

An evaluation of the Barod Digital Intervention (Webchat) Service

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1. Introduction

This report presents findings from an evaluation of an instant access Live Webchat Service (henceforth the 'Webchat Service') for people affected by substance misuse problems in Wales. The Webchat Service is managed and delivered by Barod and forms an important part of their forward-looking, digital strategy. The Service is a digital extension to existing provision and has the primary aim of providing equitable and immediate professional support for anyone who wishes to receive it.

The Webchat Service was launched in early April 2020, although plans for launching for the Service were in place long before that time. In part, this was a result of close partnership working¹ with *We Are With You* (formerly Addaction), which had set up its own instant access Webchat Service in July 2018 as part of the Drink Wise Age Well project. However, Barod was also looking to develop additional and innovative ways to deliver services and identified a gap in the market in relation to digital provision. The idea of piloting the Service was subsequently included in their successful bid to the Cwm Taf Area Planning Board for the contract to deliver substance misuse services in that region.

While the Webchat Service was initially planned and funded as a pilot project, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic² resulted in the Service being made available across Wales from the day that it was launched³. The Service does not target any particular client group and is available to anyone whose life has been affected by substance misuse either directly or indirectly. Given its digital platform the Service can be accessed by people living outside of Wales. However, to date the vast majority of people who have engaged with the Service are Wales-based, and predominantly resident in the regions where Barod currently delivers services (i.e. Cwm Taf, Dyfed, Swansea Bay and Gwent).

Evaluation context

Initially, the plan was to pilot the Webchat Service in Cwm Taf before rolling it out across Barod's services and potentially further afield. Given this long-term aim, a small portion of the budget was set aside for an evaluation over a one-year pilot period that would help identify best practice and inform national roll-out. The evaluation was therefore designed to examine both the implementation and operation of the Service as well as its outputs and, where possible, its outcomes.

The contract for the evaluation was awarded to researchers from the Substance Use Research Group at the University of South Wales and this report presents the results of that evaluation. While the long-term aim of rolling out the Service has already been achieved, the evaluation is nevertheless an important mechanism for identifying examples of best practice and for optimising delivery moving forward into the future.

¹ Over a five-year period as part of the Drink Wise Age Well programme.

² The delivery of online, digital services was ideal at a time of strict lockdown and restrictions on face-to-face delivery.

³ Funding for the Service is now provided by all Area Planning Boards where Barod currently operates.

Policy context

The introduction of a digital intervention Webchat Service in Wales fits neatly with Welsh Government's plan for a Healthier Wales⁴ along with its Quadruple Aim and ten design principles. Of particular relevance is the Plan's aim for a system that enables people to manage their own health and wellbeing and its support for innovation that includes the use of new technologies.

The Service also aligns with Welsh Government's [Substance Misuse Delivery Plan 2019-2022](#), which recognises that more needs to be done to support people and help them to access the services they need. Of particular relevance here is WG's ambition to develop a Wales wide Recovery Plan that includes the use of digital service models, to support services through any future COVID-19 peaks. An effective Webchat Service would help to achieve these aims by providing access out of hours for people who either cannot, will not or even should not, access traditional physical based services.

At a time when drug-related deaths in Wales (and the rest of the UK) are at record high levels and at a time when opportunities for face-to-face service delivery are restricted due to lockdown, the need for innovation has never been greater.

Research context

It is generally accepted that alcohol and drug misuse generate significant harm at various levels, from individual psychological and physical harms to negative consequences at wider societal level (Boumparis et al., 2019a). Traditionally delivered face-to-face, a wide variety of psychosocial and behavioural treatments aimed at helping people who misuse these substances are available, and research suggests that, generally, these are efficient (at least when compared to non-treatment) (Magill and Ray, 2009; Hennessy and Fisher, 2015).

However, treatment uptake among people who develop problematic levels of drug and/or alcohol use remains low, with recent studies suggesting that only around 7.5 to 20 percent of these individuals make use of any treatment (Saloner and Karthikeyan, 2015; Schmidt, 2016). Explanations for the low uptake include perceived stigma, low availability of treatment services and difficulties related to time and location of treatment (Xu et al., 2008).

Digital interventions⁵, as opposed to face-to-face ones, could contribute to partly overcoming these obstacles due to their potential to lower the threshold to access treatment, increased perceived anonymity when following treatment at a distance, and greater availability of treatment independent of time and place (Taylor and Luce, 2003; Griffiths and Christensen, 2007; EMCDDA, 2009). The use of digital interventions has become even more relevant today, due to social distancing restrictions and lockdown measures put in place around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic (Hsu et al., 2020). Examples of digital interventions include, but are not limited to: brief interventions, motivational interviewing, personalized normative feedback, and cognitive behavioural therapy. Also included in this category are live webchats, which are very similar to phone helplines and can be used to provide information and

⁴ <https://gov.wales/healthier-wales-long-term-plan-health-and-social-care>

⁵ The term "digital interventions" is used to refer to both internet- and computer-based interventions (Boumparis et al., 2019a)

signposting to users who visit the internet pages of various treatment providers (Williams et al., 2018).

Despite their relative novelty, there is a growing body of research focused on evaluating the effectiveness of digital interventions. A few recent meta-analyses have established that digital interventions such as brief interventions, personalized normative feedback, motivational interviewing and cognitive behavioural therapy are effective in reducing substance use when compared to non-intervening controls and may have results similar to face-to-face interventions (Boumparis et al., 2019a). The strongest evidence, based on RCTs, exists for interventions targeting alcohol use (Riper et al., 2018), followed by cannabis (Boumparis et al., 2019b) and illicit substances (Boumparis et al., 2017). However, much less is known about the effectiveness of simpler digital interventions like live webchats which provide information and signpost users to sources of support and treatment. The main reason for this is a lack of evaluations which have focused on this type of intervention.

It is believed that the scarcity of evaluations of live webchats might be due to objective reasons, mainly related to the difficulty of conducting assessments of effectiveness (Tomazic and Jerkovic, 2020). Firstly, typical outcome measurement looks at the change that a service has made to a person's life. However, many webchats run anonymous and/or confidential services, and may have contact with a service user just once, without the possibility of straightforward further contact. Secondly, the service user may be in emotional distress, thus making it inappropriate to gather comprehensive demographic information. Finally, the length of the conversation may be limited and this time is spent responding to the user's needs (Helplines Partnership, 2015). All of the above make it quite difficult to evaluate the effectiveness of a webchat conversation because most of the time it is not known what happens after the contact with the user ends.

Summary

Barod's Webchat Service was launched in April 2020 as part of their forward-looking, digital strategy. Initially, the plan was to pilot the Webchat Service in the Cwm Taf APB area but the COVID-19 pandemic led to national roll-out and nationwide availability from the outset. The Webchat Service is a digital extension to existing provision allowing for wider access to treatment and is in tune with current policy in Wales. While there is a growing body of evidence supporting the implementation and delivery of digital interventions, few studies have evaluated the effectiveness of webchats and helplines. This is largely because of methodological difficulties associated with the anonymous, short-term nature of the engagement that limits opportunities for follow-up. The general absence of evidence does not mean to say that webchats are not effective. But, what it does mean is that more research is needed to establish what value they have as a substance misuse intervention and how their efficiency can be optimised. This evaluation of the Barod Webchat Service provides a valuable opportunity to achieve those goals.

2. Research methods

In this chapter we provide an overview of the aims of the evaluation as well as a summary of the methods underpinning it.

Aims of the evaluation

For the reasons explained below, it was not possible to use a quasi-experimental research design to examine the effectiveness of the Webchat Service. It was therefore agreed that the evaluation would focus more on processes than outcomes but that, where possible, views on effectiveness would be gathered from staff and, within the ethical boundaries imposed by USW during the COVID-19 pandemic, with service users. As a result, the evaluation focused far more on examining the experience of delivering and receiving the Service than on measuring its effectiveness. This is an important limitation that must be borne in mind when reviewing the findings.

In summary, the broad aims of the evaluation were to investigate:

- how the Service has been designed and implemented,
- how efficiently the Service has been operating,
- the characteristics of Service users,
- the nature of the Service provided,
- staff and service user views on the effectiveness of the Service.

Research design

In practice, the evaluation was cross-sectional in design but with some longitudinal components that enabled changes over the 10-month study period to be investigated (Bryman, 2016). The initial plan had been to compare the outcomes of service users in the experimental area (i.e. Cwm Taf) over the study period with outcomes of service users in another similar area in Wales where the Service was not operating. This quasi-experimental design would have helped to show what outcomes might have been expected in the absence of the Service (i.e. in the control area), which could then be compared with outcomes in the area where the Service was operating (i.e. the experimental area). However, given that the Service was rolled out across Wales leaving no available 'comparison' areas, adopting this kind of research design was not possible. The evaluation therefore focused more on the process of implementation and the experience of delivering and receiving the Service rather than measuring its impact on specific outcomes.

Strategy

A mixed strategy approach was used to collect a combination of quantitative and qualitative data. The benefits of adopting a mixed strategy are widely acknowledged in the methods literature (Bryman, 2016). One key advantage is that the weaknesses of one approach can be offset by the strengths of the other. Quantitative methods enable researchers to measure and count the prevalence and extent of particular experiences (Davies et al., 2011).

Qualitative methods, by contrast, enable researchers to gather data that will help them to explain, understand and interpret those experiences (Finch and Fafinski, 2012).

Methods of data collection

The data were gathered through a combination of methods including:

1. telephone interviews with staff members,
2. informal discussions with Service managers, and
3. content/documentary analysis of a randomly selected sample of Webchat transcripts.

In addition to the empirical side of the evaluation in which primary data were collected, we also undertook analyses of data routinely collected as part of the digital operation of the Webchat Service. Excel datasets containing data extracted from the Service archives were provided to the evaluation team and these were analysed using a combination of Excel formulas and SPSS functions. The datasets included information about each chat (e.g. duration, operator ID, date, key themes discussed [i.e. 'tags']) as well as feedback provided by some⁶ Service users at the end of the digital conversation.

Ethical approval for the evaluation was granted by the Faculty of Business and Society Research Committee⁷.

⁶ The post-chat survey was an option and completed by roughly 10% of all service users.

⁷ Following a major restructure within the University, this Committee has been replaced by the Faculty of Life Sciences and Education Research Ethics Committee.

3. Results: Webchat Service data

In this chapter we present the results of our analysis of the Webchat Service datasets. The main aim is to provide an overview of the kinds of people who engaged with the Service and to summarise the characteristics of the Webchats conducted over the 10-month evaluation period (06/04/2020 to 31/01/2021).

Month, day and time of day

The Webchat Service was launched on 6th April 2020 and during that first month of operation more chats took place than in any month thereafter (see Table 1). This may be the result of the official launch and an increased awareness and interest in the Service during its early days. Since that time, the number of chats each month has fluctuated between 58 in August to 120 in October. The dip in August may reflect the warmer weather and sunnier outlooks or perhaps less engagement from professionals taking annual leave.

Table 1 Frequency and percentage of Webchats per month

| Month | Frequency | Percent % |
|----------------|-----------|-----------|
| April 2020 | 174 | 18% |
| May 2020 | 77 | 8% |
| June 2020 | 84 | 9% |
| July 2020 | 97 | 10% |
| August 2020 | 58 | 6% |
| September 2020 | 92 | 9% |
| October 2020 | 120 | 12% |
| November 2020 | 87 | 9% |
| December 2020 | 90 | 9% |
| January 2021 | 103 | 11% |
| | | |
| TOTAL | 982 | 100% |

Over the 10-month study period, the Webchat Service provided support to people seven days a week, although it is important to note that few chats took place at the weekend (see Table 2). Within the working week, the chats were spread fairly evenly across the five days with most chats occurring on Mondays and the least on Thursdays. The reason for more chats occurring on Mondays is unclear but possible explanations may be linked to the time available to reflect on problems over the weekend and/or increased opportunities for indulging in substance use. Regardless of the reason, this pattern of engagement highlights the importance of the Service being available and fully staffed on key days.

By contrast, the limited uptake of support at the weekend raises questions about cost-effectiveness and need. However, any discussion about value for money must be balanced very carefully against the value that the Service may offer in emotional and health terms (and

potentially also economic terms in the long run). In extreme cases, the availability of someone to talk to online could mean the difference between life and death.

Table 2 Frequency and percentage of Webchats by day of the week

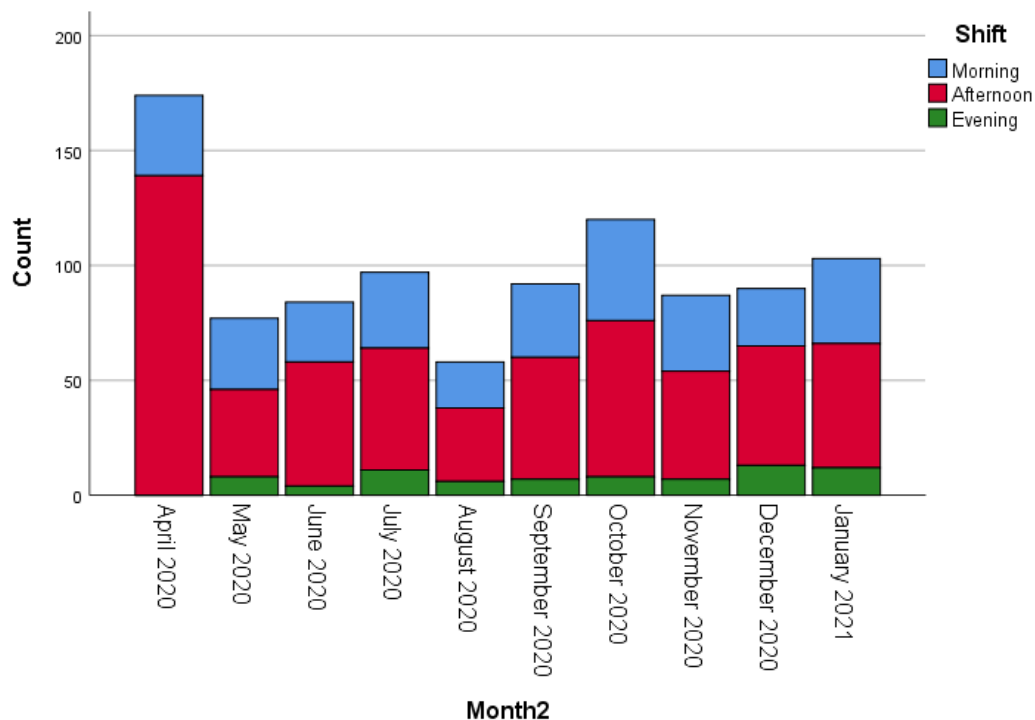
| Day of the week | Frequency | Percent % |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------|
| | | |
| Monday | 229 | 23% |
| Tuesday | 191 | 20% |
| Wednesday | 190 | 19% |
| Thursday | 151 | 15% |
| Friday | 193 | 20% |
| Saturday | 12 | 1% |
| Sunday | 16 | 2% |
| | | |
| TOTAL | 982 | 100% |

While day of the week is clearly important in terms of monitoring engagement and guiding staffing levels, the time of day is also relevant (see Table 3). The earliest call recorded was on at Friday morning at 0845 and the latest was on a Tuesday at 2033. Most chats occurred in the afternoon (after 12pm) with less than one-third taking place in the morning. This preference for afternoon calls has remained consistent over the 10-month study period (see Figure 1). Evening calls starting after 5pm have been comparatively rare but there appears to have been a slight increase in recent months (see Figure 1).

