

**'PEOPLE...SHOULD NOT BE LEFT IN THE DARK.  
SOMEONE NEEDS TO GIVE THEM A HAND'  
CHOOSE LIFE SCHOOLS EVALUATION PROJECT  
– FINAL REPORT**

*A Qualitative Evaluation of the Impact of the Choose Life Project  
Event On Pupils aged 12-14 years in schools In Wales and England*

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With excerpts from *Changing Hearts and  
Minds: The Impact of Choose Life Project  
Events in Higher Education – Final Report*  
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# 1. Part One

## 1.1 Author Details

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## 1.2 About the Research and Final Report

This study is part of a comprehensive, inter-related three-fold project. This first part comprises of an evaluation of the impact of a Choose Life Project (CLP) event on young people in secondary schools.

The second element of the project is an evaluation of the impact of the CLP event on university students' personal, academic and professional understanding of substance use. The full report by Corteen, Hughes-Stanley and Marriott-Smith can be accessed here: <https://researchonline.ljamu.ac.uk/id/eprint/22106/> and their summary report here: <https://researchonline.ljamu.ac.uk/id/eprint/22096/>

The third element of the three-fold project is an evaluation of the impact of the CLP on volunteers. This evaluation was carried out by Dr Michelle Jolley and Dr Sarah Nixon who are both based in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at the University of Winchester. Please see: *Jolley, M. and Nixon, S. (2023) 'I Wouldn't Be Where I Am Now if it Wasn't for Choose Life': An Evaluation of Volunteers' Perspectives on How Choose Life Supports Recovery and Desistance*. University of Winchester. Available at: [10.13140/RG.2.2.29003.57127](https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.29003.57127)

This evaluation involved three secondary schools and evaluation of the events by the principal researcher alongside Steve and the team. Each school was located in either North Wales/North West England and represented communities from urban, rural and semi-rural areas. All pupils aged 12-14 years who attended the CLP were invited to complete a survey after the event which asked them open questions about their feelings towards substance use

and the people that use them. It also aimed to establish the wider impact of CLP in terms of their understanding of substance use as a wider social issue. 192 pupils across the three schools completed the survey either partially or fully (75 pupils from rural location, 57 pupils from a semi-rural location and 59 pupils from an urban location). Pupils were aged between 12-14 years and the Choose Life Project had taken part within their schools (with different pupils) for a number of years prior to the evaluation project alongside the Personal, Social, Health and Education (PSHE) curriculum which exists in its various forms within both the English and Welsh education systems<sup>1</sup>.

The final report is made up of two parts. Part One provides an executive summary and the main headline findings and recommendations of the evaluation project. Part Two provides further detail to the origins of the Choose Life Project and further outlines the unique ways in which it helps school-aged children to understand issues surrounding substance use. The aims and methods of the research are presented together with a discussion, case studies and thematic analysis of the main headline findings, which includes direct quotations from the pupils themselves.

### **1.3 Executive Summary**

The main findings from this evaluation demonstrated that pupils really enjoyed listening to the volunteers' stories first hand and many more felt the opportunities to ask questions directly to volunteers in a workshop was particularly enjoyable and beneficial to their understanding of key issues related to volunteers' experiences. Pupils also enjoyed the role play section of the CLP and learnt much about the structure of the drug supply chain from this exercise. Some of the most important impacts of the CLP was that it challenged pupils to rethink their perceptions of substance use and the people that use substances. Pupils who once deemed people with substance dependency as undesirable/unsavoury characters to fear, later recognised and better understood the context of addiction and the often difficult/upsetting/sad lives of the volunteers. The majority of participants expressed a real empathy with the stories of the volunteers and demonstrated a re-humanisation of the topic of addiction compared to their ideas before the event.

The chemical/biological foundations of addiction as well as the complex structural and cultural issues that might lead to addiction was clearly understood in some pupils' responses. This understanding was often coupled with a position that society needs to commit further to making changes that would help people with addiction. At times prior negative perceptions of people who use substances remained after the CLP event in all three schools, but these represented only a distinct minority of pupils. In such examples pupils felt that the volunteers had made some bad choices that they could have avoided and that due to this they didn't deserve any help. An understanding of the role of the media in unfairly representing people who use substances was also expressed by the majority of pupil participants who believed

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that education is a devolved issue within the UK and therefore there will be variances in curricula across England, Wales, Scotland and N. Ireland.

that the media could do more in representing more fully the multifaceted factors leading to substance dependency.

Choose Life Project events provide a powerful opportunity to increase understandings of substance use, addiction, recovery, homelessness and crime and deviance and this report recommends that the CLP school events are rolled out nationally for schools. Those who work with and influence policy in this area (e.g. teachers, support staff, child and adolescent mental health practitioners, MPs, educational ministers etc.) and other change agents should also attend a school's Choose Life Project event to better support young people. In consideration of these findings, we recommend that sufficient time be dedicated to these CLP events as an important aspect to addiction education in the curriculum. The CLP event should help formulate one important aspect of the wider education and training that focuses on substance use, addiction education, prevention, early help, harm reduction and recovery throughout the secondary school curriculum (key stages 3 and 4).

## **1.4 Main Headline Findings**

Following the data collection process which took place in the Spring and Summer terms of 2022 thematic analysis of the data took place. This involved following Braun and Clarke's six phases of thematic analysis (2006/2022). Word clouds were also used to present the words/phrases participants used to describe substance use or those who use substances. The final findings and recommendations are laid out below and are discussed in more depth in Part Two.

### **Finding 1 Fear and judgement of addiction:**

Pupils mainly discussed substance use and those who used substances in a negative manner before participating in the Choose Life event. Coupled with a fear of substances and their users, it was clear in the emotive and sometimes moralistic language used by pupils, that a one-dimensional and individualistic understanding of substance use was common with many being informed by inaccurate stereotypes.

### **Finding 2 Broadening understandings through CLP:**

CLP events led to school pupils adopting a wider, multifaceted understanding of substance use and the lives of those impacted by it. The CLP event allowed for the de-stigmatisation of people who use substances, as participants were able to humanise their experiences.

### **Finding 3 Empathetic reasoning and connections:**

There was an emotional connection to the volunteers' stories within the CLP event which helped participants of the event develop an empathetic understanding with volunteers' experiences and the reality of addiction.



**Finding 4 Role of media in simplifying and stigmatising addiction:**

Following the CLP event, the majority of participants felt that the media has a tendency to represent people who use substances in a bias or over simplified/derogatory manner. The media was recognised by the majority as sensationalising, stigmatising or over-simplifying the issue of substance dependency.

**Finding 5 Supporting people who use substances:**

The majority of participants in the study expressed how society could do more in terms of helping with the problems of substance use. Many of the suggested interventions placed responsibility on the government in terms of helping to prevent/alleviate the problems associated with substance use (including reducing poverty, greater access to emotional support and wider structural support). Some participants focused on more punitive measures such as a greater focus on the policing of drugs and expressed that help should be available only to those that want help.

**Finding 6 The key role of volunteer life stories in the CLP:**

The volunteer life stories and the role play were especially impactful for the participants in the school events. The experience of a CLP event goes beyond educating about substance use, it extends to participant self-reflection and self-identification with the work of the CLP and its volunteers.

**Finding 7 Potential improvements to the CLP:**

The majority of participants across the three schools were unable to cite any part of the CLP event that they did not like. There were some pupils however who were a little confused about the role play and some cited the initial section of the event (the PowerPoint slides with the information about addiction) as being too long.

**Finding 8 Key outcomes of the CLP for pupils:**

Pupils learnt a lot from the CLP event which was expressed in the following four ways; *self-reflection, the tragedy of drug use, the re-humanising of people who use substances and the social responsibility in addressing substance use*. There was both an emotional connection with the life stories and overwhelmingly positive feedback from the events.

The student participants were asked to provide three to five key words that describe their thoughts about substance misuse *before* and *after* the CLP event. The impact of the event can be seen in the words provided by the students:



**Recommendation 4: Inclusion of debrief in the CLP event:**

CLP organisers should consider the inclusion of a debrief session at the end of the event to ensure that pupils have the opportunity to question, consider, reflect and feedback on what can often be an emotional and information-loaded few hours. This would help highlight any misunderstandings, confusion or even potential triggering to pupils to ensure the safeguarding of pupils. It could also offer an important space to highlight the main learning outcomes and take home messages of the event. A scheduled debrief with school pupils at the end of an event will help participants realise how the volunteers' stories share similar elements with other people who use substances they might encounter throughout their lives.

**Recommendation 5 Critical discussion of media representation of addiction:**

As the media in all its forms (e.g. news reporting, television, soap operas, dramas social media, etc.) has such a huge influence on the lives of young people, a section in the school CLP event addressing the inaccurate stereotypes of drug/alcohol use through different representations might be a useful addition to the event. This could help pupils recognise the ways many media channels construct the 'problem' of substance use inaccurately and unfairly.

**Recommendation 6 Clarification of the role-play component in the CLP event:**

Further clarity concerning the purpose of the role play and the 'acting' role of the volunteer as a drug dealer is needed. Many pupils who attended the event expressed confusion as they couldn't work out if the volunteer really had dealt drugs or not. Although a debrief section could be utilised, a clearer explanation is needed immediately after the 'reveal' to ensure that pupils fully understand the authenticity of the volunteers' stories that follow this.

## **2. Part Two**

### **2.1. An Introduction to the Choose Life Project**

The Choose Life Project (CLP) began as a project in HMP Liverpool and in 2008 Steve Duffy, a former prison officer (and Founder and manager of the project) established CLP within the community as a charity. Its foundations within the prison manifest following Steve's observation that a majority of people in prison had problems with addiction and substance use and nothing was being done to address this. There was no education in the prison about substance use and addiction, "there wasn't even a poster on the wall or any form of support for the inmates" (Choose Life, 2020a). It was within the prison that Steve developed an education programme about substance use and addiction which introduced the novel idea of using drama and real life experiences to respond to substance dependency and addiction amongst people in prison. Since 2008, the CLP events provide education and awareness to young people, students and professionals within the wider community.

