% in social housing
- Alcohol-related admissions and deaths are three times higher in the most deprived areas
- Gambling harms disproportionately affect those already facing hardship

Harms cluster:

- Around 60% of people in alcohol or drug treatment also smoke
- 81% of cannabis users smoke it mixed with tobacco

Her core message: **people do not experience addictions separately**, so the system should not treat them separately.

Dr Rachel Barry, Centre for 21st Century Public Health, University of Bath

Tobacco Industry Conduct and Harm Reduction Claims

Dr Barry highlighted youth-targeted marketing, industry narratives framing themselves as partners, tactics that confuse evidence or delay policy, and parallels across harmful commodity industries. Her analysis echoed evidence from ASH England's Killer Tactics report documenting patterns of industry interference.

Tess Falzon, Smoking Cessation and Wellbeing Team, Hywel Dda University Health Board *The Hywel Dda Co-Working Story*

Tess outlined a Welsh model demonstrating successful integration:

- Co-working between smoking cessation and substance misuse teams
- 8.9% cessation engagement among treated smokers
- Shared competencies, blended assessments and stronger engagement
- Hywel Dda's work demonstrates what is possible when teams collaborate.

Stakeholder Discussion Themes

Theme 1: A fragmented system creates barriers

Participants described multiple assessments, differing eligibility criteria, disconnected referrals, poor information sharing and unnecessary duplication. “No one should have to navigate four different services for connected issues.”

Theme 2: Inequality is a driving force behind addiction and recovery

Stakeholders emphasised links between stress, poverty, trauma and addiction, unequal access to support, digital exclusion and the need for trauma-informed, flexible approaches. Addiction was widely described as a social justice issue.

Theme 3: Prevention opportunities are often missed

Attendees highlighted inconsistent recording of smoking status, limited routine discussion of quitting in substance misuse services, gambling harms not routinely screened and wide variation in early intervention.

Theme 4: Language shapes experience

Participants stressed the importance of person-first, respectful language and avoiding labels that discourage engagement.

Theme 5: Motivation is not the problem – access is

Stakeholders agreed most people want to address addiction but face structural barriers. Engagement improves when support is integrated. “The problem isn’t lack of motivation – it’s lack of integrated help.”

Policy Implications

The experiences shared during the event make clear that Wales needs a unified, people-centred system for addressing addiction and dependence. Lived experience voices highlighted the frustration, duplication and missed opportunities created by siloed services. Practitioners and leaders echoed these concerns, emphasising that no reform will succeed unless it reflects the insights, priorities and realities of the people most affected.

A reformed national approach must therefore embed co-production at every stage - from policy development and commissioning to service design, delivery and evaluation. This means valuing lived experience as expertise, not anecdote.

The following four strategic recommendations set out the framework for a cohesive system that is designed with people, informed by lived experience and capable of delivering meaningful change across Wales.

Strategic Policy Recommendations

1. Create a National Framework for Addiction and Dependence

Develop one coherent framework that unifies tobacco, alcohol, drug and gambling policy and aligns funding, commissioning, standards and accountability across Wales. This provides the structural foundation needed for effective national action.

2. Establish Integrated Pathways and a Single “Front Door” for Support

Ensure that wherever a person seeks help, they receive a holistic assessment covering all forms of addiction and are connected to coordinated, consistent support. This includes shared assessments, routine screening, cross-referral and integrated information systems.

3. Build Workforce Capability and System Conditions for Joined-Up Care

Develop shared competencies across sectors, establish a national workforce programme, support trauma-informed and motivational approaches, strengthen leadership for collaboration and scale effective models such as Hywel Dda. Better data-sharing and system intelligence are essential to this.

4. Strengthen Wales’ Protection from Commercial Drivers of Harm

Ensure policy-making is transparent, evidence-led and protected from industry influence. Embed consideration of commercial determinants across government to create the conditions for a healthier, fairer Wales.

Conclusion: Building the Framework for Success

The WTHN 2025 event demonstrated strong appetite across Wales for a cohesive, integrated response to addiction and dependence. Stakeholders highlighted the harms caused by fragmentation, the impact of inequality and the many missed opportunities for earlier help. They also showcased innovation, partnership and real commitment to change.

Wales now has an opportunity to build the framework for success: a unified national approach that sees the whole person, provides consistent and connected support and acts earlier to reduce harm.

The insights in this report offer a practical blueprint for system transformation.