Table 3 Frequency and percentage of Webchats by time of day

| Time of day | Frequency | Percent % |
|---------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | | |
| AM | 316 | 32% |
| PM | 666 | 68% |
| | | |
| Morning | 316 | 32% |
| Afternoon | 590 | 60% |
| Evening (after 5pm) | 76 | 8% |
| | | |
| | | |
| TOTAL | 982 | 100% |

Figure 1 *Frequency of Webchats by month and time of day*



Entering the Webchat

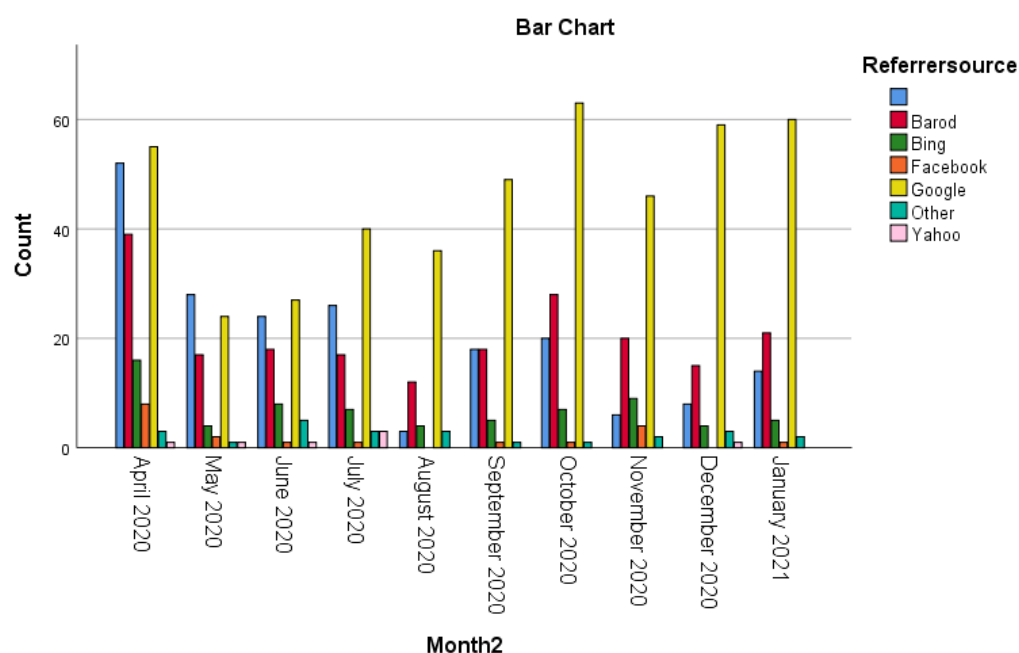
Service users entered the Webchat through a variety of web pages. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its global popularity, nearly half came through from Google, while more than one-fifth came through from Barod's web page. Only small numbers came through from other search engines (e.g. Bing and Yahoo) and a small proportion came through Facebook, suggesting that advertising Barod services via social media does work and could be capitalised upon. It is a shame that the source of referral was unknown in 20 percent of cases, and efforts could perhaps be made to ensure that this information is collected moving forward.

Table 4 *Frequency and percentage of Webchats by referral web page*

| Source of referral | Frequency | Percent % |
|--------------------|-----------|-----------|
| | | |
| Google | 459 | 47% |
| Barod | 205 | 21% |
| Bing | 69 | 7% |
| Facebook | 19 | 2% |
| Other | 24 | 2% |
| Yahoo | 7 | 1% |
| | | |
| Not stated | 199 | 20% |
| | | |
| TOTAL | 982 | 100% |

The data presented in Figure 2 shows that Google and Barod have been the primary sources of referrals over the entire 10-month study period.

Figure 2 *Frequency of Webchat by referral source and month⁸*



Webchat operators

Since the Service was launched in April 2020, 45 staff members (i.e. operators) have engaged in chats with service users. On average, the operators responded to 22 webchats each (median = 13 and mode = 2) but this varied from a minimum of just 1 chat to a maximum of 133. Clearly, some staff members have been more heavily involved in delivering the Service than others. Indeed, Table 5 shows the varied levels of engagement across staff members ranging from more than 100 chats to less than 10. While there were a small number of operators with extensive experience of at least 50 chats, it was more common for operators to have less operational experience.

Table 5 *Number of Webchats per operator*

| Number of Webchats per operator | Frequency of staff | % of staff |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|------------|
| > 100 | 1 | 2% |
| 50-99 | 4 | 9% |
| 20-49 | 11 | 24% |
| 10-19 | 12 | 27% |
| <10 | 17 | 38% |
| Total | 45 | 100% |

⁸ The blue lines are in respect of 'unknown' source pages.

The data in Table 6 show that in most cases each chat involved just one operator. However, in nearly 10 per cent of cases two or more operators were involved. Interestingly, there were four cases where at least four operators were involved in the same 'chat'. It is unclear why more than one operator was needed, but it may be that some chats are passed on to more experienced operators who have a better idea of how to respond to the service user or perhaps because they are coming to the end of their shift.

Table 6 Frequency and percentage of Webchats by number of operators

| Number of operators | Frequency | % |
|---------------------|-----------|------|
| 1 | 921 | 94% |
| 2 | 49 | 5% |
| 3 | 8 | 1% |
| 4 | 2 | <1% |
| 5 | 2 | <1% |
| TOTAL | 982 | 100% |

Response times

The data in Table 7 show how long it took operators to respond to a service user. For the 716 chats where the information was available, it took operators on average just under a minute to respond for the first time to a new chat. This ranged from almost instantly to nearly 10 minutes. Across each chat as a whole, the average response time was also just under a minute and ranged from a few seconds to 9 minutes. Interestingly, the speed of response has fluctuated over the study period. Over the first seven months, the time taken to first respond to a chat decreased from 64 seconds in April to 39 seconds in October. Similarly, the average response time decreased over the same period from 67 seconds to just under 39 seconds. However, more recently, the response times have increased back up to 58 and 57 second respectively. Changes in response time may be a reflection of staffing levels and the capacity to answer multiple calls.

In addition to response times, Table 7 also includes information about the duration of chats. On average, the chats lasted just over 12 minutes in length, but ranged significantly from only seconds in length to more than two hours. Significant variations were noted among different operators with some recording longer chats than others. This ranged from a mean of 25 minutes to a range of only 1 minute. Over the 10-month study period, 12,207 minutes (203 hours) of webchat support was provided to service users over 222 days.

Table 7 Response times and duration of Webchats

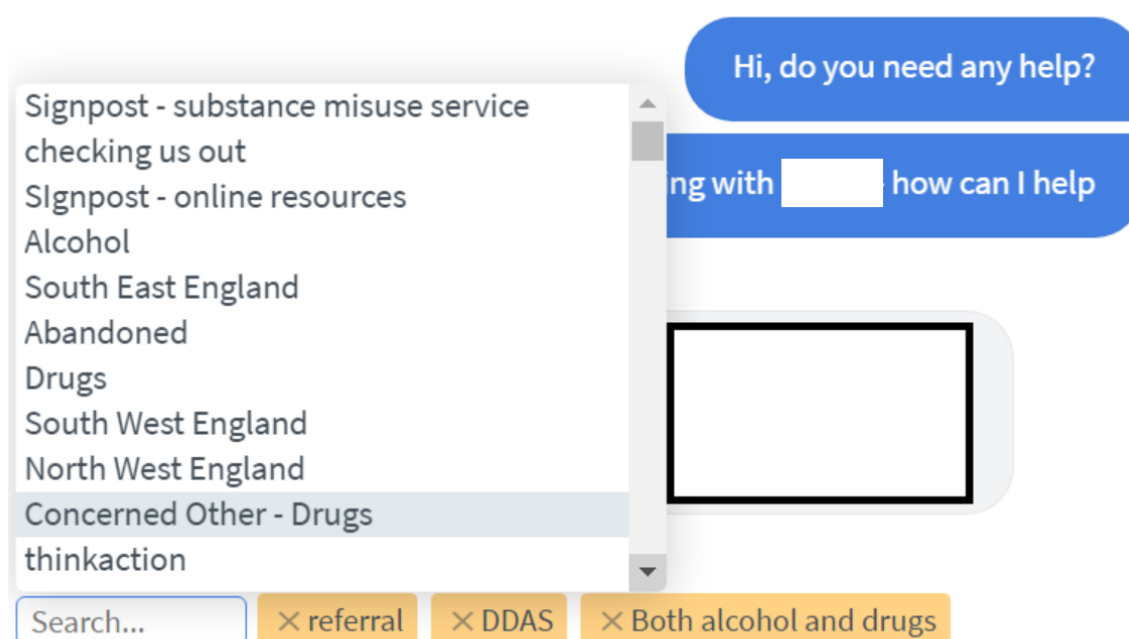
| | Mean | N | SD | Range |
|---------------------------------|--------|-----|---------|--------|
| First response time (seconds) | 52.84 | 716 | 61.37 | 1-598 |
| First response time (minutes) | .88 | 716 | 1.02 | 0-10 |
| Average response time (seconds) | 52.56 | 716 | 40.80 | 2-529 |
| Average response time (minutes) | .88 | 716 | .680 | 0-9 |
| Chat duration (seconds) | 745.85 | 982 | 802.041 | 2-7526 |
| Chat duration (minutes) | 12.43 | 982 | 13.37 | 0-125 |

Notes: SD = standard deviation, which is the average amount of variation around the mean.

Tagging

For monitoring purposes, operators are required to 'tag' key themes either during or shortly after a chat has ended. The purpose is to identify what the chat was about, who it was about, what action was taken and what region the service user was enquiring about. In practice, operators are required to select pre-existing tags from a pull-down menu (see Picture 1). If there is no suitable tag available then, to avoid duplication, operators are asked to consult with the Service Manager who will review the available tags and create a new one if necessary. Multiple tags are possible per chat and operators are automatically reminded to tag their chats before they close the chat. At the end of each quarter, the Service manager routinely reviews each chat and quality assures the tagging. Summaries of the tagging data are written up in quarterly reports and shared with Service staff and Barod managers.

Picture 2 Tagging in practice



The data in Table 8 below show the number of tags logged per chat. In about one-third of chats, tagging was limited and involved just one 'tag' per chat. However, in most cases at least two tags were logged and in half of all chats at least three tags were registered. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a significant positive correlation was found between the number of tags and the duration of call. In other words, the longer the chat the greater the number of tags added.

Table 8 Number of 'tags' per chat

| Number of tags per chat | Frequency | % |
|--------------------------------|------------------|-------------|
| 0 | 35 | 4% |
| 1 | 305 | 31% |
| 2 | 129 | 13% |
| 3 | 169 | 17% |
| 4 | 185 | 19% |
| 5 | 97 | 10% |
| 6 | 41 | 4% |
| 7 | 16 | 2% |
| 8 | 4 | <1% |
| 9 | 1 | <1% |
| | | |
| TOTAL | 982 | 100% |

The data in Table 9 shows that the extent of tagging has fluctuated over the 10-month study period from a low of 1.71 in the first month of operation to a high of 3.62 in November 2020. These fluctuations matched similar changes in the length of chats. Overall, there was a mean of 2.74 tags per chat between April 2020 and January 2021.

Table 9 Mean length of chat and number of 'tags' per chat by month

| Month | Mean length of chats (minutes) | Mean tags | Range | SD | Total chats |
|----------------|---------------------------------------|------------------|--------------|-------------|--------------------|
| | | | | | |
| April 2020 | 7.78 | 1.71 | 0-8 | 1.45 | 174 |
| May 2020 | 9.89 | 2.19 | 0-6 | 1.57 | 77 |
| June 2020 | 11.18 | 3.31 | 1-7 | 1.25 | 84 |
| July 2020 | 10.99 | 2.88 | 1-7 | 1.69 | 97 |
| August 2020 | 12.91 | 3.26 | 1-7 | 1.88 | 58 |
| September 2020 | 11.82 | 2.95 | 0-8 | 1.59 | 92 |
| October 2020 | 18.06 | 3.07 | 1-7 | 1.65 | 120 |
| November 2020 | 16.45 | 3.62 | 1-9 | 1.72 | 87 |
| December 2020 | 12.73 | 3.24 | 1-8 | 1.86 | 90 |
| January 2021 | 14.62 | 2.27 | 0-6 | 1.65 | 103 |
| | | | | | |
| TOTAL | 12.43 | 2.74 | 0-9 | 1.73 | 982 |

To explore the extent of tagging among different operators, we focused attention on the 10 most experienced operators (i.e. those with a history of engaging in at least 40 chats). The data in Table 10 show that the extent of tagging varied among the operators from a low of 1.28 to a high of 3.53. Interestingly, four of these more experienced operators logged a mean number of tags lower than the average recorded for all operators combined.

Table 10 Mean tags among ‘last’ operators with a history of at least 40 chats [1]

| Last operator | Mean tags | Total chats | SD | Range |
|----------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------|
| 1 | 3.53 | 133 | 1.79 | 1-9 |
| 2 | 2.18 | 80 | 1.55 | 0-6 |
| 3 | 1.28 | 58 | 1.46 | 0-5 |
| 4 | 2.18 | 57 | 1.43 | 1-5 |
| 5 | 2.89 | 53 | 1.59 | 1-7 |
| 6 | 2.75 | 48 | 1.48 | 1-7 |
| 7 | 3.38 | 47 | 1.86 | 0-8 |
| 8 | 2.91 | 46 | 1.74 | 1-8 |
| 9 | 2.51 | 41 | 1.49 | 0-7 |
| 10 | 2.95 | 40 | 1.54 | 1-6 |
| TOTAL [2] | 2.74 | 982 | 1.73 | 0-9 |

Notes: [1] It is assumed that the last operator is responsible for tagging. [2] Among all 45 ‘last’ operators.

Among the full sample of 45 operators, the mean number of tags ranged from a maximum of 4.75 to a minimum of 1. The frequency of tagging varied significantly across the operators with some tagging far more frequently than others. Interestingly, those operators with the highest mean tags per chat (i.e. 4 or more) were among those with the least chat experience. There are many possible reasons for this but one explanation may be ‘tagging fatigue’ among those with more chat experience. Another explanation may be related to the busy-ness of the more experienced operators and the limited amount of time available in which to log tags before the next chat begins.