Many people believe that individuals simply selfishly choose to engage in substance use often for hedonistic gain and this lack of understanding can result in a lack of empathy for people who are in the grips of drugs and alcohol addiction. The CLP events aim to dispel the myths

surrounding substance use, substance dependency and addiction, and the individuals whose lives have been impacted by these, through employing a range of creative techniques (see Section 2 below). The event is firstly built on the philosophy of using “first-hand knowledge and experiences” (Choose Life, 2020a) by recruiting recovered alcohol and drug users as volunteers to the project. CLP aims to educate pupils, students, and professionals about substance use and addiction to “about the pitfalls of substance abuse, with the addict’s own experiences offering a powerful and cautionary voice about the risks that lie on the road to addiction” (Choose Life, 2020a).

The Project over the last 15 years has educated and raised awareness about addiction, recovery and the pains of recovery and desistance from harmful behaviour by voicing volunteers’ first hand experiences of addiction. Workshops also allow Choose Life volunteers to spend time with smaller groups, allowing pupils to ask any questions they please, to help further humanise people who use substances whilst challenging any underlying assumptions about them and their lives. This report refers to drug use as substance use which includes alcohol use. The term ‘people who use substances’ rather than ‘substance users’<sup>2</sup> is preferred throughout this report.

## **2.2 The Choose Life Project and Desistance**

The theory, policy and practice regarding the concept and process of desistance is a relatively new area inside and outside of academia. For the purpose of this report desistance is the process of stopping unwanted patterns of behaviour such as substance use and/or crime. The relationship between substance use and crime and the need to simultaneously study desistance from both types of behaviour has been recognised (Nixon, 2023). It has also been acknowledged that desistance is not an identifiable one-off event, it is a process (Burke and Gosling, 2023; Kewley and Burke, 2023). The process of desistance “is also not linear, people ‘zig and zag’ in and out of [unwanted patterns of behaviour] for periods of time, often long before permanent cessation occurs” (Kewley and Burke, 2023), if it occurs at all.

Audiences at CLP events gain important insights into desistance – in terms of what this entails and how difficult the desistance journey is. Importantly, being a volunteer in the CLP is a crucial part of their desistance journey. For some volunteers this is not only part of their recovery, rehabilitation and desistance from substance use it is also about their departure and desistance from the commission of crime. For many of the volunteers, their cycle of substance use resulted in a life of crime, for some it resulted in imprisonment. Some female volunteers have worked in the sex industry and many male and female volunteers went through the care system. When the volunteers share their powerful personal testimonies not only are they doing so to aid the audiences understanding of and empathy towards the complexity of substance use and desistance, they are also giving something back to the

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<sup>2</sup> In the open-ended survey pupils were asked about ‘substance misuse’ and ‘substance users’. Substance misuse is a term that is commonly used to convey the harmful use of drugs, including alcohol, and it is a term that participants would understand. When discussing pupil’s responses, this original terminology will be used. However, in other areas of the report the terms ‘substance use’ and ‘people who use substances’ are preferred.

community. Wanting to give something back is an important aspect of the desistance journey (Maruna, 2001) whether it is desistance from substance use and/or crime. The following comments from volunteers on the Choose Life (2020c) website captures both the importance of this project for the volunteers and the audience:

*Being involved with the Choose Life Project has been a great experience. Telling my life story to large groups of people, including students and new police recruits, has really boosted my confidence. As volunteers, we always get positive feedback from the audience, which lets us know we're doing something worthwhile.*

*I have volunteered for Choose Life on many occasions. Why I do it is so that young people can hear first-hand what the horror on life addicted to Class A drugs is like and hopefully will educate them not to go down that route. I also get so much from this Project.*

The CLP has more than 600 volunteers, many of whom have been part of the project for over ten years. The volunteers are “at the heart of the project” and “their shared stories are the essence of Choose Life” (Choose Life, 2020c). Each volunteer is in recovery and they have “a unique and powerful story to tell .... [t]heir experiences inspire and empower others to walk a path that leads away from substance misuse” (Choose Life, 2020b).

As well as the stories of the volunteers, Steve Duffy offers his own insider perspective of what he learned during his time as an ex-prison officer. Earle (2014) and Nixon (2020) both express the unique insider’s perspective that ex-criminal justice practitioners can offer to others which is expressed in the way that substance use and addiction was brought to life in the role play section of the CLP event.

The CLP is currently based in Merseyside and there is a real desire to expand this nationally for that both volunteers and attendees can benefit from CLP across the United Kingdom. To validate the expansion of this scheme a formal evaluation of the schemes’ benefits is required.

## **2.3 A Consideration of the literature**

### **2.3.1 The Context of Substance Use in the UK**

The UK government has acknowledged that there is a problem with excess alcohol consumption (Orme and Coghill, 2013), and drug use within the country (Office for National Statistics (ONS), 2022). The Crime Survey for England and Wales revealed that one in five adults aged between 16-24 (18.6%) reported drug use in the year 2022, with 4.7% of this age category reporting use of Class A drugs (ONS, 2022). Young people are also represented as engaging in excessive alcohol consumption (Orme and Coghill, 2013) with 68% of 16-24 year olds likely to drink above the recommended levels (Smith, 2018).

The request for an evidenced based evaluation of the CLP is timely as it coincides with Dame Carol Black's independent review focusing on drugs, drug use, prevention, treatment and recovery (Black, 2021). Black's (2021) review highlights that there are evidence gaps in research, including what works to deter people taking drugs. Black's review recommends greater governmental focus on drugs, drug use, prevention, treatment and recovery alongside a recognition that young people (aged 11-15 years) have seen a steep rise in drug-use problems that needs further consideration (Black, 2021). Importantly, Black's review (2021) discusses the role of education in preventative interventions, and recommends that staff working with people with drug dependence be appropriately trained. To achieve this it recognises the importance of bringing researchers and practitioners together. This research project therefore addresses some of the issues raised in the Black review (2021) by evaluating the impact of the school's Choose Life Project. Although wider social and structural changes are required to change the lives of those most vulnerable to substance use, more research into the role of the education sector in contributing to this change is crucial. This evaluation is therefore key in beginning to build evidence in relation to the impact of substance use and addiction education alongside the related issues of recovery and desistance.

### **2.3.2 The Impact of Desistance Narratives**

Defining desistance "is not without debate" (Kewley and Burke, 2023. P 55) and "it has been much contested" (Barr, 2019, p. 2). According to Nixon (2020, p.1) desistance is "the study of pathways out of offending and desistance narratives are expressions of 'going straight'". Despite the oversight of women's experiences within desistance literature (Barr, 2019), understandings of desistance are beginning to influence evidence based practice (McNeil and Weaver, 2010; Maruna and Mann, 2019)<sup>3</sup>. For people impacted by substance use the desistance process could reduce recidivism, desistance from crime and substance and "prevent future harm, ... (re)build relationships, provide reparation, and help desisters develop the strengths and resources needed to live a life free from crime" (Kewley and Burke, 2023, p. 55). The acknowledgement of desistance narratives can therefore have a potentially impactful effect when trying to educate secondary school pupils about substance dependency, especially those who might have experienced this from a primary or secondary perspective.

At present there is very little research which examines the impact of desistance narratives on drug education in schools however lots of research has addressed the important role of narrative and experiential learning in teaching on a range of different topics (Ancrum, 2015; Belisle et. al., 2019; Butcher, 2006; Geregova & Frisaufova, 2020; Marsh and Maruna, 2017; Nixon, 2020; Payne et. al., 2003 Polletta, Chen, Gardner & Motes, 2011) and demonstrates how stories can help audiences reflect on various stereotypes and assumptions that may be made about groups of people such as people who use substances (Geregova & Frisaufova, 2020). Nixon's (2020) study set in HE educational settings, reported that exposure to the desistance narratives of people who had offended, had a positive impact on 68% of students'

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<sup>3</sup> See Burke and Gosling (2023) and Kewley and Burke (2023) for more detail on desistance and theories of desistance.

perceptions of them and helped to humanise stories of people who had been to prison . For Roth (2016, in Nixon, 2020, p. 4) bringing in guest speakers and using real life case studies in lecture delivery “can open student’s eyes to offender’s capacity for change”.

It is hoped that the desistance narratives and the stories shared more widely in the CLP events, will contribute positively to drug and alcohol education within secondary schools throughout the UK. It is this project’s aim to further explore the ways in which narratives and the efficacy of role playing within the CLP impact upon young people’s understandings of drugs and alcohol use.

### **2.3.3 Stigma, Representations and Perceptions of Individuals Who Use Substances**

Substance addiction is one of the most scrutinised and stigmatised conditions in society (Corrigan, Larson and Rüsche, 2009; Schomerus et al., 2011), with the public expressing negative views towards people who use substances (Crisp et al., 2000; Pescosolido et al., 2010). These negative views can result in social exclusion of people who use substances (Livingston and Boyd, 2010), with people choosing to distance themselves from those who use substances (Marie and Miles, 2008).