Table 10 and Figure 3 below provide information about the content, or themes, of the tags. In total, 85 different tags were used during the study period. These included tags indicating that the called had been ‘abandoned’, was ‘spam’ or related to ‘research’⁹. For simplicity, our analysis focuses on those themes (or key words) that were tagged in at least 30 chats (i.e. the 21 most frequently used tags)¹⁰. Unsurprisingly, given the guidance given to operators, the most commonly used tags were related to the location of the Service user (e.g. Wales, Dyfed, Cwm Taf) and the purpose of the chat (i.e. checking us out, signposting, professional query, recruitment).

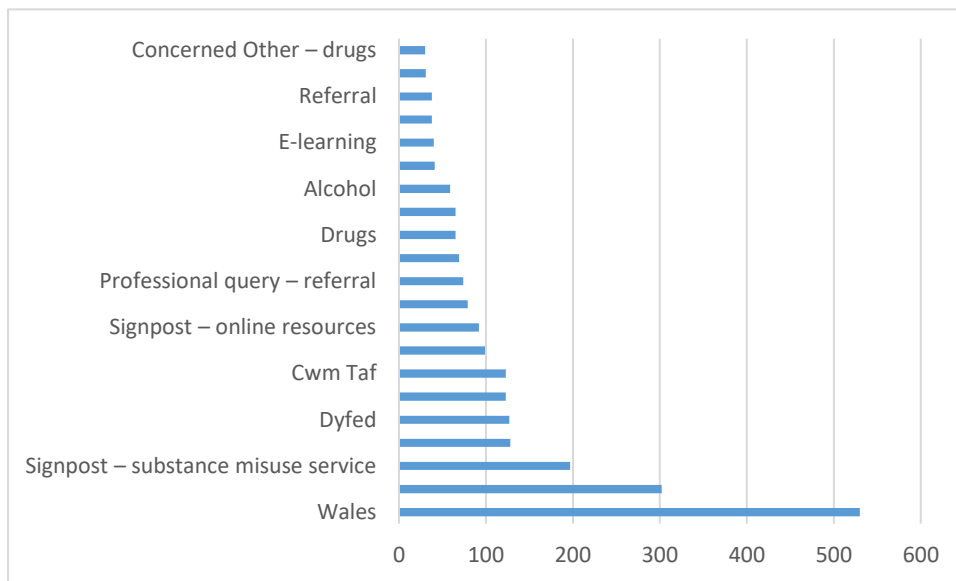
⁹ We suspect that our own research-related enquiries may have been included in the dataset.

¹⁰ This is not to say that infrequently tagged issues are not important. Clearly they are. But, the purpose of this analysis is to identify common themes.

Table 11 Tagging themes

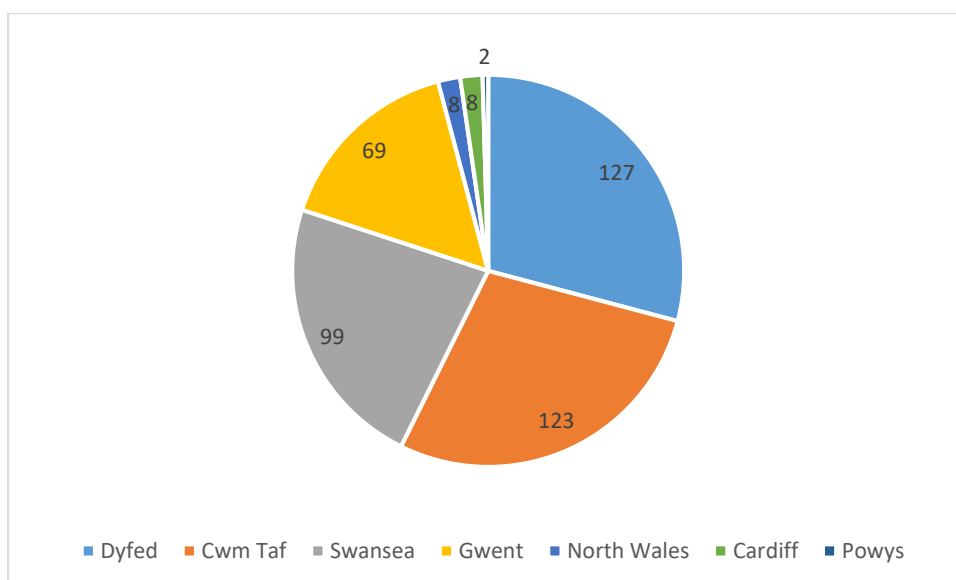
| Most frequent tags | Tag 1 | Tag 2 | Tag 3 | Tag 4 | Tag 5 | Tag 6 | Tag 7 | Tag 8 | TOTAL tags |
|--------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------|
| | | | | | | | | | |
| Wales | 99 | 179 | 146 | 74 | 18 | 13 | 1 | 0 | 530 |
| Checking us out | 255 | 33 | 8 | 6 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 302 |
| Signpost – substance misuse service | 67 | 34 | 40 | 35 | 15 | 5 | 1 | 0 | 197 |
| Professional query – help and advice | 51 | 42 | 17 | 16 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 128 |
| Dyfed | 20 | 34 | 30 | 24 | 13 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 127 |
| Recruitment | 47 | 42 | 20 | 10 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 123 |
| Cwm Taf | 25 | 31 | 34 | 16 | 10 | 6 | 1 | 0 | 123 |
| Swansea Bay | 17 | 24 | 28 | 15 | 10 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 99 |
| Signpost – online resources | 31 | 23 | 19 | 8 | 8 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 92 |
| Abandoned | 36 | 28 | 8 | 6 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 79 |
| Professional query – referral | 11 | 10 | 14 | 21 | 13 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 74 |
| Gwent | 10 | 12 | 25 | 14 | 7 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 69 |
| Drugs | 20 | 19 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 65 |
| Individual looking for support | 3 | 5 | 5 | 14 | 19 | 12 | 6 | 1 | 65 |
| Alcohol | 20 | 16 | 9 | 10 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 59 |
| Personal identifiable information | 0 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 8 | 13 | 4 | 6 | 41 |
| E-learning | 7 | 12 | 5 | 14 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 40 |
| Signpost - other | 10 | 11 | 14 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 38 |
| Referral | 4 | 8 | 10 | 10 | 2 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 38 |
| Professional | 6 | 10 | 14 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 31 |
| Concerned Other – drugs | 12 | 8 | 5 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 30 |
| TOTAL [common themes] | 751 | 585 | 461 | 309 | 145 | 71 | 19 | 9 | 2350 |
| TOTAL [all themes] | 827 | 668 | 536 | 370 | 178 | 80 | 24 | 10 | 2693 |

Figure 3 *Most commonly used tags*



Over the 10-month study period, most chats were from people living/working in Dyfed and Cwm Taf followed by Swansea Bay and Gwent (see Figure 4). Few chats were in relation to North Wales, Powys or Cardiff and the Vale. Clearly, engagement with the Webchat Service is far greater in those areas where Barod has physical bases and contracts to deliver face-to-face services. To achieve parity across the seven APB areas, if this were an aim, it would seem that greater promotion and publicity about the Service (e.g. through links on existing provider websites) may be needed.

Figure 4 *Tagged locations*



Post-chat survey results

Approximately 10 percent of those who engaged in chats during the study period completed a post-chat survey that asked them for information about themselves, why they started the chat and how helpful they found it. Unfortunately, given the small sample size, this provides little indication of the characteristics of people engaging with the Service as a whole. Nevertheless, the data does provide an indication of how different types of people engaged with and experienced the Service.

Table 12 provides some information about the type of people who completed the online survey. Most of the service users classified themselves as female and White. It is not possible to calculate the mean age due to the use of age groups rather than age in years, but the distribution was fairly evenly split between those aged 40 and under (56%) and those aged over 40 (45%). Distribution across APB area was far more varied with most based in Cwm Taf, Swansea Bay and West Wales and few based in Powys, North Wales and Cardiff and the Vale.

Table 12 Characteristics of service users who completed the post-chat survey

| | Frequency | % |
|----------------------------|------------------|----------|
| Male | 27 | 30% |
| Female | 61 | 68% |
| Prefer not to say | 2 | 2% |
| | | |
| 18-30 | 28 | 31% |
| 31-40 | 23 | 25% |
| 41-50 | 19 | 21% |
| 51-60 | 16 | 18% |
| 60+ | 5 | 5% |
| | | |
| Black | 1 | 1% |
| Mixed | 3 | 3% |
| Other | 1 | 1% |
| White | 86 | 95% |
| | | |
| ABMG – Swansea Bay | 20 | 25% |
| AB – Gwent | 8 | 10% |
| BC – North Wales | 1 | 1% |
| C&V – Cardiff and the Vale | 3 | 4% |
| CT - Cwm Taf | 25 | 32% |
| HD – West Wales | 20 | 25% |
| P - Powys | 1 | 1% |
| Other – outside of Wales | 1 | 1% |
| | | |
| Total | 91 | 100% |

Notes: Some missing cases.

Nearly three-quarters of respondents indicated that they had not previously sought help from services (see Table 13). Of those that had, 18 per cent had received support from Barod and 10 per cent from other services. Half of the survey respondents indicated that COVID-19 had played a role in them accessing the Service.

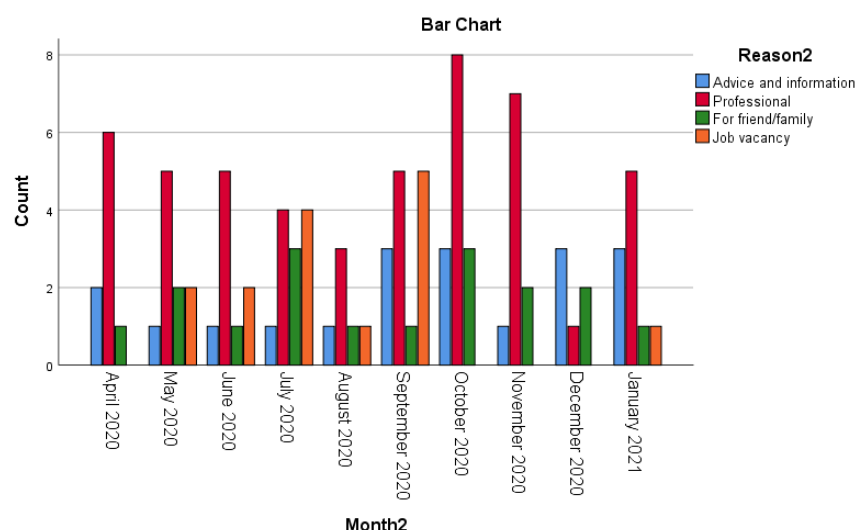
Table 13 Reasons for contacting the Webchat Service

| | Frequency | % |
|---|-----------|------|
| No – first time I’ve sought support | 36 | 72% |
| Yes – I have received support elsewhere | 5 | 10% |
| Yes – I have received support from Barod | 9 | 18% |
| No – COVID-19 did not play a role | 39 | 50% |
| Yes – COVID-19 played a role | 39 | 50% |
| Advice and information | 2 | 2% |
| Advice and information for myself – alcohol | 6 | 6% |
| Advice and information for myself – drugs | 9 | 9% |
| Advice and information for myself – mental | 2 | 2% |
| For professional purposes | 49 | 49% |
| Job vacancy | 15 | 15% |
| I’m a friend or family member | 17 | 17% |
| Total | 100 | 100% |

Notes: Some missing cases.

When asked to explain why they had started a chat, most stated that it was for professional purposes including seeking information about a job vacancy (64%) (see Table 13). The remaining reasons were fairly evenly split between seeking advice and information for their own personal problems (19%) or on behalf of a friend or family member (17%). Looking at changes over the study period, this response pattern has remained fairly consistent over the 10 months that the Service has been operating (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 Reason for contacting the Webchat Service by month



An important part of the post-chat survey were the questions that asked respondents to comment on their experience of the Service. The responses were overwhelmingly positive with 98 per cent rating the chat as 'good' (see Table 14). When asked if the Service was easy to use, again the majority (97%) either agreed or strongly agreed that it was.

Table 14 Rating the Webchat Service

| | Frequency | % |
|--|-----------|-----|
| | | |
| | | |
| Webchat rated good | 85 | 98% |
| Webchat rated bad | 2 | 2% |
| | | |
| <i>The Webchat service was easy to use</i> | | |
| Strongly disagree | 1 | 1% |
| Disagree | 0 | 0% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 2 | 2% |
| Agree | 10 | 11% |
| Strong agree | 79 | 86% |
| | | |

The responses in relation to 'helpfulness' were quite different with a large proportion providing a neutral answer. Nevertheless, nearly half of respondents indicated that the Service had helped them. The difference here may well reflect the type of person completing the survey. Indeed, closer analysis shows that people engaging with the Service for professional and job-seeking purposes were less likely to rate the chats as helpful. Interestingly, those seeking information about job vacancies were far more likely than any other group to indicate that engaging with the Service had not been helpful (see Table 15). The implication of this may be that more appropriate signposting regarding job vacancies may be needed either prior to entering the Service to filter this type of service user away from the Webchat.

Table 15 Helpfulness of Service by type of Service user

| | Advice and information | Professional | For friend or family | Job vacancy | Total |
|--|------------------------|------------------|----------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | | | | | |
| <i>The Webchat service really helped</i> | | | | | |
| Strongly/disagree | 6% (1) | 6% (2) | - | 55% (6) | 11% (9) |
| Neither agree/disagree | 31% (5) | 50% (18) | 38% (6) | 27% (3) | 41% (32) |
| Strongly/agree | 63% (10) | 44% (16) | 63% (10) | 18% (2) | 48% (38) |
| TOTAL | 100% (16) | 100% (36) | 100% (16) | 100% (11) | 100% (79) |

At the end of the post-chat survey, respondents were asked to provide details of why they had rated the Service in a particular way. Reasons for negative ratings were linked wholly to the speed of response (e.g. “Taking too long to reply to simple request”, “Slow”) while the reasons for positive ratings were varied and included comments about the fast speed of response. Further examples are presented in Table 16 below.

Table 16 Qualitative comments about the Webchat Service

| | |
|------------------------------|--|
| Reasons for negative ratings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Taking too long to reply to simple request” - “Slow” |
| Reasons for positive ratings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Brilliant service really speedy and friendly” - “Very responsive and helpful” - “Great advice” - “Very helpful” - “[staff member] was very quick” - “cannot thank you enough for the help and support you’ve given me” - “bloomin’ fantastic” - “Exceptional service thanks # 😊” - “[staff member] was very helpful in passing me the information I requested” - “Brilliant advice given, extremely helpful” - “[staff member] was awesome” |

Summary

In this chapter we have presented the results of our analysis of official Webchat data covering the period 6th April 2020 through to 31 January 2021. During that 10-month period, 982 chats were recorded. These chats took place over 222 days and together lasted for 12,207 minutes. While the Service operated seven days a week, there was a clear preference for Mondays and for afternoons with limited uptake at the weekends. Google was the primary entry point for accessing the Service with Barod’s web page a distant second.

Since the Service was launched, 45 staff members have been involved in, on average, 22 chats each. However, there was a significant variation among staff members with some engaged in more than 100 chats and others in just one. Speedy responses were noted across the board with most chats being responded to in less than a minute. The amount of tagging in a chat was linked to the length of chat and in most cases at least two tags were logged. A total of 85 different tags were used by the operators but tags related to the area and type of visitor were the most popular. In terms of location, most chats were from people living in areas where Barod have physical bases and contracts to deliver services.

Post-chat survey responses were obtained for roughly 10 percent of the sample. Most respondents were female and White but they were mixed in terms of age. For nearly three-quarters of respondents, the chat had been the first time that they had sought support. The sample was fairly evenly split in terms of the proportion accessing information for professional purposes and the proportion seeking support for themselves or someone else.

Feedback on the service was overwhelmingly positive with 98 percent rating it as 'good' and 86 percent rating it as 'easy to use'. Ratings of helpfulness were a little less positive and these were found to vary by the type of person accessing the Service – job seekers and professionals were far less likely than concerned others and people with their own problems to rate the Service as helpful.

4. Results: Webchat conversations

In this chapter we present results from a brief analysis of ten randomly selected webchat conversations. Our aim is to provide readers with a sense of how chats start, unfold and end as well as some idea of the kind of interaction that takes place. The selection of a random sample of chats is useful in that it protects against any cherry-picking of what might be regarded as successful or high quality chats. The downside, however, is that it may mean that examples of good and poor practice are not identified. It may also mean that certain client groups are not adequately represented within the sample.

Who accessed the webchat?

Analysing the chats enabled us to examine in a little more depth the kinds of people who were seeking support. The sample was varied and included individuals seeking help for their own substance misuse problems, concerned others, and a local high-school teacher looking for drug-related teaching materials. Aside from the teacher, professionals were under-represented within the sample. Nevertheless, the inclusion of concerned others as well as those seeking support for their own problems suggests that publicity about the Service is reaching the target groups.

What was the reason for accessing the webchat?

Most of the webchats reviewed were in respect of people seeking help for their own alcohol and/or drug dependency problems. The rest were equally split between: a) concerned others who were seeking support for themselves because of anxiety and distress generated by a family member's substance misuse, and b) concerned others who wanted generic contact information for friends/relatives to self-refer to Barod. The one remaining webchat conversation was with a high-school teacher looking for a cannabis awareness course for his/her students.

Generally, all conversations reviewed had positive outcomes in terms of the service users getting the information that they were looking for. However, there was significant variety in terms of the nature of these conversations, depending on the reason why people accessed the service. These variations are highlighted in the sections below.

Conversations with those who sought help for themselves

The most interesting and invariably longest conversations were those with people who were seeking help to overcome their own problems with alcohol and/or drugs. For some of these people, this was the first time they had reached out for support to deal with their substance misuse problems.

*... ive tried this chat many times but i chicken out, im glad ive finally reached out
(Webchat 2)*

I haven't tried anything I've never asked for help before. (Webchat 5)

For this person contacting the Webchat Service was a last resort after all other avenues had been exhausted.

I have nobody to speak to anymore and just need help getting on the right path. I'm sick of crying now. (Webchat 5)

At the end of many of these conversations, service users expressed their gratitude to the webchat operator, some stating that this was the first occasion when they were able to open up and have a non-judgemental conversation in a long period of time.

Thank you so much you been great help. (Webchat 10)
Ok, thanks again. I really hope to hear soon... (Webchat 1)

Visitor: Thank u for talking to me today its the first conversation Ive had for ages without some one telling me drinks ruined me
Operator: No problem, it's been great speaking to you. Do people tell you that a lot?
Visitor: It's all I'm ever told. (Webchat 5)

The webchat conversations with these individuals also revealed that this forum is very useful for promoting harm-reduction messages, as well as coping techniques for risky situations.

Operator: DDAS can also supply you with naloxone if you dont have any (Webchat 2)

Operator: So, in terms of harm reduction for cocaine use, we would say, avoid using any snorting equipment - this could increase the risk of catching viruses like Hep C and COVID. Avoid passing any snap bags with powder in again due to the risk of catching COVID.

Visitor: Ok. (Webchat 10)

Operator: We can provide support around resilience, so how can you deal with those situations when you in them

Visitor: ok

Operator: So take someone who is alcohol dependent - they cant avoid alcohol - its on the tv, supermarket, walk past the off licence - so therefore we facilitate them building resilience based skills to deal with those situations that are seen as risky and reduce the risk of them drinking. That could be the same with you, cocaine and your friends

Visitor: that sounds interesting ☺

Operator: and those resilience skills will be unique to you - some will work some won't - sometimes its trial and error

Visitor: Ok I see

Operator: and if you ever go into a situation where you are determined not use cocaine, but you do, we would always say, dont beat yourself up, learn form it and identify that, that coping mechanism didnt work so I need to identify and try another (Webchat 10)

Surprisingly, given that this was the first contact with the operator, all service users disclosed very personal information during their conversations. This suggests that, perhaps due to anonymity and confidentiality, trust and rapport was easy to build via this communication channel. This can be partially attributed to the operators' excellent communication skills, evidenced in their non-judgemental attitudes and the genuine compassion and empathy in their responses.

Visitor: Thank you for all your help!

Operator: No problem at all, you're very welcome and it's been a pleasure speaking to you. Just a couple of useful numbers in case you do need to chat with someone... DAN 247 Text 'DAN' to 81066, Samaritans 116123 (freephone). Good Luck!!

Visitor: Thank you. Have a nice day!

Operator: You too and remember, you made the first step today. (Webchat 5)

Operator: Well you have taken a massive step Rxxxx, so well done and it has been a pleasure talking to you (Webchat 2)

Conversations with concerned others

There were a couple of conversations with concerned others that were reviewed as part of the transcript analysis. It was interesting that initially both these people wanted to get support for a family member, but as conversations progressed it was revealed that they were also in need of support. Both service users were very happy to hear that Barod offered support for concerned others as well and ended-up seeking contact information for self-referral. These two cases show that the webchat could be very efficient in raising awareness of the wide range of services available, which might be missed or overlooked otherwise.

Visitor: He is getting help and is doing well, but I feel I need something as I am not coping with everything that has happened.

Operator: That's positive that's he's getting support. As yes of course it can affect the people close to them. From what you're saying it's been difficult for you too. You say its' changed him in a lot of ways, which can be hard for you to see as a mother. You seem like a very caring and loving mother to have helped him get this far. There is help available for you. Barod offer concerned other support.

Visitor: thank you, yes, my life has been a nightmare. (Webchat 4)

Conversations with those seeking contact information

Conversations with concerned others who were only looking for contact information in relation to self-referrals were significantly shorter and ended immediately after the sought after information had been provided.

Operator: Hello. How may I help you?

Visitor: Hi. Please could you tell me how my ex/boyfriend would get support from you. can he self refer or would he need to be referred in via GP/probation etc

Operator: Thank you for getting in touch, in which area does he live? This will help me get the correct information.

Visitor: llanelli, carmarthenshire

Operator: thank you. He can self refer by calling 03303 639 997. They may be closed between 12.30 and 1.00 for lunch but he will certainly be able to speak to someone after 1.00

Visitor: thank you very much.

Operator: No problem, is there anything else can help you with today?

Visitor: no thats it, thank you for your help. stay safe (Webchat 3)

The way in which this chat ended is noteworthy. While the chat may have been short, the operator made sure that the visitor had no further questions or need for help before the call was ended. A similar ending was noted in several other chats too, perhaps indicating that it is standard, good, practice to empower the visitor to end the chat.

Is there anything else I can assist you with today? (Webchat 9)

no problem at all anything else I can help with today? (Webchat 8)

is there anything else I can help you with today? (Webchat 1)

Summary

In this chapter we have presented a brief review of a sample of 10 webchats. The sample was randomly selected to avoid any 'cherry picking' but resulted in a sample skewed in favour of concerned others and people in need of direct support rather than professionals seeking guidance. Two types of concerned other were identified, including those seeking support for their own anxiety problems and others seeking referral guidance on behalf of a family member or friend. The one professional in the sample was looking for teaching materials for students at his/her school. Regardless of the type of person involved, all of the webchats had positive outcomes in the sense of achieving the goal of the chat.

The length of chat varied by type of person with the longest chats being in respect of those seeking direct support for their own problems. Analysis of the content of the chat highlighted the non-judgemental and caring responses of Service staff and the gratitude of all visitors at the end of the chat. The amount of sensitive information that was divulged in some chats was noteworthy and it is anticipated that this was in part due to the anonymous nature of the chat but also a result of the kindness of the operators.

5. Results: Interviews with Service staff

In this chapter we present the results of the semi-structured interviews conducted with eight Webchat Service staff members during the summer of 2020. The interviews were all conducted by telephone¹¹ and digital recordings of each interview were transcribed securely and professionally by Transcriptum Limited. To protect the identity of interviewees, all transcripts were labelled with unique ID codes and no names or identifying information were stored within them. The aim of the interviews was to examine the lived experience of delivering the Webchat service and to explore views on effectiveness and differences between digital and face-to-face delivery. The interviews included questions exploring: roles and motives for volunteering as an operator, typical days working on the Service, good and bad chats, attitudes towards the Service, challenges of delivery and views on how to improve the Service¹². On average, the interviews lasted for 31 minutes, ranging from 17 minutes to 74 minutes.

The interviewees were employed in a variety of roles within Barod and included: a recovery worker, training co-ordinator, two team leaders, a case worker, a young person's worker, a communications manager and an administrator. Five of the interviewees were women and three were men and all of them described themselves as either White Welsh or White British. Seven of the eight interviewees had considerable frontline experience of working in the field of substance misuse (ranging from 6 to 23 years) and all had hands-on experience of supporting people through the Webchat Service. The sample was therefore suitably qualified to comment on the experience of delivering the Service as well as reflecting on the differences between digital and face-to-face service delivery.

1. Webchat role

Staff working in the Webchat Service were recruited through an open call disseminated to all Barod staff that sought expressions of interest for volunteers to deliver the Service. An important part of the interview was therefore to examine what these volunteers expected from the role and what motivated them to volunteer in the first place.

1.1 Does your role meet your expectations?

A couple of participants said the role was not quite what they expected in terms of who was accessing it. They said they felt this way because the Service was used by professionals and the general public in a significant extent. When the Webchat was initially put in place, there was a general expectancy that it was dedicated for, and was going to be used mainly by, service users (i.e. people with substance use problems).

I: Is the role that you're playing what you hoped or expected it to be?

R: I think originally, we probably expected that it would be a lot more support provided to service users or should I say, to people who were looking for support around their

¹¹ The original plan had been for face-to-face interviews but restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that all data had to be collected remotely.

¹² A copy of the interview schedule can be found in the Appendix.

substance use. So, especially people who never may have entered services before. I think originally it was expected that we would be more dealing with people like that. But actually, how it's turned out, we're probably getting a wide array of conversation and people accessing the chats. So, predominantly, we've actually seen professionals using it. And then even the general public using it in terms of enquiring about job vacancies and stuff. I think initially, we probably didn't expect it to be as much as it is in terms of those people. (ID 007)

However, a few other participants felt that the webchat role did meet their expectations.

I: Is the role that you play what you hoped or expected it to be?

R: Yes, pretty much. Answering a range of questions that could be service user-related, so actually about something or a professional enquiry. So, pretty much. (ID 001)

I: Okay, is the role you're playing what you hoped or expected it to be?

R: In some ways, yes. In some ways, we've captured referrals for the service I work for that we wouldn't have had. So, that's good. (ID 004)

A few participants expressed a feeling of anxiety about fulfilling the role of a webchat operator, which was mainly related to either not knowing exactly what the expectations for this role were, or not being able to answer appropriately the questions that might come through.

I: Is the role that you're playing what you hoped or expected it to be?

R: I didn't know what the expectations were to be honest with you. I was quite anxious and quite... like I said my job role I'm not on the front line as a front line worker dealing with sort of service user issues on the front line. Obviously I'd been employed with Barod and obviously have a good overview of a lot of stuff, but not really the frontline service. I was concerned about being able to answer those questions or issues that come in. (ID 005)

While frontline experience may not be mandatory for recruitment onto the Webchat Service, these findings suggest that some staff may be less prepared and able to take on the role than others. The implication is that more individualised and intense training may be needed for some staff than others in order to alleviate any anxiety. The question then becomes whether this investment of time represents good value for money.

1.2 Reasons for volunteering

The majority of respondents said that the reason why they decided to volunteer for the Webchat Service was the fact that they felt it could increase service users' access to support. Some flagged up the value of anonymity that the Webchat affords while others highlighted the importance of providing access to support at a time when drop-in was not possible due to the pandemic and lockdown.

I: Why did you volunteer to work on this project?

R: I thought it was really interesting. I thought it was interesting and I thought it was... it was good to offer more accessibility because there are going to be a lot of people

who aren't quite ready to make that phone call or to walk in to a service to get support but they might be comfortable with anonymously just typing in and getting the information so that when they're ready, they know where to go. (ID 002)

Well, when we went into lockdown, we were obviously all trying to find out new ways of working and how we can still support the people that we support. For me, it was just a no-brainer really. I just think it was a great way of connecting with people you couldn't see face to face or couldn't come into the drop-in. That was it for me, really. (ID 003)

We run a single point of contact telephone service within DDAS and I manage that mainly, and I've always thought that having a webchat facility would be good and that we were missing people that don't want to talk on the phone and just want a bit of advice anonymously. So, I always thought it was a good idea. Well, it's worth supporting. (ID 004)

Other reasons mentioned by participants were: because they had extra time on their hands, because they liked the novelty of the project, because they were generally interested in technology, and because they thought it would help with their personal development. This is how one participant exemplified some of these motivations:

Personally, I haven't been front-facing, so, working with service users for quite some time, so it was a good opportunity to engage with service users as well as other cohorts of the population such as professionals and others in terms of providing that kind of advice and information and support. But also, to develop new skills in terms of providing that information and support via a new method and new intervention which will see digital support. It was a new opportunity which was something I was quite interested in getting involved in and developing skills associated to that. (ID 007)

Reasons for volunteering were clearly mixed but underpinning them all was the wholesome, altruistic motive of wanting to help improve access to support for those in need.

2. Chats in practice

The interviews also included questions probing for details of the lived daily experience of delivering the Webchat Service. The aim here was to get a sense of what, in practice, being an operator involved.