Stigmatisation is defined as an “overall stereotypical and prejudicial social process” (Corrigan and Wassel, 2008, p.43) which results in an individual or group being labelled and discriminated against (Link and Phelan, 2001). Whole communities can stigmatise individuals/groups, with the same negative attitudes being expressed by all (Berryessa and Krenzer, 2020). Goffman in his work on stigma (1963) outlined how stigmatisation can result in a *spoiled identity* for the stigmatised group as they become discredited and understood solely by their stigmatising attribute. Regarding substance use, it has been found that the public view people who use substances in a negative way, viewing such individuals as more blameworthy and dangerous than people who do not use (Corrigan, Kuwabara, O’Shaughnessy, 2009; Racine et al., 2015; Sattler et al., 2017). For these reasons, the public are reported as being unwilling to affiliate with people who use substances (Lang and Rosenberg, 2017).

The UK Drug Policy Commission (UKDPC) (2010) conducted a survey with three thousand adults living in the UK, which questioned their views on affiliating with individuals who *previously* used substances. The survey found that 43% of respondents said they would not want to live next door to someone who had previously used substances, with more than 50% reporting that they would not trust someone who had previously used substances to be a babysitter. Additionally, one out of three respondents said anyone thinking about entering a serious relationship with someone who had previously used substances would be foolish. These results show how the public not only have a negative perception of people who use substances, they also retain a negative perception of those who *previously* used substances (a trend identified by Goffman as *enacted stigma* (1963) that can still be applied to a person’s past as well as their present).

Changing attitudes towards individuals who use substances is thought to be possible through the medium of education. Richmond and Foster (2003) reported that elements of postgraduate courses can contribute to positively changing attitudes towards people who use substances whilst simultaneously increasing treatment optimism within addiction work. Watten et al. (2013) supported this notion by claiming that addiction education programmes can effectively address negative attitudes, stigmas and biases in students also at university level. Other scholars such as Fraser et al. (2017) argue against the notion that education can reduce stigma, believing that if this were true then educated individuals such as lawyers would not hold the negative attitudes that they do. In response to this however there should be a distinction made between *levels* of education and the *content* of education. Meurk et al. (2014) also disagrees with the idea of education changing attitudes and perceptions, as they state that attempts to re-conceptualise addiction as a brain disease to the public has not produced any changes in stigmatising perceptions. Meurk et al.'s study highlighted how people find it hard to let go of their inaccurate generalisations despite explaining how addiction makes it difficult to control ones impulses and make the right decisions. With this in mind it is useful to look to other influences that further construct/confirm/reproduce ideas around people who use substances.

The negative attitudes of the public surrounding individuals who use substances are considered by some scholars to be partly the result of negative media portrayals of this group (Fraser et al., 2017; Scheibe, 2017; Williams, 2020). Media representations of addiction are often sensationalised, biased, one-sided and simplistic and exaggerate the harms of drugs, which results in the reproduction of damaging stereotypes and a misinformed public (Fraser et al., 2017). Goode (2015) notes that messages shared through the media can have an influence on policy change which reflects the importance of creating a more diverse and realistic representation of addiction through various media channels. Although debates are ongoing concerning whether the media is informed by societal views (and presents topics in ways appealing to their audience, (Williams, 2020)), or whether societal views are informed by the media, the power media platforms hold in terms of reproducing/constructing ideas around substance users is clear.

The term 'media' in this context is not solely concerned with news broadcast channels and publications, but encompasses the array of media outlets (e.g. TV series, soap operas, films, social media, media campaigns and documentaries). These forms of media are highly influential as they are part of popular culture with social media being particularly heavily utilised by children and young adults (with one recent study by Ofcom (2023), reporting nearly all 12-17 year olds use social media and have at least one social profile). Whilst it is important to note that consumers of media content are not passive dupes (and often critically engage in media stories/profiles/reporting to figure its authenticity (ibid.)), the impact of media reporting/imagery needs to be considered. Consuming one-dimensional representations of people impacted by addiction through the array of mediums are likely to lead to the wider public eventually adopting these limited understandings (Scheibe, 2017). This can lead to harmful consequences for people who use substances as they slowly become excluded from society due to a lack of willingness by society to provide adequate support such as harm-



reduction spaces and equipment. Brown (2015) further states that social rejection can lead people using substances to not access or complete their treatment. According to Goode (2015), the media should be held responsible for their actions and be forced (through policy) to change their methods, in the hope that this would change public perceptions and enable individuals who use(d) substances to live without stigma.

It would appear with greater scrutiny of media representations alongside high quality, evidence-informed addiction education programmes the public could be better placed to develop a fuller understanding of the complexities of living with addiction (Richmond and Foster, 2003). Research is required in this area to establish the most effective method of changing public perceptions and implemented as early as possible to enable change within society.

#### **2.3.4 Addiction Education Approaches in Schools in the UK**

Addiction is defined by the National Health Service (NHS) as “not having control over doing, taking or using something to the point where it could be harmful to you” (NHS, 2021). The most common addictions are drug and alcohol addictions (NHS, 2021), which schools and higher education institutions try to combat through the use of education.

It has been found that the younger the age of initiation of substance use, the greater the likelihood of ongoing use, addiction and harm later in life (Hodder et al., 2012). It is therefore essential that age appropriate education regarding drugs/alcohol is continuous in a young person’s life and begins as early as permissible (Robinson, 2019). For this reason, schools are seen as a vital and safe environment for health and addiction education (Macdonald and Nehammer, 2003). The UK government have underlined this in their 10-year drug plan by outlining plans to provide an effective, evidence-based health and relationship education programme to young people to help prevent the use of drugs with the aim of reducing young people’s use of drugs and thus creating a safer society (Department for Education et al., 2022). There has also been a focus on the involvement of teachers and multiple agencies (police, teachers, peers and parents) to help both prevent and educate pupils on the dangers of addiction (Allott, Paxton and Leonard, 1999).

There is minimal research which points to effective evidence based practice in schools within the UK but one example of a successful alcohol (and cannabis) education programme is the ‘Climate Schools Programme’ which was piloted in two UK secondary schools (Newton et al., 2014) having been established in Australia. Results of a randomised control trial showed students’ knowledge about alcohol increased whilst alcohol consumption decreased (Ibid). The programme trialled in British schools used cartoon storylines of teenagers experiencing real-life situations associated with harms caused by alcohol consumption with the hope of replicating the long-term results found with Australian students.

Conversely, further evidence suggests that drug and alcohol education in school settings have had little impact in terms of preventing alcohol and other drug use (Hodder et al., 2012; Orme and Coghill, 2013). Previous 'Just Say No' campaigns were based on the logic that informing (and often scaring) children about the dangers of drug use, would subsequently dissuade them from partaking in drugs (Mold, 2021) although history informs us that such approaches also fail. A potential reason for this lack of success in schools, was that young people felt that the substance education delivered was patronising and preaching (de Visser et al., 2013). Other health education programmes tried to encourage children and young people to make healthier choices in their lives with some authorities worrying that such a drug education might make more people aware of the drug market and allow them to be more curious about partaking (Hodder et al, 2012; Mold, 2021). The preferred form of education from schools and higher education institutions in recent years (perhaps as a response to this) has been centred around normative education, affective education and the teaching of life-skills (Bennett, 2014; Brown, 2012; Cahill, 2007; Hodder et al., 2012; Paxton et al., 1998).

A normative education model operates with the intention of presenting the reality of drug use and avoids scare tactics which have been proven to not work (Cahill, 2007). Paxton et al. (1998) and Cahill (2007) show how normative education programmes can produce significant reductions in drug use by combining the teaching of social and life skills (such as negotiation skills) whilst equipping pupils with honest knowledge. An affective education approach, prioritises personal and interpersonal development of pupils with the aim to reduce drug use by enhancing individual's self-esteem, clarifying their values and improving their decision making skills (Bennett, 2014; Hodder et al., 2012). In order to fully understand the impact of this approach to substance education further work in the UK is required (Brown, 2012).

Addiction, alcohol and drug education is covered in England by personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, which is considered an important and necessary part of all students' education (Department for Education (DfE), 2021). All other nations in the UK (N.Ireland, Scotland and Wales where education is a devolved issue) have their versions of PSHE in their curriculum with it becoming a compulsory and statutory subject in September 2020 (DfE, 2021). In 2010, Ofsted reported that none of the schools they inspected were delivering outstanding drug education with the PSHE curriculum (Brown, 2012) which implies a need for improvement. Scott and Oliver's (2022) research with young people reported similar experiences of PSHE drug education which relied too heavily on scare tactics and the need for total abstinence. Such an approach fails to acknowledge the social content and reality of experimenting with drug use and further harm reduction strategies could have better mitigated harms young people come to whilst engaging in recreational drug-use. PSHE was also reported to focus more on sex and relationships and more time is needed to discuss substance use in more detail for this education to be effective (ibid.).

### **2.3.5 Creative Pedagogy in Addiction Education**

The CLP events inform pupils from the perspective of people who have experienced addiction as they believe 'there is no-one better to educate and inform about the danger of drug and

alcohol abuse than someone who has been there and experienced it all for themselves' (Choose Life, 2020a). Over the last twenty years there has been an increased interest in adopting creative pedagogies and methods in education (Banaji, Burn and Buckingham, 2010).

The utilisation of people talking about their real life experiences of addiction in the CLP allows us to regard the CLP events as both a creative peer-informed pedagogical practice. Shiner (2002) defines 'a peer' as an alternative to a person with 'professional credibility' and further explains that a peer does not have to be defined by age but includes a person who may have an affinity to those being educated. This approach emphasises the importance of affinities and connections as an identified tool in peer education to help increase empathetic understanding. Parkin and McKeganey (2009) however highlight how the major diversity in peer education approaches (in the health context specifically) create a difficulty in terms of assessing the efficacy of peer-led education programmes despite the increasing demand for evidence-based practice models across a range of sectors.