2.1 Typical day

Regarding a typical day working on the Webchat, participants' answers varied and were split equally between the following views:

a) Some reported that a typical day was generally quiet:

So, my shifts have generally been quite quiet. So, I think I generally tend to get between three and maybe five calls a shift. (ID 002)

The ones that I've done haven't been particularly busy. I see a lot of people coming into the site and having a look round. I think in total in all the shifts I've done, I've probably answered three queries, when someone has actually started chatting. (ID 003)

b) Others said that initially a typical day was quiet, but now it has become busier:

Well, when I started, because obviously I started it when we first started lockdown, and the shifts were very quiet. So, I'd tend to find the afternoon shift, if any, was the busier of the shifts. But from my colleagues they've noted that definitely, activity has increased. That's the feedback I've had from my team, is that when they're doing the sessions now, that they're definitely not as quiet as what they were initially, because it was new, isn't it? Everything was new, and it took a bit of time for service users and people to get that message across that they can access that kind of service. I think it definitely picked up a bit. (ID 007)

c) The rest of participants reported that no one day was the same and that the volume of chats during a typical day varied:

I: Can you please describe what the typical day or a typical shift on the webchat service?

R: It's really varied really. I can't say that it's ever really much one session is the same. Sometimes they've been busy and then other times, there's been times when there are lots of people on there but not wanting any kind of chat. So, you can see loads of people on there, but they're just not responding to do any webchat. So, there's not really any shift that's the same. Some are busy, some are quiet and then there's a range of different questions that are coming in. (ID 001)

Clearly, the Webchat Service varies from day to day and might include busy afternoons with lots of visitors or slow days where prospective visitors are 'on there' but not engaging. This raises questions of what, if anything, might be done on that front page to help encourage engagement. In its current form, the entry page invites visitors to 'click here' for further information. Emphasising the **anonymity** of the Service without the need for a 'click' and adding a quotation from a service user might be one way of addressing this problem.

07/04/2020

You can now chat to Barod in realtime!

Our new webchat feature is perfect if you want some advice on substance misuse or to find out where you can go to for support. Just click the pink tab in the bottom right hand corner to start your chat!

For more information on our webchat feature, click [here](#)

[return](#)

TO FIND YOUR NEAREST OFFICE OR REQUIRE FURTHER HELP

CONTACT US



2.2 Example of a 'good' chat

Overwhelmingly, participants explained that they considered a good chat one in which they were able to successfully answer the users' questions and provide useful, substantial information:

I suppose a good chat was one we had last week that resulted in a referral to DDAS which is the part of the service that I work for and it was somebody who was enquiring what sort of help was available, where they'd be able to access it through the chat and given that was my area of knowledge I was able to give a lot of information about the service, how a referral would proceed, what they needed to do etcetera. That's about the end of it to get a referral, and then that was followed up by an assessment elsewhere. That was absolutely perfect. (ID 004)

Okay, so a good chat is, I had a person contact the webchat and they were... this was quite early when we started going but after lockdown. This person was saying, they felt they were drinking too much, that they were just so terrified of being in a small village where everyone knew everyone and they were terrified to go to a service and actually get support because someone would know someone who would tell their family. And, I gave them a few resources on how to look at drinking less and reducing your alcohol when at home. I gave them specific wellbeing in lockdown resources, and also links to Smart Recovery which is a BS core group which is completely online at the moment, that they could access anonymously, and they were really happy with that. They felt that they had a lot to look at. Obviously going forward you don't tend to know did they use it, was it useful, but they left the call very content with the information they'd been given. (ID 002)

Some good ones are where they come through and say, "I'm worried about my son's drinking, I don't know what to do". So, once we've sussed out the area, we can signpost them to the correct services then. So, we can give reduction advice there and a bit of support work. We can also generate a referral for one of the Counties then as well, so that person can get support, not face-to-face at the moment, but a phone call then, which then feeds back to what you said on the chat, that's really good. (ID 006)

A couple of Webchat operators mentioned that they would regard a chat as a good one if they had received positive feedback from the user at the end of the conversation:

[I] gave them some advice about injecting practices and different substances and then also directed them to what training is available for free for other professionals. So, that was a really good chat. So, they got a really good overview of where we're at, what we do, how to support the individual they were talking to who might not want a referral in to the drug service, and that feedback... they fed back on the form there that was good. So, that was a really good one. (ID 001)

I suppose if somebody's kind of engaging with you and you can obviously get the information quickly to that person and it's quite – they're thankful.... You know they're quite grateful for the information and I feel like I've done in a... as quick as you possibly can really. I suppose that's a good one. (ID 005)

In practice, defining a 'good' chat was based either on a self-assessment of quality or on feedback from the visitor at the end of the chat. The anonymous nature of the Service means that follow-up is not possible and that the effectiveness of any advice given cannot be gauged. This makes it difficult for operators to learn from mistakes or to emulate successes as outcomes are not known. Consideration might therefore be given to finding ways of measuring success. This might include capturing information about Webchat engagement on referral forms or assessments.

2.3 Example of a 'bad' chat

When asked to describe a bad chat, most participants talked about conversations that ended up abruptly.

Well, the bad ones are the ones that come through and say they've got a problem, and then when you start up the conversation, they sign off. That's generally a bad one. (ID 006)

A bad one, I wouldn't say I've had necessarily a particular bad one at all – touch wood so far. I think I've had a few people like when you're trying to sort of... like you're obviously having a conversation and then they just kind of randomly shut off. They just close the chat down or whatever. So I suppose that kind of feels... I don't know whether it's bad or not, but it doesn't feel like it's a 'resolved' [sic] end to it, if that makes sense. And it's probably because I've given them the information and it's maybe just that tail-end of the conversation where you're going like, "Is there anything else I can help you with?" and they kind of cut off before you can kind of do that 'exitey'-type stuff as well. They got what they wanted and moved on! (ID 005)

Other characteristics of a bad chat, but less often mentioned, were: users not engaging, inability to provide accurate and/or complete information and having to deal with disrespectful users.

Inability to provide info:

R: A bad one, I suppose it's [...] if you don't have the answers immediately, because bear in mind I don't know everything; I don't even know everything about Barod! So sometimes I have to research the information and come back to them.

I: So, that worries you sometimes?

R: Yes, I don't like not having the information. To be fair, I've learnt more about Barod in the last few weeks than I knew before! (ID 004)

Not providing complete/accurate information:

Then a bad example, which was an error on my part, was someone had come on and asked for training. I didn't really think, actually I'm part of something bigger than my own service, so I gave very local details to her. It was after I thought... I didn't even ask her where she was calling from or where she was messaging from. I've given her the details for Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent. She could have been up in England or Scotland somewhere. I think that was a good bit of learning for me, really. (ID 003)

Unlike good chats, bad chats seem to be defined mainly in terms of visitor behaviours rather than operator behaviours. This is interesting and may suggest that there is a need for operators, perhaps as a team, to reflect on chats where things might have been handled differently. The quarterly meetings of staff that were set up in December 2020 will be a useful vehicle for achieving this goal.

2.4 People accessing the Webchat

There was a general feeling among participants that professionals were the category of individuals most likely to use the Webchat, and to a less significant extent service users and concerned others. As seen in a previous section, this was sometimes thought to be a limitation of the Webchat, as participants thought this service was put in place mainly for the benefit of service users.

So, for my chats, I've not really had service users. It's mainly been other professionals from... mainly other professionals and concerned others. But service users themselves, not so many. (ID 001)

[I]t's not massive amounts of service users getting in touch. It is more often than not professionals ... I don't know. But it seems to be primarily professionals rather than service users. (ID 002)

I: Have you noticed particular types of people accessing the service?

R: There is are lot of professionals, I would say. (ID 005)

In terms of substances for which Webchat users sought information and/or support, participants cited heroin, cocaine, cannabis, benzodiazepines and prescription medications. However, the most widely mentioned was alcohol, either in isolation or along with one of the substances mentioned earlier.

I: If you're thinking about service users, have you noticed particular types of them accessing?

R: For alcohol mainly I would say it is, at the moment. (ID 006)

Yes, I think from my... from what I've seen and from the chats that I've had relating to people who are wanting support for themselves or for concerned others, I would say alcohol is the biggest one that I've seen. I've probably had a few related to other drugs such as maybe some prescribed meds or in terms of the likes of heroin as well. I wouldn't necessarily say I've come across many to do with cannabis or like that. So, alcohol for me leads the way in terms of the chats that I've had as well. (ID 007)

I: Thinking about the service users accessing the services, or the concerned others, have you noticed particular problems amongst those people? So, what they were looking for, what they were asking for? Alcohol, drugs?

R: So alcohol use. An increase in alcohol use, definitely. Alcohol and benzodiazepine use are the ones that spring to mind.

In terms of problems for which Webchat users accessed the service, most participants explained that people used it in order to seek help generally. This included asking questions about the availability of, and access to, support services:

I: What about in terms of the help that they are seeking? Is there any particular type of help that people are seeking?

R: Generally, people don't know what they're asking for in the sense that they'll just say, "I need help with my drug use". (ID 002)

I: In terms of the queries themselves, are they seeking support, are they seeking signposting or advice, what did you see?

R: Advice and support and it could be for themselves or for a family member generally, I've found. (ID 006)

One participant mentioned that service users who contacted them via the Webchat sought information on how to cope with withdrawal symptoms:

But then equally... less often will be people saying, "I'm using such and such, my parents say I should just stop, is that correct", or, "how do I cope with withdrawals from this particular substance" (ID 002)

In terms of professionals who accessed the Service, participants overwhelmingly reported that they sought signposting information:

There is are lot of professionals, I would say, that are looking... finding information. I think sometimes yes, it can probably be used as a little bit of a more direct enquiry, that kind of looking for information. Sometimes you get a feel for that as well, but sometimes a lot of it is like professionals, like you said, just wanting to know contact numbers for specific services, yeah. (ID 005)

R: What I would say is the two chats I have had, they've both been professionals who are working with... frontline workers, and they were both looking for more mental health support.

I: Have you been able to signpost them to...?

R: Yes. The one lady, I took a number and signposted her to services in Swansea. The other lady, was about the training, so I think I... I don't know if I got the right area, but I gave her the training details for our service. (ID 003)

Clearly, the main client group of people accessing the Webchat Service are professionals in need of signposting to relevant organisations and information. While this may not have been the original target group, it is an interesting development that has no doubt helped people with substance misuse problems indirectly through the professional intermediary. It is also clear that the Service is playing an important role in providing advice and support directly to people in need, particularly those with problems related to specific substances. Monitoring the type of substance that Webchat visitors are seeking support in relation to could be a useful indicator of broader patterns of use within the general population.

2.5 Use of tagging

One of the features of the Webchat is the ability of the operators to tag key themes within the conversations that they have. Multiple tags can be attached to a particular conversation (e.g. drug, location, type of service user etc.) and the rationale behind this process is to make monitoring and reporting easier.

Participants generally admitted that when they received training for operating the Webchat, they were encouraged to use the tagging function. When asked if they tagged their chats, most participants reported they did:

I: Do you regularly tag your chats?

R: Yes. (ID 001)

I: Do you regularly tag your chats and if you do, do you do these during or after the call, and what are the most frequent tags that you use?

R: Yes, I try... we've been encouraged to tag all of them, so I try my best to remember to do it. (ID 002)

Yes, I tag all the chats that I do. (ID 007)

However, there was one operator who said they did not (*'The answer to that is no', ID 004*), and another one who said they only recently started to tag their conversations (*I didn't at the start because I'd completely forgotten about it, but now I do the mass of the chat, ID 006*).

When asked what tags they used most often, some said 'Wales' (or the region where the service user came from), and some said they tagged the type of person using the Webchat (i.e. professional, significant other, service user). One participant said they also tagged the type of substance that was the object of the conversation. Examples of these are provided below.

I obviously put a lot down for sort of Wales tags and obviously if I'd got an idea of the area if they've said that in conversation, so for example if they were looking for Cwm Taf or Swansea, then I would tag that area as well. Location is probably the most. (ID 007)

I try my best to remember to do it. I will tag during the call if it's quite clear. So, for example, if someone is saying, "I'm a professional looking for the contact detail of this office", then I'll put in professional query. But then if it's a service user, then generally I'll leave it to the end of the conversation to choose what is the most appropriate. I'd say the most common tags are professional query and signposting to service. Then the occasional family or concerned other. (ID 002)

I: And what would you say are the most frequent tags that you're using?

R: Generally for us, it's Wales; I've used Cwm Taf quite a lot, because as I said, the Ponty ones came through quite a bit in that one day, drugs or professional requests and stuff like that, those generally tend to be the ones that I use, or alcohol. (ID 006)

Participants were also asked about whether they thought tagging was useful or not. Everyone believed tagging was useful, although one of them admitted that this exercise was not necessarily useful for Webchat operators, but more so for those managing the service.

Yes, it's a useful thing to do, because when they're looking at what people are coming on there for, it's an easy way of pulling a report. So, it's important to do that otherwise you're losing what people are coming in for. (ID 001)

I can see it's useful when you're looking back, and useful if that person comes on the chat with someone else. So, I think tagging is useful. (ID 004)

Obviously I think, for us as a worker maybe not as useful, but I presume for sort of reporting and for getting an idea of information, yeah it would be very useful to kind of wheedle down that kind of scenario. (ID 005)

The latter point about tagging being a useful tool for reporting and monitoring purposes was also highlighted by the webchat manager:

Yes, I definitely think it's useful. From a reporting perspective it is useful. So, obviously... you've got the post chat surveys but they only count for about 10% of all chats. So, you could argue it doesn't necessarily give you the best overview, where I think tagging, I think it can give you a better overview of what's going on. So, you can get more specific around, for example, how many chats are to do with services in a specific area so to speak. Obviously, it just enables you to be able to get a better idea of actually what the majority of chats are. (ID 007)

Finally, one participant highlighted one possible limitation of the tagging system currently used for the webchat: sometimes none of the pre-defined tags matches the information provided during the conversation. In this situation, the operator decided to tag the chat with 'Wales', a general and not necessarily useful classification.

I've had a few calls that it doesn't really... I can't think of an example right now. I'm sure it will come to me, but where it doesn't really match any of the tags. I can't remember what it was now but last week, I had one that it didn't really match anything. It was a service user query but it wasn't specifically about getting substance misuse support, and I can't recall what it was. But I ended up just tagging it as Wales, because they were in Wales and nothing else really matched. I think having a free text option would be useful. (ID 002)

The implementation of tagging appeared to vary across the interviewees although all recognised its value particularly for monitoring purposes. Interestingly, the current set up that restricts the development of new tags (to avoid duplication) may result in inappropriate tagging for want of any sensible alternative. The drawbacks of duplication need to be weighed up against the value of being able to tag more appropriately.