Performing arts-based methods of education are utilised across the educational stages and commonly utilised within health care courses (such as medicine and nursing) as watching performances of real-life situations is thought to provide a useful insight into possible real-life scenarios and prepare students to act with empathy when dealing with real-life scenarios (Perry et al., 2011). Studies have shown how students develop a better understanding of how to act in potential situations following exposure to performing arts and improves their attitudes (Rosenbaum, Ferguson and Herwaldt, 2005; Shapiro and Hunt, 2003; Shapiro and Ruckner, 2003). The use of role play is also documented to benefit students in numerous ways including their level of conscious thought (Backman et al., 2019; Leung, Mok and Wong, 2008).

Performing arts-based methods of education are not only used in higher educational institutions but are also adopted by drug and alcohol educators to teach students about addiction through the form of drama, theatre and role play. MacDonald and Nehammer (2003) discuss and evaluate the use of a play (*Wings to Fly*) to highlight critical issues surrounding illegal drug use, including peer pressure and the notion of choice amongst school children aged 10-12 years in south Wales. Their evaluation revealed how pupils enjoyed the play and gained some information about drugs. Other similar plays utilised in drug education have also outlined the impact of the performances often staying with young people for months after the event (Collins and McWhirter, 1998, cited in MacDonald and Nehammer, 2003). Both examples highlight how the use of programmes using performing arts-based methods of learning have been successful in educating young people about the issue of drug use which have also been reported in the context of secondary schools (Hobbs, 1999 cited in MacDonald and Nehammer, 2003 p.84).

## **2.4 An Overview of the Schools' Choose Life Project Event**

The section provides an overview of the Choose Life Project (CLP) event experienced by the participants of this research.

#### **2.4.1 Introduction to Substance Use and Addiction**

A school CLP event typically begins with a talk by Founder and Manager of CLP Steve Duffy about his experience of substance use and addiction in prisons. This is followed by a PowerPoint presentation about legal and illegal substances and addiction. Although this section follows a more traditional 'drug education' pedagogical model (i.e. delivers information through slides and relevant videos), it is an important phase of the event as myths and misconceptions about substance addiction and how it operates physically/chemically in our system, are dispelled, challenged and corrected.

#### **2.4.2 Role Play: *The Life Testimony of a Drug Dealer***

The next stage of the event introduces the volunteers (usually three) and one of these have been selected to play the role of a drug dealer (at this point the audience are not aware that this is a role play). The 'drug dealer' is then introduced to the class by Steve and the role play takes the form of a question and answer session with Steve. The questions asked by Steve are often contentious and designed to reveal the 'drug dealers' focus on making money at the cost of exploiting or harming vulnerable others. This is the first time that the audience learns about drug use from a storied account (albeit not an authentic one) and generally evokes clear exasperation towards the 'dealer' as the realisation of the power of those at the top of the hierarchy and their actions in terms of violence, exploitation and splicing of drugs before they hit the market, becomes apparent.

#### **2.4.3 Question and Answer and Role Play Revelation**

The pupils are invited to ask questions to the 'drug dealer' which usually results in a series of challenging and confronting questions directed at the 'drug dealer' which demonstrates how emotionally engaged participants are in the event. After the Q & A it is revealed to the audience that this was a role play and in fact the 'drug dealer' is a person recovering from substance use and not a dealer, but that the answers are based on conversations Steve previously had with drug dealers during his time as a prison officer. Further explanation of the drug chain of command is given via another PowerPoint presentation and it is made clear that those at the top of the drug supply chain are usually protected whilst the vulnerable people below them become more exposed to the violence, addiction, disruption, exploitation and dangers involved in the drugs scene.

#### **2.4.4 Volunteer Life Story**

Next the volunteers come forward one at a time to share their life stories with the school group as a whole. Each of the volunteers on the programme are in recovery from substance use they have experienced in the past. Some may have experienced the care system, prison, homelessness, abuse, loneliness, unemployment, violence and other difficult circumstances but all are united in their dependency on substances at some point in their lives. This allows another opportunity for pupils to benefit from understanding addiction through the context of lived experiences which can help create an affinity between the volunteer and the pupil.

In their discussions about recovery, it is made clear through volunteers' stories that relapses are common. All volunteers are encouraged to speak frankly, honestly and authentically about what happened, frills and all and if they feel comfortable will discuss their feelings at different points in their lives. As an audience member the stories can be hard to listen to at times but can also demonstrate how the volunteers have persisted and attempted to build safer and happier lives for themselves as they work towards desistance and recovery.

#### **2.4.5 Video: Rat Park**

In between the volunteers' stories a short film outlining the main findings of the experiment *Rat Park* undertaken by Bruce Alexander in the 1970s is shown. A discussion of this classic study allows participants to fully consider the social and environmental factors that impact upon addiction (see Gage and Sumnell, 2018) which is a common theme running through the event and is clearly highlighted by the volunteers' stories. The timing of this in the event is crucial and allows the audience to map parallels to the ways in which the volunteers' social environments have impacted upon their relationships with substances.

#### **2.4.6 Video: Morph**

Next the pupils are shown another short video, this one was based on real individuals – previous volunteers. It showed volunteers morphing from their identities in active addiction into their desistance identities. It is an important aspect of the event to allow audience members who may experience substance use themselves or live with people who use them, that there is support available to help people move away from substance dependency.

#### **2.4.7 Volunteer-led Question and Answer Session**

The volunteer-led question and answer section is the final part of the CLP event and allows for interaction between the audience and the volunteers. Schools may organise the smaller groups differently but it works well when volunteers are able to take their groups to different rooms to create a smaller and more relaxed environment. Using a carousel learning strategy (pupils are able to move between the volunteers in groups) participants are encouraged to ask questions to the volunteers. Although this extends the learning of the pupil in terms of understanding in more detail the emotional, practical, physical and mental strains of substance use and desistance, the ambience is relaxed and personable to allow the pupils to truly see the person behind the label.

#### **2.4.8 Support for School Pupils**

Steve and the volunteers are trained in offering support and directing attendees to relevant services in the instance of a pupil sharing their own stories about substance use which can sometimes happen. In schools the CLP team are usually at the venue for much of the day and correspondence with teachers before the event outlines any safeguarding issue procedures that should be followed in the instance of pupils' disclosure.

## 2.5. Background to the Evidence-Based Qualitative Evaluation of the Choose Life Project

This research is part of a comprehensive inter-related three-fold project which comprises the following:

- 1) An evaluation of the impact of a CLP event on *university student's* personal, academic and professional understanding of substance use (led by Dr Karen Corteen, Dr Amy Hughes-Stanley and Georgia Marriott-Smith)
- 2) An evaluation of the impact of being part of the CLP on *volunteers* (led by Dr Michelle Jolley and Dr Sarah Nixon)
- 3) An evaluation of the impact of a CLP event on *pupils in secondary schools* (led by Dr Cassie Ogden)

The researchers have collaborated to independently evaluate the impact of the CLP on university students, school pupils and CLP volunteers. This is with the intention of using this evidence-based research to build on good practice within CLP and to identify where improvements can be made. This evaluation also has the potential to inform evidence-based policy and contribute to practice change beyond the CLP.

The schools' evaluation project aimed to capture the impact of the CLP across three schools in the North Wales and North West England regions in terms of pupils' understanding of substance use, the potential factors contributing to addiction and the desistance journey. School pupils between the ages of 12-14 years located in rural, semi-rural and urban areas were included in the study and asked to complete an open-question, qualitative survey designed to capture their views and feelings on substance use and users.

## 2.6 School Evaluation Aims and Methods

### 2.6.1 Summary of the Research

192 pupils across three schools in the North West of England and North Wales regions representing communities from rural, semi-rural and urban areas of the UK, participated in the school evaluation project within the Spring/Summer terms of 2022. Gatekeepers from each participating school were approached before the CLP event and sent an information sheet about the project and a gatekeeper consent form (see appendix 1). On the day each pupil was given a covering letter (appendix 2) and a participant information sheet (appendix 3) before they completed the open question survey (appendix 4) that also requested their consent before completion. Both participant information sheets and surveys were distributed once the CLP event had finished.

All pupils were reminded that details written on the survey would remain confidential and surveys were completed entirely anonymously. The participating schools allowed for time within the hall/class that the CLP workshops were delivered for the surveys to be completed. This resulted in a very high return rate. Nevertheless perhaps due to different motivations/abilities throughout the different classes, many surveys were completed with

scant detail which somewhat impacted upon the data. Nevertheless the vast majority of participants were able to express, at a minimum, a few lines about their views on substance use and the CLP event itself and most attempted each question.

### **2.6.2 Ethics and Ethical Approval**

The Liverpool John Moores (LJMU) Research Ethics Application Form was completed and submitted to the University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) in February 2022 and gained LJMU Research Governance Approval on 4th March 2022. The UREC Reference is: 22/HSS/002.

### **2.6.3 Key Aims of the Research**

The research entailed five key aims:

1. To evaluate the impact of the Choose Life Project event on pupil attendees' attitudes towards people who use substances and substance dependency.
2. To evaluate the impact of a Choose Life Project event on pupil attendees' understanding of the wider social factors contributing to substance use and people who use substances.
3. To build on good practice within the Choose Life Project and to identify areas of improvement.
4. To provide key findings and future recommendations in relation to education aimed at raising an awareness and understanding of drugs, alcohol, addiction, and recovery and desistance.
5. To disseminate the findings and recommendations and to track and record impact.

## **2.7 Thematic Analysis of Data and Case Studies**

The following section provides the research aims, main findings, case studies and key recommendations as a result of a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) of 192 open-ended surveys completed by participants. The findings are rooted in and supported by the student participants' voices.

**2.7.1 Research aim 1 findings:** To evaluate the impact of the Choose Life Project event on pupil participants' attitudes towards people who use substances and substance dependency.