3. Views on the webchat

A key part of the interview was to explore staff views about the Webchat Service focusing in particular on their understanding of its aims and whether or not these are being achieved. The interviews also probed for details of the key strengths of the Service as well as the challenges involved.

3.1 Reasons why the Webchat was introduced

A general consensus existed among participants with regard to the main reason why the Webchat Service was introduced. The operators thought the service was put in place to increase Barod's accessibility among its users:

I think it's just to make the service more accessible to give people more ways of reaching out and just to make it as easy as possible for someone to get information and to get in touch. (ID 002)

I: So, why do you think the service was introduced?

R: Yes, it was another way of accessing and being accessed basically, for and by service users. (ID 006)

So, it was a way of trying to increase accessibility for some people as well. So, obviously you can think about certain areas of Wales which are very rural and I take for example parts of Rhondda Cynon Taff which is trying to get to, for example, one of our bases. It may only be a few miles down the road, but for the individual, it could take them a good couple of hours to get there. (ID 007)

A few participants reported that introducing the Webchat service was a way of aligning Barod with other initiatives which used similar digital platforms in Wales, such as the 'Drink Wise, Age Well' programme.

I think the organisation as a whole, is very focused on continually trying to develop its services and looking at other organisations such as, 'We Are With You' and obviously we have the Drink Wise, Age Well service based in Cwm Taf in Wales which utilised the webchat so it's developing in line with them as well. (ID 007)

I think it's something that Barod probably had sort of had thoughts to look at that for the future as a way of communication and obviously we're quite up on the social media and stuff and that now as well and that's happened. I know obviously like you said, with the Drink Wise, Age Well we had, they had that as part of the Drink Wise, Age Well which obviously we're part of that project as well. (ID 005)

Another common theme among participants was that even though the idea of a Webchat Service for Barod existed before, the onset of COVID-19 and the consequent lockdown accelerated its rollout.

I think it was in response to COVID-19, and as I said, I think it was on the agenda for Barod as an item that was kind of, you know, "Yes, this is something that we will do in

the future,” and then the pandemic came and I think it was, “Right, okay, well we need to act on this sooner rather than later.” (ID 008)

So I knew it was kind of on the horizon, but I think it probably got thrown into the thing a bit more because of the sort of COVID lockdown situation as well. So yeah, probably more is going to happen, but I probably... it kind of happened quicker due to circumstances, yeah. (ID 005)

3.2 Aims of the webchat

Overwhelmingly, participants thought that the main aim of the Webchat Service was to increase access to Barod’s support services. Increased accessibility was generally described in terms of:

1) easier and speedier access:

But I think it’s just to make the service more accessible to give people more ways of reaching out and just to make it as easy as possible for someone to get information and to get in touch. Yes, I think the aim was to make it more accessible to people and to provide more pathways for people to get information. (ID 002)

I: What do you think were the aims of the service? What is it trying to achieve?

R: Same thing really, more access, more ease maybe. (ID 006)

2) capturing a wider range of service users:

I believe the idea was just to keep an extra point of contact to encapture people who weren’t ringing in or walking in to our offices. So, I think that’s when and why to be fair. (ID 004)

For me, it’s about reaching out to those service users that are unable to for whatever reason, access services. So, having the ability to engage, because most people have access to the internet and to have that kind of service. It doesn’t meet everybody’s needs going into an office, into a building, having that face-to-face, and I think if people can, in that spur of the moment, have access to that information, then it can make a whole lot of difference to that individual’s experience, to their motivation to change. I think it’s a great technique to engage with lots of different people from lots of different backgrounds. (ID 008)

3) avoiding anxiety and stress related to face-to-face or phone conversations:

I think a lot of people, particularly with mental health, with anxiety, people are more comfortable to send a message. I see people are less and less confident in making phone calls these days. People are opting for messaging rather than phone calls. (ID 002)

Like I say, some people don’t want to talk on the phone so that’s a better way for them. (ID 008)

The rest of participants perceived that the aim of the Webchat was to either increase the profile of Barod's brand: *'It's trying to generate interaction with the brand and make it more pertinent. Maybe raising its profile and things like that'* (ID 001), or to free up phone calls: *'[A]ctually, as you take in some of that, the phone calls, freeing up the phones as well really. So, it would make service more efficient.'* (ID 003)

While a range of aims were identified in the interviews, it was widely understood that the Webchat Service was introduced in order to improve access to services. This was understood to be in terms of making services more accessible both physically and psychologically. The potential for the Service to enhance the profile of Barod and to free up staff for other tasks were also recognised but these were viewed as more supplementary than fundamental aims.

3.3 Were the aims achieved or not?

Most respondents thought it was too early to say whether the aims of the Webchat Service were achieved or not. When they reflected on this, they referred to the aim of increasing the Service's accessibility:

It's hard to say really because it's still fairly new. Obviously we've been doing it for a couple of months now, but it's still fairly new. I think in the long run, it would definitely be positive but it would be hard to say at the minute. (ID 006)

So, I guess it's quite hard to say whether we've achieved that aim because of... it's only four months in. I always say, we may be in a better position even just a couple of months down the line, but probably within a year, we'll be able to see, has this worked? (ID 007)

Another participant said that access to the service was starting to increase: *I think it's starting to [...] We've definitely captured people through this service that we would have missed elsewhere, just not the volumes that we get.* (ID 004)

Finally, there was one service operator who thought the Webchat was not entirely achieving its aim of increasing accessibility to Barod's services, and that was because of a lack of awareness:

I think not as much as we would like to. I think we've put it out there and for the people that are using it, I think they are getting a lot of use from it, but just from the low amount of calls, I personally think that there are a lot more people that would find it useful that just aren't aware. (ID 002)

The interviewees were in general agreement that it was too early to say whether or not the Service was achieving its primary aim of increasing access. The interviews were conducted in the Summer of 2020 only a few months after the Service had been launched. This is an important methodological limitation that must be borne in mind when drawing any conclusions. Nevertheless, it is interesting that some interviewees had noticed an increase in engagement with people who would have been missed from services previously. Awareness raising is important as clearly the Service can only help those who know of its existence.

3.4 Strengths

Overwhelmingly, the biggest reported strength of the service was its accessibility (mentioned by all but one participant). Accessibility was described in terms of ease of access (i.e. not requiring physical presence) and instant availability to professional help from a Barod worker.

So, for the service users, I think it's really useful for them. So, they don't have to necessarily have to try and get through on phones and all the rest of it. So, that saves them having to make journeys or phone calls. They can get in to the path... and answers that are good for them. Then as an organisation, as we said before, it just streamlines everything and gets that interaction really. (ID 001)

It's nice and quick, it's instant. So, if you ring a base to ask "what are your needle exchange opening hours" it might be that the phone is engaged, or it might be that the person... there isn't someone available to talk to you. Whereas this is quick, it's instant and I think it definitely complements. (ID 002)

The best things are the... you've got the access to information at your fingertips. (ID 004)

I think the fact that it's easily accessible and that people can access the website and it's really quick and they can get answers. (ID 005)

Another strength mentioned by a couple of Webchat operators was the anonymity provided by this service to its users.

I think that it gives people that kind of anonymity to be able to just go online and have a really confidential anonymous chat with someone. I think it might encourage people who wouldn't want to necessarily walk into a drug service to just go online and get some information. (ID 003)

I think the best bit of it is obviously you can offer a service anonymously to anyone in the country, and they can come on and get information that they need. (ID 002)

Finally, one participant thought that another strength of the Webchat was that it provided its users the ability to 'test the waters' before committing to a service (which was more difficult during a face-to-face appointment).

The best thing is definitely... it's quick and easy, so someone who is maybe thinking, "maybe I should address my drinking", "maybe I should address my drug use", it's not a... they can do it in a non-committal way, so they can test the waters [...] But it's very non-committal, so people can get that support without feeling that they need to register with a service, to attend a service. That's a huge thing I think, breaking down barriers to get vital reduction information to people. (ID 003)

3.5 Limitations/Challenges

Participants also highlighted some of the limitations or challenges of the Webchat. These were grouped into three main categories, which were equally mentioned in interviews.

Firstly, several operators outlined some technology-related issues, such as problems with internet connection, variable IT skills of users and lack of access to laptops or phones which could be used to access the webchat:

Limitations are certainly going to be connections. So, IT... if the connections are poor... that could go both ways. Not everybody has got good internet, especially in Wales, in the more rural areas. They might not have very good internet access which is... so, the equity of access to webchat may not be for everybody. It might not be... some people might have reading and writing issues and stuff like that. So, equity of access is a thing. (ID 001)

Yeah, I think obviously depending on a certain kind of group of service users, you may have... specifically if you're looking at more vulnerable crisis in sort of homeless kind of cohorts, then that would be more challenging for them to access because of not having any sort of facilities in the technology and of engaging, the phones or tablets or laptops to access the internet. So I think that would be the challenge for that. (ID 005)

Well, the challenges have been technology. We started the service for young persons'. We had new laptops five, six years ago, and we were running on Windows 7. So, when our IT department, we were phoning up because the webchat sessions were just really 'laggy', or our internet connectivity wasn't great, that was a huge challenge. We've been really fortunate that, as an organisation, people have tried to... As a company, they've purchased new laptops and stuff for us. But that was a barrier and a challenge to begin with. (ID 008)

Secondly, a few participants explained that the current staffing arrangements for the Webchat might need to be looked at.

What I would say is that I think it was taken on very quickly, due to COVID, and I'm not sure that it's working out as it would have been, if we'd had time to get more of a cohort of staff trained up to take shifts on. I think that there's so few of us that our part of the rota is becoming a little bit unmanageable. (ID 003)

Yeah, and the challenges I think are going to be sustaining it. Staffing it as well. If it's just an add-on for somebody's role, I think that can become challenging then potentially when things start kind of going back into some sort of normality in bases and I think that may see a drop off. (ID 005)

I think because this is an add-on to a lot of staff members' own jobs, then sometimes it can be... I think it's only happened once throughout the whole time we've been going for the four months where a shift hasn't been filled for example. So, if you take 'We Are With You', they have dedicated webchat advisors. That's their job, whereas us, we've got young person's workers, we've got admins, we've got adult service workers, and this is just something that is added on to their job. So, to ensure that we are covered sometimes can be quite stressful from that point of view. So, that doesn't help sometimes. (ID 007)

Finally, a couple of interviewees expressed their concern that at times, the use of Webchat might constitute a barrier for efficient communication with the service user, especially when compared to the traditional, face-to-face interactions:

I: Are there any other things that you might think make it difficult for people to use it?

R: Sometimes just the tone because you can't tell the tone with which someone is... if someone is... especially difficult conversations, or if someone has written a very emotive paragraph about how they're sick of everything, they're fed up of being how they are. They say things that in person would be instant warning signals. I can't live like this, I can't go on. But it's hard to know... when someone is saying it, it's easier to tell, is it a flippant remark, or is it something to be concerned about, and obviously face-to-face, you would often say, "have you been thinking about suicide?", that might be something we directly address with someone in order to offer harm reduction. (ID 002)

Limitations are always going to be what they are saying may not necessarily be what's going on. They might say, I need help with my alcohol use but they might be playing it down. Nothing beats face-to-face stuff in substance misuse work, just like with a lot of things, but there's nothing horrific in terms of the limitations for it. (ID 006)

The interviewees identified a range of strengths and weaknesses some of which have important implications for the future delivery of the Service. Ensuring that it remains fast and easy to access as well as anonymous is clearly important and needs to be prioritised. The issue of speed is particularly significant. This relies both on ensuring that staff (and users) have access to appropriate IT equipment as well as ensuring that sufficient numbers of staff are available to chat with service users. One solution might be to have dedicated Webchat operators rather than staff incorporating Webchat work into their existing roles. The challenge of reading tone into text is a difficult one to resolve given that text is the sole form of engagement within this Service. Safeguarding protocols are clearly needed for any situations where staff are concerned but unsure of a service user's state of mind and intentions.

3.6 Areas for improvement

In light of the above limitations, interviewees were asked to think about ways to improve the Webchat Service. Most participants chose to suggest improvements related to the staffing of the Service, such as: increasing the number of people working on the Webchat, hiring designated Webchat workers, including the Webchat hours into staff workloads, and extending the operational hours:

I: How would you see the service improved? How would you improve it?

R: I personally, and I've said this to my line manager, I think if Barod as an organisation has taken this on, it's absolutely amazing. We've got a staff force of hundreds of people and I think that if it was made mandatory, as part of your job description, and everybody did the training, then that would be one shift... very few and far between, with plenty of backup, if someone was sick or someone needed to change a shift.

I: So you would need more people working on it.

R: Definitely. It was very much volunteer to come forward, and I think there's probably about 15-20 of us, when we've got a workforce of over 400. (ID 003)

I also think that it needs to have... obviously everybody's kind of doing this on a voluntary basis as part of their already full time role and I think that's been achievable during this period of the lockdown and people working from home and not having that kind of... I'm not saying they're not busy, but in the same businesses that they were in before. So I think going forward I think that would be more difficult if we get busier, if people would be able to continue to commit to the timeframes, they would need to look at more specific workers for that service then. (ID 005)

I think maybe extending the hours. I know it's not going to be a 24-hour service, but I think it would be really beneficial to maybe extend that. For people at work as well, because not everybody is going to be able to access, or have that ability to log on before five o' clock if they're professional, and they may be working until 5:00, so maybe having the hours extended would be really helpful. (ID 008)

A few participants also suggested that increasing awareness of the Webchat would improve its uptake and efficiency:

I think word of mouth, promotion, making sure that people are aware that this is something that we now deliver; I think that's going to be key. (ID 008)

I think probably work needs to be done on more marketing and promotion of it, I think personally. I think there could be more work involved in that [...] Yeah, marketing and promotion of it really as well. I don't think we've had a massive push on it, but I think you could create a lot more sort of advertising and promotional, really marketing it across the board as well. (ID 005)

Several interviewees proposed that an improvement in the technical aspects of the Webchat would also make it more useful. Solutions mentioned by these participants included the availability of a toolkit with resources embedded in the Webchat and a friendlier and easier-to-use interface:

More resources, because at the minute, I'm sending... I'll Google something, mental health support in Sheffield for example, and I'll send them the links and send them the information. But if we had something in-built that was, "here is a video on dealing with opiate withdrawal", that could be quite useful. (ID 002)

I think it would be really good to have a really robust bank of resources like fact sheets and stuff. I'm getting more familiar with things like that, of sending things like that out on links and stuff like that to people. So having that; making a more robust... toolkit, yeah basically of doing that as well. (ID 005)

I think our website needs improving and the way the chat is introduced needs improving. It feels very clunky and old-fashioned. It's not quite the same as say, you click on Amazon and it feels very smooth and altogether and you know where to find

the help. It feels a bit ten years ago. So, I think they could make that easier and... Yes, more easy to access and just... it's just been designed and then not really tested by our service users. (ID 004)

A couple of interviewees said that a good way of improving the Webchat would be to allow for direct referrals to be made through it. In this way, precious time would be saved, and, more importantly, it would ensure that the user's decision to seek help is not jeopardized by delaying their enrolment into treatment.

So, we do that referral there and then for that person, which would be good. So, I guess getting some form of system in place to enable that. I think it would just make it a lot easier for the person that we are dealing with because just accessing a webchat could be a big deal for somebody and just saying to them, "but you need to go and call somebody else now", and they're like, "whoa". It kind of goes back to saying, yes, this webchat is good because it enables people who don't like to pick up the phone for example. They can engage with us, but then you're saying to them, "no, but you do have to pick up the phone to somebody". So, yes, I would say that was one of the big developments that would be nice to be seen to do. (ID 007)

A final improvement suggested by one participant was to potentially change the Webchat so that multiple service providers could have access to it. In this way, service users could have access to a range of organisations able to cater to their needs:

I think in terms of the developments, whether we could develop it in terms of working with other services... a small number of conversations have been related to mental health but if we worked in collaboration with other services like mental health, because we both know that mental health and substance abuse is very much related... I'm not saying this organisation, but Mind obviously is the first organisation that comes to the forefront when you're talking about mental health. We have the same webchat service ourselves and we work with Mind who have a chat service on their website. So, you could have access to a mental health worker for example with that. So, whether there is scope to work more in collaboration with partner organisations with that as well. (ID 007)

The interviewees identified a variety of ways of improving the Service but most were linked either to staffing or to improving the technology and user interface. The need to raise awareness and facilitate faster access to treatment through direct referrals and multiple providers were also identified as important ways of enhancing the Service moving forward.

3.7 Comparison with traditional support

Participants were also asked to reflect on how the Webchat compared to traditional support tools used by Barod. Interviewees generally thought the Webchat could be used as an additional tool to existing ones, which could potentially increase the pool of service users for Barod:

It's an add-on to it, isn't it? It's not... it's never going to replace any of those things in itself. It's just another string to the bow, isn't it? (ID 001)

I: How does the service compare with traditional modes of working such as phone calls or face-to-face or group therapy?

R: I think it complements them. I think we need all of them, but I think it compliments them. I think it adds another... there are people that don't like talking on the phone. There are people that don't like face-to-face. There are people that just want to sit at home and type and get the basic information and I think we capture that. So, it complements the others and brings in people that we might not get through traditional means. (ID 004)

Nevertheless, there were participants who thought that the Webchat was not as good a tool as the traditional, face-to-face interventions:

R: I don't think anything is as good as face-to-face. So, your groupwork that's where you're going to get the best out of people but at the moment it's a needs must thing and it gives people the chance to get in touch. (ID 006)

Obviously it's probably a little bit more difficult to do so via a message than... because you're not able to get those non-verbal cues so to speak, with that person, and obviously when you're providing that support, you're probably taking a lot of what that person is saying via their non-verbal cues. So, I guess you don't have that perception and therefore you're not able to get additional ideas of what's going on for that person via those non-verbals. (ID 007)

Despite these challenges, there was recognition among staff members that this new means of interaction was useful in capturing a wider range of service users and therefore they needed to adapt and improve the ways support was provided:

Well, it's a challenge for us all at this point in time, because that isn't our normal practice as it stands. So, I think if you look at how we engage at the moment with our service users, we've had to be innovative. We had to change. I think regardless of whether we were going to do the live webchat sessions, we've had to look at how our message... Obviously, staff may prefer face-to-face, but there's lots of people that embrace this mode of interaction and are fine with it. (ID 008)

The interviewees had mixed views on the value of the Webchat Service in comparison with traditional services. Some considered the Webchat Service to be complementary and an add-on to existing services. While most recognised that digital services can in some situations be more useful than traditional services, there was a general consensus that delivering services remotely was more challenging. Not being able to see facial expressions or hear the tone of voice were flagged up as particular problems associated with Webchats.

4. COVID-19

The final points of discussion during the interviews were issues related to COVID-19, such as: 1) how has COVID-19 featured in Webchat conversations, 2) whether COVID-19 influenced

uptake for the Webchat and 3) what will the future of the Webchat be once COVID-19 related restrictions are lifted. Each of these issues are addressed separately below.

4.1 How has Covid-19 featured in Webchats

Participants generally reported that issues related to Covid-19 had not featured in Webchat conversations. Below are a couple of examples of typical answers from interviewees on this particular point:

I: Has COVID-19 featured much, or any, in any of your chats, and what were the issues if it did?

R: No, I haven't had any conversations about COVID. (ID 003)

Not that I can recall anyway anybody specifically stating anything around the sort of COVID, no. Not for me anyway. (ID 005)

Actually in terms of the conversations I've had, I can't recall one where COVID was actively discussed. (ID 007)

In the rare case that COVID-19 did come up in Webchat conversations, the questions from users were strictly related to opening hours for Barod services and how these operated during this time:

But it wasn't that they had enquiries around their drug use, for example, and how COVID was impacting that. Nothing like that. It was more to do with how the services were still functioning in light of COVID-19. (ID 008)

The only time it's featured in our chats is people asking if we were still open and explaining to them how we move forward and most appointments will be telephone appointments, etcetera, but that's all. (ID 004)

4.2 Perceived Impact of COVID-19 on the use of the Webchat

When asked if they believed COVID-19 influenced uptake of the Webchat, participants' opinions were equally split. Some believed that COVID-19 had no impact on the number of people who accessed Barod's Webchat and that those service users who did access it would have sought help anyway.

No, I haven't seen a change but what I would like to see is that it remains. Of the contacts that we have had, the general feeling that I get is that we would have had those contacts with or without lockdown. I feel that these very much were people that were choosing to use a web service rather than give a phone call in. So, I don't feel COVID made that much of an impact on the use of the website, although the fact that it's been there should someone want to reach out, rather than they know they can't go in to a building... I think it's been really useful. But I think the people who contacted would have contacted anyway in that way. (ID 002)

A few other operators believed that COVID-19 might have influenced uptake for the Webchat, but could not be sure of it:

It's hard to say. I'm assuming that these people would be there, with or without COVID. It's really hard to make that assumption. I think for some people, COVID has exacerbated their drug use, and then I think there's a whole cohort of people that we engage with that it's worked really well for them, and they've done really well and have managed to kind of maybe sort themselves out, or calm things down. But I can't really comment either way there. (ID 008)

Finally, several interviewees suggested that COVID-19 was a valid reason why people accessed the Webchat. Some suggested COVID-19 accentuated problematic use of alcohol in general, and hence more people were likely to seek help to address it.

I think yes, there has been an increase in particularly alcohol being used during sort of the lockdown period and maybe people that just think about more support with that as well. So yeah, there's no doubt about it, I think that has definitely had an impact. (ID 005)

I think as a service, alcohol is becoming more of an issue so definitely it would mean that people are trying to get in touch a lot more, because either they're realising or family are realising that they're drinking more. (ID 006)

A couple of participants believed that the Webchat use increased as a result of COVID-19 because of its accessibility:

I'm assuming that there's going to be some people that may have just walked through the door to refer themselves in to services, which obviously we do see, especially in those services where we have the drop in. I've seen it myself multiple times where people literally just come through the door and say, "I need some support". You talk with them and you do an assessment there and then. But obviously, during the lockdown, that hasn't been available to people. So, I wouldn't be surprised if there had been people who then have accessed our webchat as an alternative to that as well. So, I think definitely it's made things potentially... given people an alternative to get what from us. (ID 007)

Again it's difficult to answer. I would say yes there's definitely an increase and I think it's definitely... like you said it's more accessible for people if they're at home to access that as well. Generally I think the whole... a lot of the whole world has gone more online haven't they as well? So I think that generally it was... but yeah, it's probably heightened the fact with the lockdown period as well. (ID 005)

Finally, one interviewee suggested that because people created support bubbles during lockdown and moved in together, concerned others were more likely to become aware of the extent of a loved-one's alcohol problem.

I: Do you think that people are accessing the service because of problems caused by COVID-19?

R: Yes, so I would say there, there have been a few. I think there has been a few concerned others that have accessed it, because like I mentioned with one of the situations earlier, where they've had a loved one move in with them because of the lockdown. So, that loved one may have been living on their own previously but thought we don't know how long this is going to last so I'm going to move in with somebody so I've got some form of social company so to speak. So, we've... not to go over old ground, but you know that some people say that "ever since they moved in with us, since the start of lockdown, I'm only now starting to realise how much they're drinking". (ID 007)

Mixed views were reported by interviewees in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on the Webchat Service. Some felt that service users would have engaged with the Service regardless of the pandemic. Indeed, interviewees noted that the issue rarely cropped up in chats and when it did it was only in relation to opening times. Others, however, thought that it had increased access largely because the 'world has gone more online' but also because of an increase in alcohol consumption during lockdown. Of particular interest was the belief that concerned others had become more aware of substance use problems during lockdown as a result of a closer proximity to family members through support bubbles.

4.3 Future of webchat post-COVID-19

The last issue explored during interviews was participants' perception regarding the future use of the Webchat if and when COVID-19 related restrictions were lifted. A general consensus emerged among participants, who overwhelmingly supported the idea of the Webchat being kept in place and who thought that its use was likely to increase in future.

Well, I'm hoping that they'll... they'll certainly carry on with it as it is and expand it further really. I think it's got potential to be a lot more than it is right now. (ID 001)

I think to be honest, the use of the webchat is only going to increase. I say that because it's just going to get more established as a service, and obviously we will continually keep promoting it as well and unfortunately, there is always going to be new people who want support or will just want information. (ID 007)

I mean, "We Are With You" have been operating live webchat sessions way before COVID-19, and their webchat sessions are really, really productive, really successful. I would like to see that Barod continues with the live webchat, and that this is just an additional mechanism that we can use to engage our service users. With or without lockdown, it is something that I think we need to drive forward as an organisation. (ID 008)

I think it will steadily increase usage I think personally. Again obviously that's me speculating and my own opinion on it, but yeah I think people have realised that there's a new way of working in this kind of sector and I think that will start getting access... if you have the right kind of marketing and promotion and that kind of thing with it as well, I think that it will steadily... I don't think it will be a massive jump, but I think it will steadily increase, if that makes sense. (ID 005)

A few participants suggested that the Webchat should be regarded as an essential tool in Barod's string of services and therefore should be expanded and promoted further. For these interviewees, the Webchat needs to be kept because of its ability to capture an extended pool of service users.

I think it's essential going forward. I think if we want to capture everybody, it's essential. I don't think it's a big problem providing it, because you can get on with other stuff. If it got busy enough to need full time work, then obviously it would stay, but even at a low level, you can be logged in and just get on with other stuff and wait for a chat to pop up, so the server is constantly there. So, I would say it's essential to keep, but that's me that wanted it before. (ID 004)

I think it's a good thing to keep in place because again, people's social and domestic situations don't change in or out of COVID. You have a lot of people in deprivation where maybe they can't afford credit, but they're able to top in to Wi-Fi in different places. So, that's going to be... it's going to need to be a way for people to get in touch, certainly if people have lost jobs and things like that. They're going to need to have another way of contacting, because maybe the anxiety around COVID won't go so they want to drop in to this but they haven't got the credit to call. It's just going to be that extra string to the bow for people to get in touch. (ID 006)

I think it's only going to be an additional string to our bow, as it were, with regards to how we engage with people in our communities, for example. At the end of the day, some parts where we cover, there isn't an office space for an hour and a half's drive. How on earth can you expect somebody to get into an office for a face-to-face appointment? So, with regards to staff time, it makes them more productive because they can just Zoom in, or have that conversation from the comfort of their desk, and likewise for people with anxiety, because often that comes hand-in-hand with substance issues, they don't have to leave the confines of their home to gain service then. (ID 008)

Summary

In this chapter we have presented findings from interviews with eight staff members involved in the delivery of the Webchat Service. The interviewees volunteered for the role of operator mainly out of an altruistic desire to help improve access to support for those in need. Most had previous frontline experience of delivering support to people with substance misuse problems. While this kind of experience was not mandatory, levels of anxiety were higher among staff without this kind of experience.

The interviewees described the day-to-day experience of delivering the Webchat Service as varied with no day being the same as the next. Generally speaking, afternoons were noted to be busier than mornings but interviewees also described many quiet days including days when prospective visitors were 'on there' but not engaging. Definitions of 'good' chats were based either on a self-assessment of performance or on the basis of visitor feedback at the end of the survey. Bad chats, however, were defined mainly in terms of visitor behaviour and the abrupt premature ending of chats. The challenge of measuring effectiveness is an

important one that is difficult (but perhaps not impossible) to remedy in a context where follow-up is not possible and outcomes cannot be monitored.

It was generally understood that the Service was being accessed by professionals far more frequently than by concerned others and people in need themselves. While this may not have been the original target group, it is an interesting development that is likely to have helped people with substance misuse problems indirectly through the professional intermediary. Nevertheless, significant numbers of people in need of help were noted to be accessing the service and receiving support directly from service staff.

Tagging was widely recognised as an important part of the Service, but this was believed to be of most benefit for management and monitoring purposes. However, the inability to create new tags was thought to be a limitation that led to inappropriate tagging. The potential for the Service to be used to monitor patterns of use within the community was not identified specifically, but there is clear potential for it to identify new and emerging substances or problems.

It was widely understood that the Service was introduced in order to improve access to services both physically and psychologically and there was general agreement that it was too early to say if this aim had been achieved. However, there was a consensus of opinion that the Service should continue into the future beyond the pandemic. The strengths of the Service were described in terms of speed and simplicity while the weaknesses were primarily identified as the things that would hinder those strengths (i.e. inadequate IT equipment and insufficient staffing levels). However, the difficulty of assessing a service user's state of mind was also flagged as an important drawback making it far less useful than traditional face-to-face and telephone services. Nevertheless, the value of the Webchat Service as an add-on to existing provision was widely recognised and interviewees were all hopeful that the Service would continue long into the future.

6. Discussion

This report has drawn on a range of sources and used a variety of methods to evaluate the implementation, delivery and, where possible, the effectiveness of Barod's Webchat Service. We had hoped to evaluate outcomes and effectiveness more robustly, but we were unable to do this due to the anonymous nature of the Service, which limits the opportunity to follow-up service users, and the national roll-out of the Scheme beyond the initial experimental area, which prevented us from comparing outcomes with those in a 'control' area. In this chapter we summarise the key findings of the evaluation and highlight some areas where they may be scope for optimising the Service for the future.