### *Tainted characters*

Many participants before the CLP discussed people who use substances as 'othered' beings that were selfish and degenerate in nature. *'I thought the people were all really bad and horrible people'* (participant 66), *'I thought they were wasters'* (participant 22), *'I thought they were idiotic and stupid'* (participant 51) *'they are bad people who choose to do drugs'* (participant 122). Moreover, some participants felt very negatively towards the substance use they took part in *'it is bad, gross, not healthy for you or anyone else'* (participant 17) *'it's very wrong to abuse substances in that way'* (participant 51), and held judgemental views towards people who used substances, *'Drugs are bad for you, you should not take them because it makes you a bad example to other people'* (participant 54).

The perception of the selfishness of people who use substances was also reflected in a number of participants' comments highlighting their belief that people who use substances consistently chased hedonistic pleasure. *'I thought people used drugs for fun'* (participant 21), *'I thought that people did drugs for fun with their mates and in parties'* (participant 120 and participant 113), *'I thought that substance misuse was taking drugs because it made them feel good and that they took it because they wanted to'* (participant 35), *'They don't care about their lives and future and instead prefer to spend all of their earnings on drugs/alcohol'* (participant 61).

Overall, a large proportion of the participants displayed a lack of awareness of the complexities of substance use and the people who use substances before they attended the CLP event. Goffman explains in his seminal text *Stigma* (1963) how the stigmatisation of others occurs when an attribute is identified that can be discrediting to the individual. The process of stigmatisation involves a process of dehumanisation and an eventual discrediting of a persons' identity as the individual becomes defined entirely by their derided attribute. This process is more likely to occur in a society which prioritises individuality over the importance of collectively and community and utilises soundbites over deeper explanations when discussing important issues. The responses of the pupils here are a product of their wider environment just as their ideas about substance users is a product of theirs.

### *Some thing/one to fear*

Within the responses was a clear indication that pupils believed drugs and alcohol were very dangerous which may have reflected some of their previous drug education within their primary schools. *'It's not good for you, it's very dangerous and addictive'* (participant 38), *'Drugs and alcohol can have major implications on your mental and physical health'* (participant 122). The clear common answer reflected in the word cloud is 'addicted' and this word is used in a negative way prior to the event, and addiction becomes something to be feared itself. This reflects a sort of inevitability around substance use and the development into addiction. This links to the ideas of people who use substances making 'bad choices' in the first instance that ultimately leads to addiction in their lives. Although some level of understanding of the addiction and chemical processes underlies these ideas, there is still a

general lack of acknowledgement of how environmental/cultural factors have a part to play in the stories of people with substance dependency.

Previous drug education policy might regard the fear of both legal and illegal substances as a positive outcome (Mold, 2021), however if a wider understanding of the causes of addiction are not recognised (e.g. vulnerabilities apparent in people's lives that make them more susceptible) early warning signs will not be noticed leaving young people more at risk. Conversely, the users of substances themselves are regarded as dangerous as the substances they are dependent upon and due to this, participants expressed a fear towards these people. *'They are dangerous'* (participant 10), *'They are angry, not well educated, homeless and criminals'* (participant 17). The connection between criminality and addiction in this instance is built on the essentialisation of the morally devoid character who continuously makes the wrong decisions as opposed to being linked to the complex cycle of desperation, physical decline and chemical dependency within a culture (particularly with illegal substance use) that can be corrupt, exploitative and dangerous.

### *Someone to blame*

The 'individual blame' of the person dependent on substances is clear in the previous themes however the frequency of blame geared towards them was pronounced and warrants a category in itself. Participant 144 represents the viewpoint held by some that if the individual wanted to, they could quite simply decide to stop; *'Even if you do drugs you can still get rid of them out of your life'*. This continues; *'they might depend on drugs to get through pain, but it's always their own choice'* (participant 121) *'they could easily recover from substance abuse'* (participant 67) *'I previously thought people had more power in their decisions'* (participant 142) *'they don't care about their lives and future and instead prefer to spend all of their earnings on drugs/alcohol'* (participant 61).

The CLP helps challenge the idea of addiction being simply the fault of the individual who becomes substance dependent. If society believes that drug and alcohol addiction is a negative and dangerous thing to have in our communities then we need to work together to help support those already addicted towards desistance, as well as working on a society that better prevents addiction in the first instance.

### *A product of their circumstance*

The final theme of this finding highlights the viewpoint of a minority of young people before participating in the CLP event but reflects some participants' recognition that understanding addiction requires thinking beyond the individual perspective. Participants recognised drugs can be used as a coping mechanism to overcome difficulty in their lives *'I believed it [substance abuse] happened when someone's life isn't as good as they wanted it to be so they used drugs to feel something'* (participant 76) *'I think that people have trauma from their childhood so will become addicts'* (participant 19), *'I thought people who had a bad upbringing or family issues [would get addicted]'* (participant 120). These responses are a more positive and

accurate reflection of the backgrounds and experiences of some people dependent on substances. Other participants said a little more in relation to the impact of their environment *'I thought that [people] misuse substances because of depression, sickness, loneliness or trauma* (participant 68) and even broke the individualised understanding of addiction by recognising the need for outside support *'I thought the people would be in a bad place and need someone's support'* (participant 36).

This reported theme in the attitudes towards substance use and its users is an important one and one that the CLP events can build on and encourage throughout their time at the schools. It is important to note that different audience members will have a more multifaceted understanding of addiction, however it is also important to explain that not all people with childhood trauma, mental health issues, with difficult lives etc. will turn to substances and likewise not all people who use substances have this background.

The attitudes towards substance use and their users after the CLP event reflected a wider understanding of the social and environmental issues that might contribute to them becoming substance dependent. The realisation of the full stories and circumstances of the volunteers' stories clearly helped establish a fuller appreciation of the various factors that might lead to addiction and more fully establish people who use substances as people in their own right as opposed to merely 'addicts'. Goffman (1963) explains the reality of people's lives are never represented through stigmatising processes and this research shows how the volunteers' stories succeeded in revealing their *actual social identity* which involves a process of understanding further the details of their biographies, the experiences of their life events and creating an empathetic connection with these accounts.

There were three main ways in which participants expressed their thoughts on substance use and users:

- a) *the reality of addiction,*
- b) *empathetic reasoning,*
- c) *wider social awareness.*

### *The reality of addiction*

Addiction is a term that appears frequently in the list of adjectives used to describe substance use and users by participants both before and after the event. The difference in the use of word 'addiction' is however apparent when looking at pupils' ideas about addiction *after* the CLP event. First there was the improved understanding of how addiction works as a chemical process. The CLP event explains this and how due to the chemical need developed by people who use substances drives that need for more drugs/alcohol. *'I now understand how addiction effects the brain and how falling into misuse is pretty easy* (participant 160). Although some might over-simplify the process of addiction, the discussion about it appears to change from addiction being a personal problem, to something that comes from that chemical dependency

*'My thoughts are it [alcohol/drugs] is extremely addictive and everyone could easily become addicts'* (participant 19) and that with the right help addiction can be prevented/managed *'[Substances are] addictive and dangerous, but if you can get help for it, the addiction goes down'* (participant 20). Addiction no longer becomes the substance user's goal/purpose but instead a consequence of substance use *'I know now that people don't do it to get addicted'* (participant 66), *'There's a story behind why people need to consistently take drugs and that it's an addiction that's hard to tackle'* (participant 45) which demonstrates a more informed and empathetic understanding of the substance user's experiences.

Alongside the more informed discussion of addiction, away from the demonization of addiction as a life choice, there was a further expression of the exploitative nature of the illegal substance market; *'People use young people to do their dirty work. They manipulate teens'* (participant 72), *'I realised how easy it was to become addicted and how easy dealers can persuade you to take them'* (participant 41) *'I've learnt that the business market for misuse is a dirty and horrible trade'* (participant 61). Such statements further highlight the ways that the CLP event helps pupils better understand the complex and nuanced set of circumstances that can lead to substance addiction and how vulnerabilities are exploited. To relate this back to the work of Goffman and structure, the pupils who took part in the CLP event started to move away from assumptions about people who use substances' personalities as moralistically flawed, to humanising personal attributes as a result of recognising the structural influences (e.g. the drug trade) and objective processes (chemical reactions to substance).

#### *Wider social awareness*

Some pupils cited specific social factors that they felt contributed to substance dependency; *'They might have a bad upbringing or friends that do drugs'* (participant 44), *'People fall into addiction because of things that happen in their life and they use it as a coping mechanism'* (participant 121), *'They're people who just get that caught up in their lives by things such as being abused, and they feel as if they need to use drugs to stay happy'* (participant 76), *'[They] could be stressed, sad, could have family problems or anything else'* (participant 1). The overall recognition of the social factors leading to addiction is summed up in the following quote; *'People just get lost; mistreated and get dragged into substance misuse'* (participant 176). Common to these quotations are phrases such as 'falling into' getting 'caught up', getting 'lost' or 'dragged in to' substance use, which suggests that outside factors are leading to substance dependency, in contrast to language utilised commonly to describe people who use substances prior to the CLP event which tended to focus on 'choices' and 'not caring'.

The sense of inevitability with regards to people's background/family lives 'leading' to substance use can sometimes border on stigmatisation if not framed a particular way. *'They get roped into it because of the environment around them that it starts off as a way for them to fit in or just it's what they've always known'* (participant 137). Although the intention of this statement might be to shift the causal factor away from the individual conscience to social background, the effect can be the stigmatisation of culture/lifestyle and the framing of the

debate in terms of 'problems of the underclass'. These proposed by thinkers such as Charles Murray, (1990) define the underclasses by high rates of welfare dependency, unemployment and poverty and blame and deride this constructed group for high rates of single parent families, antisocial behaviours and criminality. Highlighting social background as an explanation for substance dependency therefore is not always progressive but can be equally as damning as blame is placed on a whole perceived community as opposed to individuals within it. Extending this observation to recognise that a) such a straight forward causal explanation is inaccurate and b) situations impacted by environment and poverty are just as much the responsibility of government and politicians as they are individuals or communities is an important step in understanding substance use more fully.