Background, policy and research context

Barod's Webchat Service was launched in April 2020 as part of their forward-looking, digital strategy. It was anticipated that the Service would be useful for people who could not, would not and perhaps even should not access traditional physical-based services. The idea for the Service emerged out of close partnership working with *We Are With You* and collaboration on the Drink Wise Age Well project, which included provision of a digital webchat service for people aged 50 and over whose lives had been affected by alcohol. Initially, Barod's plan had been to pilot their own Webchat Service in the Cwm Taf APB area. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and social lockdown limited opportunities for face-to-face service delivery, and this triggered the national roll-out and nationwide availability of the digital Webchat Service from the outset.

The Webchat Service is essentially a digital extension to existing provision, which increases opportunities for people whose lives have been affected by substance misuse problems to gain access to professional advice, information and support. The Service is in tune with current substance misuse policy in Wales and fits in with wider policy objectives, including the Healthier Wales agenda and the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. The Service also aligns with Welsh Government's updated [Substance Misuse Delivery Plan 2019-2022](#), which recognises that more needs to be done to support people and help them to access the services they need. Of particular relevance here is WG's ambition to develop a Wales-wide Recovery Plan that includes the use of digital service models, to support services through any future COVID-19 peaks.

While there is a growing body of evidence supporting the implementation and delivery of digital interventions, few studies have evaluated the effectiveness of webchats and helplines. This is largely because of the methodological difficulties associated with the anonymous, short-term nature of engagement with service users that limits opportunities for follow-up. However, it is important to note that the absence of evidence does not mean that webchats are not effective. Rather, it means that more research is needed to establish what value they have as a substance misuse intervention and how their efficiency can be optimised. This evaluation of the Barod Webchat Service has provided a valuable opportunity to help fill this gap in knowledge.

Webchat data

An important part of the evaluation was to review the official data routinely collected within the Webchat digital platform. Our analyses were conducted using SPSS and Excel and focused on the 982 chats that took place during the 10-month period 06/04/20 to 31/01/21. During that period, chats took place on 222 separate days and more than 12,200 minutes of engagement were recorded. While the Service operated seven days a week, there was a clear preference for Mondays and for afternoon shifts with comparatively little uptake in the evenings or at weekends. Google was the primary entry point for accessing the Service with Barod's web page a distant second. Nevertheless, the logging of some chats coming through Facebook suggests that social media can play a role in leading people to the Service and may be worth investing more effort into.

Since the Service was launched, 45 staff members have been involved in chats. Some operators have been far more heavily engaged than others but, on average, each staff member engaged in 22 chats. Speedy responses were noted across the board with most chats being responded to in less than a minute. Tagging allows operators to record key themes relevant to the chat and perhaps unsurprisingly, the amount of tagging in a chat was found to be linked to the length of chat. A total of 85 different tags were used by operators but tags related to the area and type of visitor were the most popular. In terms of location, most chats were from people living in areas where Barod have physical bases and contracts to deliver services. This suggests that if a national Webchat Service is an aim, then wider publicity beyond Barod's own web pages, social media platforms and physical services is needed.

To gather feedback about the experience of engaging with the Service, a post-chat survey was used. Responses were obtained for roughly 10 percent of all Service users but the sample was skewed in favour of female and White respondents. The sample was fairly evenly split in terms of the age of respondents and in terms of the proportion accessing information for professional purposes and the proportion seeking support for themselves or someone else. Encouragingly, given the aim of widening access to substance misuse services, nearly three-quarters of respondents indicated the chat had been the first time that they had sought support.

Feedback on the Service was overwhelmingly positive with 98 percent rating it as 'good' and 86 percent rating it as 'easy to use'. Ratings of helpfulness were a little less positive and these were found to vary by the type of person accessing the Service – job seekers and professionals were far less likely than concerned others and people with their own problems to rate the Service as helpful.

Webchat analysis

To investigate the operation of the Service in practice, we undertook a brief review of a random sample of 10 chat transcripts. While the randomisation process prevented any cherry-picking of successful cases it did result in a sample that was skewed in favour of concerned others and people in need of direct support rather than professionals seeking guidance. Two types of concerned other were identified, including those seeking support for their own anxiety problems and those seeking referral guidance on behalf of someone else. The one professional in the sample was looking for teaching materials for students at his/her

school. Regardless of the type of person involved, all of the chats had positive outcomes in the sense of achieving the goal of the chat (e.g. supplying the requested information).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the longest chats were noted to be with those people seeking direct support for their own personal problems. These chats were characterised by helpful discussions in which staff routinely demonstrated non-judgemental and caring attitudes as well as helpful support and advice. The conversations were all well received as service users consistently expressed gratitude at the end of their chats. Importantly, service users appeared comfortable with the digital platform as they often disclosed in-depth and sensitive information. While this may well be linked to the anonymous nature of the Service, the way in which the conversations unfolded suggests that the rapport with kind and sensitive operators also played a role. The personal qualities of operators are clearly important and this needs to be considered when recruiting new staff in the future.

Interviews with Webchat staff

Eight Webchat operators agreed to take part in an in-depth interview about the lived experience of delivering the Service. The interviewees were employed in a variety of roles within Barod, most had considerable frontline experience of working in the field and all had hands-on experience of supporting people through the Webchat Service. The sample was a credible one that was able to comment on the experience of delivering the Service as well as reflecting on the differences between digital and face-to-face service delivery. The interviews lasted, on average for about 30 minutes and covered a range of issues including their motivations for volunteering for the role, their expectations and their views on its effectiveness.

Reasons for volunteering to work shifts as a Webchat operator were mixed but underpinning them all was an altruistic motive of wanting to help improve access to support for those in need. This prosocial motivation was a reason for one interviewee volunteering even though he/she did not have direct frontline experience of providing substance misuse support. While such experience is not mandatory, it clearly presented a challenge in the sense that he/she was more anxious than others. The implication of this is that more individualised and focused training may be needed for some staff than others. The question then becomes whether this investment of time represents good value for money.

The interviewees described varied days working on the Webchat Service with no day being the same as the next, although afternoon shifts were generally busier than others and there was limited uptake in the evenings and weekends. Looking ahead, it is important that the Service carefully monitors patterns of engagement and ensures that staffing levels match anticipated demand. This will help to maximise the speed of response whilst minimising costs.

Several interviewees described shifts when people were on the website (“on there”) but not engaging, which may suggest that something is needed to help trigger them to start a chat. One idea might be to emphasise the anonymity of the Service on the front page without the need for a ‘click’ to access further information. Adding a quotation from a service user flagging up the benefits of engaging might also be helpful.

When asked to define a 'good' chat the interviewees tended to base this either on a self-assessment of quality or on feedback from the service user at the end of the chat. The anonymous nature of the Service means that follow-up beyond the chat is not possible and that the effectiveness of any advice given cannot be gauged. This makes it difficult for operators to learn from mistakes or to emulate successes as outcomes are not known. Consideration might therefore be given to finding ways of measuring success. This might include capturing information about Webchat engagement on referral forms or assessments.

Unlike good chats, bad chats tended to be defined mainly in terms of service user behaviours rather than operator behaviours. This is interesting and may suggest that there is a need for operators, perhaps as a team, to reflect on chats where things might have been handled differently. Indeed, one interviewee described reflecting on the advice he/she had provided after a chat and recognised that the advice given was not as appropriate as it might have been. The quarterly meetings of staff that were set up in December 2020 will be a useful vehicle for staff to share such experiences and learn lessons from one another's successes and mistakes. The development of a toolkit of resources embedded within the Webchat Service, as recommended by one interviewee, might also help with this too.

Interviewees noted that the main client group of people accessing the Webchat Service is professionals in need of signposting to relevant organisations and information. While this may not have been the original target group, it is an interesting development that is likely to have helped people with substance misuse problems indirectly through the professional intermediary. It is also clear that the Service is playing an important role in providing advice and support directly to people in need, particularly those with problems related to specific substances. Monitoring the type of substance that Webchat visitors are seeking support in relation to could be a useful barometer of patterns of use within the general population.

The implementation of tagging was noted to vary across the interviewees although all recognised its value particularly for monitoring purposes. Motivation to tag might be enhanced by illustrating to staff the wider benefits of tagging for the Service (e.g. monitoring trends in substances, problems, areas). Interestingly, the current set up that restricts the development of new tags (to avoid duplication) may result in inappropriate tagging for want of any sensible alternative. The drawbacks of duplication need to be weighed up against the value of being able to tag more appropriately.

While a range of aims were identified in the interviews, it was widely understood that the Webchat Service was introduced in order to improve access to services. This was understood to be both in terms of making services more accessible both physically and psychologically. The potential for the Service to enhance the profile of Barod and to free up staff for other tasks were also recognised but these were viewed as more supplementary than fundamental aims. The interviewees were in general agreement that it was too early to say whether or not the Service was achieving its primary aim of increasing access. This finding is no doubt linked to the fact that the interviews were conducted in the Summer of 2020 not long after the Service had been launched. This is an important methodological limitation that must be borne in mind when drawing any conclusions. Nevertheless, it is interesting that some interviewees had noticed an increase in engagement with people who would have been missed from

services previously. Awareness raising is important as clearly the Service can only help those who know of its existence.

The interviewees identified a range of strengths and weaknesses some of which have important implications for the future delivery of the Service. Ensuring that it remains fast and easy to access as well as anonymous are clearly important things that need to be prioritised. The issue of speed is particularly significant. This relies both on ensuring that staff (and users) have access to appropriate IT equipment as well as ensuring that sufficient numbers of staff are available to chat with visitors. One solution might be to have dedicated Webchat operators (as is the case for *We Are With You* services) rather than staff incorporating Webchat work into their existing roles.

The interviewees identified a variety of ways of improving the service but most were linked either to staffing or to improving the technology and user interface. The need to raise awareness and facilitate faster access to treatment through direct referrals and multiple providers were also identified as important ways of enhancing the Service moving forward.

The interviewees had mixed views on the value of the Webchat Service in comparison with traditional services. Some considered the Webchat Service to be complementary and an add-on to existing services. While most recognised that digital services can in some situations be more useful than traditional services, there was a general consensus that delivering services remotely was more challenging. Not being able to see facial expressions or hear the tone of voice were flagged up as particular problems associated with Webchats, but it was recognised that while these were problems for some, they were seen as benefits for others (i.e. in the sense of providing anonymity).

Mixed views were reported by interviewees in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on the Webchat Service. Some felt that visitors would have engaged with the Service regardless of the pandemic. Indeed, interviewees noted that the issue rarely cropped up in chats and when it did it was only in relation to opening times. Others, however, thought that it had increased access largely because the 'world has gone more online' but also because of an increase in alcohol consumption during lockdown. Of particular interest was the belief that concerned others had become more aware of substance use problems during lockdown as a result of a closer proximity to family members living together in support bubbles.

Lessons for the future of the Webchat Service

In this chapter we have drawn together the key findings from each strand of the evaluation. Overall, the evidence collected suggest that Barod's Webchat Service is achieving its aims of widening access to substance misuse support for those in need. Since being launched in April 2020, Webchat operators have engaged with large numbers of different kinds of service users and have provided a Service rated almost unanimously as very positive and helpful. Looking forward, it is important that the Service is publicised as widely as possible to increase awareness among people living and working in areas beyond those in which Barod currently operates.

Throughout the chapter we have flagged up some points that might help guide future delivery of the Service. For clarity, these suggestions are presented in bullet points below:

- The personal qualities of operators are clearly important and need to be considered when recruiting staff in the future. Recruitment of operators without a history of frontline experience may require more intensive training to alleviate anxiety.
- While most visitors entered chat through Google and Barod's own web pages, the logging of some chats coming through Facebook suggests that social media can play a role in leading people to the Service and may be worth investing time and effort into.
- If the Webchat Service is to be a fully nationwide service (thereby achieving WG's ambition) then wider publicity beyond Barod's own web pages, social media platforms and physical services will be needed.
- It is important that the Service carefully monitors patterns of engagement and ensures that staffing levels match anticipated demand at key times. This will help to maximise the speed of response whilst minimising costs.
- The post-chat survey responses indicated that ratings of helpfulness varied by type of service user. People seeking jobs were far less likely to rate the Service as helpful. More appropriate sign-posting to relevant informants may therefore be needed either during the chat or perhaps even before the person enters the chat on the Barod website.
- The number of visitors to the Webchat web page who are 'on there' but not engaging suggests that triggers might be needed to nudge them into starting a chat. One idea might be to emphasise the anonymity of the Service on the front page without the need for a 'click' to access further information. Adding a quotation from a service user flagging up the benefits of engaging might also be helpful.
- Measuring success is difficult given that anonymity prohibits follow-up. Consideration might therefore be given to finding other ways of measuring success. This might include capturing information about prior Webchat engagement on referral forms or assessments.
- Bad chats tended to be defined in terms of visitor behaviours rather than operator behaviours. This may suggest that there is a need for operators to reflect on chats where things might have been handled differently. The quarterly meetings of staff that were set up in December 2020 will be a useful vehicle for achieving this goal.
- Monitoring the type of substance for which Webchat visitors are seeking support could be a useful barometer of patterns of use within the general population.
- Restrictions on the development of new tags (to avoid duplication) may result in inappropriate tagging for want of any sensible alternative. The drawbacks of

duplication need to be weighed up against the value of being able to tag more appropriately.

- The challenges of ensuring sufficient staffing levels to cover demand was noted by some of the interviewees. One solution might be to have dedicated Webchat operators (as is the case for *We Are With You* services) rather than staff incorporating Webchat work into their existing roles.
- The need to raise awareness and facilitate faster access to treatment through direct referrals and multiple providers were identified as important ways of enhancing the Service moving forward.

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Appendix

Evaluation of Barod's Webchat Service

Staff interview schedule

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this confidential interview. Please can I just clarify that you have read and understood the information sheet and that you are happy for me to record the interview?

About you

Sex:

Age:

Ethnic group:

Role:

Length of time in role:

Previous related work experience:

Role in Webchat service

What role do you play?

Why did you volunteer to work on this project?

How often do you work on the Webchat service?

How long is a typical shift?

Is the role you're playing what you hoped/expected it to be?

Is your work monitored by anyone? Who? How often?

Chats in practice

Please describe a typical day working on the Webchat Service?

Can you describe some 'good' chats? And some bad ones?

Have you ever been worried about someone's safety during a chat? What did you do?

How long are your chats, on average? What's the range?

Do you make referrals? How often? Who to?

Do you regularly tag your chats? Do you do this during or after the call? What are the most frequent tags? What do you think about tagging?

Have you noticed particular types of people accessing the service?

Have you noticed particular problems among those accessing the service?

Views on Webchat service

Why was it the service introduced?

What are the aims of the service?

Do you think that the service is achieving those aims?

What are the best things about the service?

What are the challenges?

How could the service be improved?

How does the service compare with traditional modes of working?

COVID-19 issues

Has COVID-19 featured much in your chats? What issues?

Are people accessing the service because of problems caused by COVID-19?

What do you think will happen with the use of Web Chat once the lockdown measures ease?