Some of the participants expressed a clear understanding of the complex social factors in the lives of people who use substances. First by making explicit the need for support in their lives; *'They just needed support and help to stop using and it's way harder than it sounds'* (participant 4), *'It's hard to stop and they need help'* (participant 44), *'What matters is to educate ourselves in how to give the proper support when trying to recover'* (participant 142). Such comments locate responsibility of desistance and recovery firmly outside the culture of the person who uses substances. Second by expressing more fully the complexity of various factors in leading to the volunteers' substance dependencies; *'I think my perspective has really been altered after this session. It has made me realise substance abuse has lots of layers to it and the costs that come along with it can be more damaging than the actual substance'* (participant 142).

In Tyler and Slater's article on 'Rethinking Stigma' as well as recognising the importance of understanding the negative consequences of stigmatisation on individuals and communities, they advocate for the reconceptualising of stigma to allow for a better understanding 'of pressing contemporary problems of social decomposition, inequality and injustice' (2018, p.721) . This theme within the young people's responses demonstrates how the school CLP event has contributed to an understanding of drug and alcohol dependency as an issue influenced by wider environmental, social and cultural factors that impact upon groups of people inequitably.

### *Empathetic reasoning*

Demetriou and Nicholl (2022) state that empathy manifests both in the emotional form (where we are able to live the other person's experiences) and in the cognitive (where we can appreciate another person's experience but don't become emotionally involved). Having gained empathy a person has a greater capacity to fully understand and appreciate a particular experience/situation. The responses from pupils to the CLP event demonstrates how initial emotional connections to volunteers' stories can generate empathy and allow for a connection to people who might have very different lives to themselves. When outlining their perceptions of substance use/users after the CLP event, pupils expressed a range of different emotional reactions *'I felt sad'* (participant 8) *'Most of them have an extremely sad story I don't think they're as bad as I thought'* (participant 70), *'I think they are misunderstood*

*and probably have a sad backstory'* (participant 50). At times participants felt conflicted but still evidently emotionally connected; *'My thoughts about people who misuse substances after the event are the same (lonely/criminals) but I feel depressed and angry at the same time'* (participant 17).

The importance of feeling something about the volunteers' stories (usually sadness/upset but also anger) generally allowed for a greater empathy towards substance dependency and desistance. *'People just get lost; mistreated and get dragged into substance misuse'* (participant 176), *'I understand how they can get addicted and why they want to sell drugs'* (participant 120). In order for the pupils in this study to start to understand the volunteers' experiences better however, there had to be a challenge to some of their prior ideas of the person using substances as being inherently bad and evil, and the realisation that these same people can be nice, personable and likeable people seemed to enable a greater understanding of addiction; *'I think they can still be very nice people and not as horrible as people make out'* (participant 66), *'Can be nice most have just made bad decisions'* (participant 27), *'they are not all bad. They have thoughts and understand what they did'* (participant 30). The challenge faced and epitomised in this last quotation is that participants of the CLP event could leave having understood and humanised the volunteer's narratives but might still hold stereotyped ideas about strangers' stories around addiction and desistance. The volunteers may be seen as the exceptions and that other people who use substances are 'bad'. This can be addressed via a debriefing session at the end of the CLP event which can contextualise the volunteers' stories in light of the wider discussions about addiction and people who use substances. The CLP event creates a 'critical interpersonal and societal role enabling sharing of experiences...between individuals and provid[ing] an emotional bridge' (Riess, 2017, p. 74) and as a result of spending time with people recovering from substance use, young people establish an empathetic understanding of their situations.

Overall the CLP event has allowed school pupils to improve their understanding of substance use and consider the multiple factors leading people to rely on substances. Empathetic reasoning is highlighted as one of the key outcomes which derives from the volunteers' stories and enables a multifaceted understanding of the complexities of substance dependency. The stigmatisation of the substance user appears to decline following the CLP event as participants were able to humanise people who use substances as opposed to making their substance use their only defining characteristic.

**2.7.2. Research Aim 2 Findings:** To evaluate the impact of a Choose Life Project event on pupils attendees' understanding of the wider social factors contributing to substance dependency and people who use substances.

To address this aim participants were asked to discuss their views regarding media representations of substance use and users and asked to consider the role of society in addressing addiction and desistance. The findings are discussed below.

### 2.7.2.1 Themes surrounding social factors related to addiction

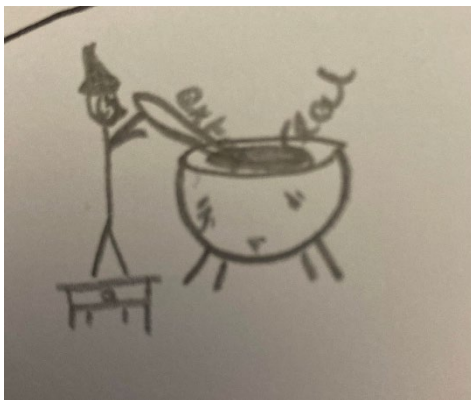
Once school pupils had attended the CLP event it was clear that they were more likely to recognise the ways that social institutions played a part in contributing to the real life experiences of substance dependency and could help contribute to successful narratives of desistance. This first section explores the three ways in which the school pupils' understood the responsibility of media in portraying the 'realities' of addiction as they critiqued many representations as:

- a) sensationalising the lives of substance users
- b) stigmatising their characters and lives
- c) over-simplifying the complex issue of addiction

#### *Sensationalist representations of substance use/rs*

One creative participant (63) was able to express their understanding of the media process when discussing substance use and their users via a visual diagram.

*Figure 1: Participant 63's drawing*



The drawing shows a person stirring potion in a cauldron. The text reads 'extra' going into the pot and 'real' coming out of it. The image accompanied the following quote; *'I think what they [the media] do is, what I call 's\*\*t stir'. So they take a real story and add their own little parts to make it sound worse than it actually is'* (participant 63).

Another participant states; *'They usually tell one-sided stories because it makes them more money and there are no feelings in them'* (participant 4). This theme demonstrates an understanding by participants of the intentions and priorities of media when reporting about or representing substance use. Within this theme participants don't recognise any moral or ethical incentive within the industry and instead emphasise the drive to make a story 'good' ('extra') so that it is watched by many.

Another participant shows how they believe that further careful research is needed if media representations are to improve; *'I feel they only tell one-sided stories because it never tells you what the actual person is thinking or why they were doing it sometimes people can be very, very nosey and need to do research before putting it everywhere'* (participant 65). Mistruths/misrepresentations are also cited by some participants; *'They say people become drug addicts, always become addicts because of peer pressure'* (participant 64).

The inaccuracy of portrayals of substance use and people who use substances within the media was a common trend in the responses of the pupils. It would be useful to learn more about which forms of media participants felt were particularly open to this practice as most responses just referred to 'media' in the general sense.

### *Stigmatisation of the substance user*

Related closely to the above theme, participants wrote a lot about the ways in which media stigmatise people who use substances regularly in their portrayals/reports. *'I think the media is quick to shame people with substance misuse. They are very much deemed rough which is not always the case. The people suffering have a backstory and a reason to their coping mechanisms and shouldn't be judged for it. The media fails to mention the suffering they go through'* (participant 161), *'I think the media and such say that people with addiction problems always have a choice and that they're bad people that cause trouble'* (participant 42), *'they can make it seem like the people that are addicted sound really horrible'* (participant 27). It is clear from these responses that pupils can identify the processes of stigmatisation taking place within some media channels and the CLP event could have enabled the identification of these discrediting processes by giving access to first hand experiences of substance dependency. Participant 28's quote conveys their emotional response to the CLP event and how this contrasts to media coverage *'I feel that they make it less sad than it actually is'*. Which implicitly alludes to the lack of substance user voice within the media which could help contribute to inaccurate and unfair portrayals.

Another participant also alludes to the unfair and inaccurate reporting on addiction; *'I believe most of the media only tell one-sided stories they portray an addict as an entirely bad person. The media does not understand that an addict most of the time wants to change and that is something the media can't understand and the media always only reports bad news'* (participant 23). Here the suggestion that only bad news is news worth reporting, further also suggests that the complexity of stories about desistance are not of interest to the media.

In trying to further explain the reason behind this stigmatisation of addiction participant 52 explained *'I think it's so people that are addicted to drugs and alcohol [can] stop and so if they post it will also get people to not become drug addicts and alcohol addicts'* (participant 52). In contrast to other opinions on the media, participant 52 suggests there may be some moral reasoning behind painting a particular image of substance use and people who use substances. The reality of the volunteers' stories about their substance dependence is obviously dark, sad and troubling at times but when entering desistance their lives can be turned around with the right help and support. The stigmatisation of people who use substances does not help anyone's road to recovery and the acknowledgement of the negative impact of media stigmatisation of people who use substances shows the ways that the young people's understanding and empathy towards vulnerable others gained partly through the CLP event, could help build a more caring and supportive society.



### *Over simplification and forced autonomy of the substance user*

The final theme when discussing media's discussion of substance dependency outlines the ways in which participants feel media individualise the plight of the person using substances and downplay the outside social factors that have helped contribute to substance dependency; *'No I don't think it's fair (portrayal) without the person/victim's life they are seen as plain idiots as it is portrayed, when it's usually trauma/depression'* (participant 68), *'they fail to mention the fact of childhood trauma and exploitation and manipulation'* (participant 6). Participants also felt there is a lack of discussion of the support that could be put in place to help people who use substances towards desistance; *'they don't show that people can't help their addiction without help. They make it out that all people that have a relationship with drugs are bad, and that they're always gonna be bad'* (participant 72), *'they talk about the drug addicts as bad people when not all are. They also don't say how much it's hard to stop it'* (participant 45). The help sought by the volunteers in the project and the difference this made, clearly helped pupils understand the importance of that help and if the media also conveyed these messages then more people may support the need for structured help to support those dependent on substances.

The last quote of this section accurately conveys the participant's frustration in relation to the media reproducing false assumptions about people who use substances and constructing them as 'othered' from the rest of society; *'[media] describes them [people who use substances] like they are f\*\*k all to do with us but it's not their fault or their choice; it's an addictive substance'* (participant 71).

### **2.7.2.2 Themes outlining support needed for users of substances**

Participants of the CLP event agreed in the main that society and people should help create an environment where substance use is not as big a problem and one which helps those whom already are substance dependent. Voices of pupils who still believed that substance use is an individual problem and therefore people shouldn't receive further support were evident, but were in a minority across all three schools involved in the project. These individuals occupied the position that people who use substances were still 'bad people' and therefore were undeserving of help; *'It's the person's problem and not the good people's problem'* (participant 54), *'obviously they [the person using substances] can do more. They always could have just chosen not to'*. (participant 63). The vast majority of participants did not agree with this position and felt changes were needed in society to help support people who use substances and to help prevent substance dependency. Their responses are grouped into the following three themes below:

- a) *punitive support,*
- b) *therapeutic support,*
- c) *wider structural/societal support*

### *Punitive support*

Participants were creative when it came to thinking about the various ways in which in particular substances could be kept off the streets. Their responses demonstrated a real understanding of the ways the illegal substance market (and alcohol) has a detrimental impact upon people who get caught up within it, but also reflected a naivety in relation to the difficulty of infiltrating this culture. *'People should have licences for specific substances and should be helped more than they are'* (participant 68), *'Yes burn everything that produces drugs'* (participant 32), *'The society could try put limits to the alcohol to shops so people can't keep on drinking and try to stop illegal drugs getting sold'* (participant 67). It was however pleasing to see young people firstly understanding substance use as a wider social issues and second considering the power of policy change in addressing this problem.

Other participants felt that the police could offer further support in terms of the surveillance and arresting of drug dealers in particular; *'I think there should be more cops preventing substance misuse'* (participant 4), *'I think society could do more by arresting more drug dealers and be more patient with them'* (participant 180). The interesting shift in this last quotation is in the criminalisation of the people on top of the illegal drugs trade hierarchy as opposed to the people who use substances themselves. This seems to be an obvious impact of the CLP event which explicitly outlined the nature of the illegal drugs trade through the role play section.

### *Therapeutic support*

There was much discussion amongst participants of the need for further therapeutic support for people who use substances both in the professional and more informal capacities. *'I think they should get some sort of therapist to help them'* (participant 50), *'they should get counselling to talk to others'* (participant 35), *'Yes get therapists to help them'* (participant 25), *'they could find help online or go to doctor'* (participant 44). Participant 137 further demonstrated the therapeutic benefits of talking to others in similar situations; *'I definitely think rehab should remain and improve for recovering addicts as well as community groups like AA as I think having a good support system is what they need'* (participant 137) with similar sentiments reflected in the following; *'they could do more like classes to talk and discuss their problems to help each other'* (participant 35) *'yes they should help and can have a club for stopping addiction like coffee, drugs, smoking and drinking'* (participant 13).

As well as professional support participants also suggested that friends, family and the local community could also offer support; *'your family could help you stop and sometimes even your neighbour because your family doesn't like to see people high and drunk'* (participant 52), *'they could have a chat with family members and the family members could try to talk them out of it or other people'* (participant 67). This theme reflects the participants' observation of sadness, loneliness and isolation in the volunteer's stories as the pupils in their responses have thought about how society can resolve the situations people who use substances are in, by building connections both with other people in their communities and lives and also connections to their feelings and issues by speaking to professionals. Prior to the event many

participants discussed the negative (physical) health impact of substances on their users. After the event the focus on this theme centres on the mental well-being of people who use substances and the need to gain support for this aspect of their lives. This further underlies a deeper understanding of what leads to substance use and the wider implications of substance use following the CLP event.

#### *Wider structural/societal support*

This is the most popular theme from participants when asked whether people who use substances should get support. Many responses in this category referred to societal support more generally and did not always specify what this might look like; *“my opinion is that society should help more. They should be supported to help recover. People should keep them busy”* (participant 19), *‘trauma or rough childhood can be a cause but society can help more’* (participant 16), *‘I think society can do more to support these poor unfortunate people and put more effort into helping them’* (participant 28), *‘society can do more to help prevent substance misuse also to help people out of substance misuse’* (participant 6).

As well as highlighting the need for unspecified support from society, many participants further noted the need to stop punishing/judging people who use substances for their pasts; *‘because they might have just made one mistake that can change and ruin their lives’* (participant 39), *‘they should be helped and supported even if they relapse’* (participant 23), *‘I think they should support them, to listen more instead of judging them’* (participant 180). An understanding of both the body’s dependency on substances and the set of complex social and cultural factors that exist in the lives of those with substance dependency are required to arrive at these standpoints.

Some participants were more specific in relation to how society may help the issue of substance use. One participant feels education is the answer, *‘I believe drug dealers should be educated and users should be given support’* (participant 6), whilst another feels social media could be utilised to good effect, *‘Society can do more to help (e.g. show it across social media)’* (participant 24), the reduction of poverty was also cited across a number of participants’ responses; *‘[society needs] to try and prevent poverty; help people to not want to buy drugs and alcohol’* (participant 120), *‘[we need to] stop poverty/house the poor instead of [what] the Tories [are doing]’* (participant 113).

Some participants felt that wider help was needed but individual agency of the substance user was further required for the support to work; *‘we should help if they are willing to and put the effort in but there is no point helping them for them to relapse’* (participant 120), *‘I feel [people who use substances should be asked] to help them recover but if they say no then it’s their problem’* (participant 65) *‘If they regret their decision and want to get better then you should help’* (participant 24). There is some evidence of moral judgement behind some of these quotations but nevertheless if the focus is on change and support, then these standpoints can lead to positive and effective change in the way society views substance use and supports recovery.

The following final quotations sum up the ideas and perspectives held by participants in terms of their views of the role of society in resolving problems related to substance use:

*'Instead of hating them and punishing them we should get them in the community where they can have a normal life'* (participant 149), *'Society should do more than turn a blind eye to the reality that they don't want to see. Instead they should try and help'* (participant 23).

Overall the pupils in this study demonstrated much maturity and wisdom in their reflections on what could be done to help the problem of substance dependency following participation in the CLP event. Some of their responses could rival those posed by current policy makers and change agents which is testament to the candid sharing of experiences by the volunteers.

**2.7.3. Research aim 3 findings:** To build on good practice within the Choose Life Project and to identify areas of improvement.

To address this aim participants were asked to outline their favourite and worse parts of the event and were given the opportunity to suggest how the event may be improved. The corresponding findings (6 and 7) are further discussed below.

The enthusiasm and engagement of participants with the volunteers' stories was clear and the impact the stories had on them emotionally and cognitively is testament to the volunteers' candid, heartfelt and open discussions of their experiences. Participants appreciated volunteers' honesty and spoke with affection and care about individual stories they heard: *'I liked Steve's<sup>4</sup> story, it was interesting it shows that life is hard sometimes'* (participant 16), *'I liked how honest everyone [the volunteers] was'* (participant 68), *'I liked it when they were telling their stories because it made me think about how other people suffer and how in the future should I help people like them'* (participant 35). The connections to the volunteers' stories were so strong that many participants left the volunteers comments at the back of their survey; *'I really appreciated this session and I'm really grateful to the people that helped me understand'* (participant 28), *'I feel really sorry for Steve'. He didn't deserve to be messed with on the streets* (participant 51), *'Joseph's the best!'* (participant 107), *'I hope the addict in your brain stops and you get to see your kids and your family'* (participant 52), *'Good luck at staying sober'* (participant 62), *'Thank you for spreading awareness and I'm sorry that happened to you Steve'* (participant 65), *'Stay well'* (participant 69).

Participants also appreciated the opportunity to ask questions to the volunteers and liked the more interactive elements of the event; *'I enjoyed asking questions'* (participant 66), *'I liked being able to ask questions'* (participant 23) *'listening to their stories and asking questions'* (participant 17). Many participants also enjoyed the role play element which demonstrates that story sharing from an authentic space was a good learning tool for the school pupils.

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<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms are used in place of the real names of volunteers

Participants didn't really embellish on what it was they liked about the role play but simply stated it as their favourite part of the event.

Although the vast majority of the participants did not highlight anything negative about the event, a minority of participants demonstrated confusion about the role play; *'I thought the role play was good, but wasn't fully sure what was going on'* (participant 150), *'I got a bit confused with the role playing. Did the guy that was acting as a drug dealer actually go to prison?'* (participant 172), *'there should be a prisoner from a real prison in the event'* (participant 110). The last point demonstrates confusion as one of the volunteers from participant 110's event had been in prison, so although the role play component was fictional, the pupil didn't seem to understand that the volunteers' stories (which involved discussion of being in prison) were real.

Others struggled with the length of the event and wondered if some of the sections that utilised more traditional pedagogical practice (e.g. the Powerpoint presentations) could incorporate more interactive elements within them. *'Maybe show more videos to make it more interesting. Like what and how it effects the human body etc.'* (participant 144), *'I got a little bored so maybe not as much talking and more fun stories and more activities to do'* (participant 17), *'we were sat down for 2 hours straight so maybe we could do something more practical'* (participant 147). This finding further demonstrates that the use of story-telling worked well (although the role playing component could benefit from further explanation) and any significant constructive feedback focused on the delivery of some of the more traditional delivery of information regarding addiction.

Recognising the diversity of the audience when visiting pupils in secondary school could help improve the overall experience for those pupils who might struggle with traditional forms of teaching. Utilising some of the methods adopted in the more experiential elements of the event to re-think some sections of the PowerPoint material could further improve engagement of the audience. Furthermore wider utilisation of break times (in line with school policies) would seem to benefit some of the young people; *'The people talked for a bit too long, I felt guilty saying that but at some point I found it was less inspiring. There was no break'* (participant 111), *'I enjoyed all of it. Maybe we could've not sat in one chair for so long (have breaks) or maybe a smaller group'* (participant 156).

**2.7.4. Research aim 4 findings:** To provide key findings and future recommendations in relation to education aimed at raising an awareness and understanding of drugs, alcohol, addiction, and recovery and desistance.

**2.7.4.1. Main take home messages from CLP:** This aim has been addressed and further punctuated in the findings and recommendations below. The CLP schools event allows young people the opportunity to understand more fully the complex nature of addiction and the

factors that might contribute to people using substances. These four themes illustrate the main messages that pupils gained from attending the event:

- a) self reflection
- b) the tragedy of drug use
- c) the re-humanisation of people who use substances
- d) the social responsibility required to tackle addiction

### *Self reflection*

Following the CLP event many pupils considered how the event's messages might influence their own engagement with substances; *'[I learnt] that I should always think before I do something'* (participant 15), *'[I learnt] that no matter what, I should never do drugs, alcohol or anything like that'* (participant 17), *'to never start and do drugs because once it starts there is no way back'* (participant 191).

This important theme demonstrates that listening to honest accounts of addiction and desistance can help young people make informed decisions about any potential future experimentation with substances and realise that often there are real and difficult consequences of substance use. It is important to emphasise that scare-tactics are completely avoided in the CLP events and audience members are respected as curious young people that deserve the right to learn the truth about addiction and substance use. By showing respect to young people in the learning environment especially when dealing with pressing issues that may impact them within their lives, has proven to have a positive learning impact.

### *The tragedy of drug use*

Related to the above, in terms of highlighting some of the reasons to avoid substance use, many pupils discussed how they had learnt how tragic and chaotic the lives of people who use substances often are. *'Drugs end your relationship with everything and everyone'* (participant 5), *'substance misuse is life changing and [gives a] horrible life ahead'* (participant 26), *'drugs can absolutely ruin your life'* (participant 31), *'[drugs] can really let you get up just to knock you down again 10 x harder'* (participant 142). It is noticeable in these responses that the young people are talking about the problems of addiction and drugs in particular with the absence of explicit blame on the individual using drugs. The focus instead is on the tragic consequences of drugs and the impact it can have on people's lives.

### *The re-humanising of people who use substances*

Following the trend to recognise the wider, complex set of factors often leading to substance dependency following the CLP event, the key learning points for the vast majority of pupils centred around how anyone can be impacted by substance use and become substance dependent; *'It's not just the people that [are] homeless that do drugs'* (participant 13), *'anyone can be addicts no matter how much they say they will stop. Everyone's story is different'* (participant 19), *'addictive substances are bad but some people who use them aren't'* (participant 148).

There is also a return and challenge to their prior-held assumptions about people who use substances and a realisation that people who use substances are people first; *'All former drug users aren't dangerous or rough'* (participant 16) *'people who substance misuse are not necessarily bad, just misunderstood'* (participant 50), *'it's not always the addict's fault and they are usually vulnerable people'* (participant 137), *'[they are] people [who] just often just wanna feel better'* (participant 68), *'that addictive substances are bad but some people who use them aren't'* (participant 148).

Part of the re-humanising and de-stigmatisation of people who use substances occurs due to the recognition that the choices people make are made under difficult circumstances; *'they didn't choose for this to affect them as much as it did'* (participant 23), *'life can force you to go on drugs sometimes'* (participant 25). And once substance use begins participants were able to understand how addiction takes its hold; *'the addicts try to stop but it's super hard for them because it develops in your brain'* (participant 52), *'substance misuse is not a choice'* (participant 166). Throughout this theme the young people also emphasised the need to stop judging people who use substances which is an important component of de-stigmatisation; *'Substance misusers are misunderstood'* (participant 43), *'don't judge people you don't know'* (participant 181), *'Don't judge them, yes they do/did do drugs but you have no idea why'* (participant 173).

#### *The social responsibility required to address substance use*

Through the recognition that recovery/desistance is possible in the lives of the volunteers, pupils learnt that society could do a lot more to help those who are substance dependent and in preventing the substance use in the first instance. The stories once again made a clear impact on the pupils who could see that the life of crime that sometimes accompanies the lives could be prevented; *'there should be more charities to help once people get out of jail.'* (participant 4), *'people who are addicts should not be left in the dark. Someone needs to give them a hand'* (participant 23), *'substance users should be supported because everyone deserves a second chance'* (participant 8).

The analysis of the themes in the data collected from the three schools in this evaluation demonstrates the clear impact and efficacy of the CLP schools event in educating young people about the realities of substance dependency. Due to the success of this project and the benefits that many pupils from participating schools have gained from this, we hope that recommendations are followed by key change agents as we strongly believe that the CLP school events could form part of the solution to addressing drug and alcohol addiction so prevalent in current UK society.

### **2.7.5 Three participant case studies**

This section presents three participant case studies to capture the ways pupils responded to and learnt from taking part in a CLP event in their school. They encapsulate the different reactions and degrees of understanding about addiction young people developed. The first

case study represents a minority perspective of those surveyed but one that needs to be considered, the second symbolises a less rare response to the CLP and the final case study is reflective of the most common expressions and understandings about addiction following the event. All three case studies offer important insights into the efficacy of the CLP.

### **Mason: Preconceptions remain embedded**

Most young people who attend the school CLP come with a set of prior assumptions about addiction and the people who use substances. Mason was no exception, however for this participant (and others like him) the CLP evaluation demonstrated little change to their preconceptions after the event. Although Mason represents a minority viewpoint, his voice is important when considering the ways that the CLP can help reach out and educate all young people about addiction and the people impacted by it.

Mason recognised the danger of drugs before the CLP *'Drugs are bad and you should not take them because it makes you a bad example to other people.'* In discussing his thoughts on the people who take substances he further added *'The people are very stupid and they think about it.'* Mason's understanding of drugs as harmful goes beyond the physical consequences of addiction and into moral arguments involving the people who use substances. Mason's reasoning appears to follow the argument that people who take drugs have the option to make the *right choice* and by making the *wrong choice* to take drugs makes them, by default 'stupid' and implies that this makes them in some way morally degenerate (by becoming a 'bad example' to others).

After the CLP Mason's moral judgements about people who use substances are still apparent: *'they need to get a life and stop taking other people's stuff'* and *'I still think it's a very bad thing to do... you should not do drugs and other stuff.. It's not healthy and you are paying to kill yourself'*. Whilst the understanding of substance use being damaging is an important one, the nuances of the lives of people impacted by addiction are not important to this young person, as they are ultimately individuals who made bad decisions. He adds: *'No I don't think they should have help because they have been the idiot taking drugs...It is the person's problem and not the good people's problem'*. Such a position renders people impacted by addiction as undeserving of support despite evidence showing how reintegration into communities is integral to help aid positive identity change that can lead to addiction recovery (Best, Irving and Albertson, 2017).

The CLP event for Mason (and a minority of people whom he represents) serves to confirm, as opposed to challenge, his prior assumptions. Mason for example felt the volunteers' stories were good because *'you can see how stupid people are doing it'*. At the end of the survey he offers some advice to the volunteers: *'get GTA on Xbox or PlayStation so you don't have to do this stuff in real life'*. This final statement refers to a game (Grand Theft Auto (GTA)) that is well known to feature characters that buy, sell and produce drugs (from horticulture to laboratories) with the player having the option to use alcohol and some of these substances throughout the game. GTA further simulates getting drunk or high or blacking out as a



consequence of substance use. Therefore Mason alludes again to having little sympathy for people who choose to take substances instead of alternatives such as simulating substance use on various video games. Mason's case study demonstrates that the CLP informs young people about some of the dangers involved in substance use but nevertheless also shows how some young people might select aspects of volunteers' life stories (e.g. examples of their criminal past) to further consolidate individualised and negative stereotypes of people impacted by addiction.

Mason's case study is a helpful reminder that young people will enter the CLP with a wealth of different experiences with and exposures to addiction which might result in differing and sometimes emotional responses to the topics raised in the event. Offering a safe space to respectfully share some of the young people's concerns and ask volunteers questions, goes some way in addressing their preconceptions.

### **Gethin: an informed individualist**

Gethin shared some of the sentiments of Mason when asked to describe people who use substances and substance use before the event. He wrote the following: *hard, crack heads, addicted, money-wasting* which shows a bias and stereotypical assumptions about people who use substances. Gethin acknowledged that he had a better understanding of the issues involved in addiction after the event but still reasoned that ultimately the fault lies with individuals making bad decisions *'it's stupid, but I understand it gets addictive'*.

The volunteers who tell their stories within the school events are honest about mistakes they have made in their lives and how addiction has led them to make a series of bad decisions. Gethin concluded that such life choices made by people who use substances makes them unworthy of help. *'I get that it's addicting but if people know it's bad for you, why do they still use it? I am not really bothered about it if it was a stranger but if it was a close friend or family member I would try and help them because I know how addicting it can be.'* This quote demonstrates some understanding of the chemical reaction to drug use but does not fully extend to an understanding of the social and personal contexts that lead to using substances in the first instance. This results in Gethin's limited expression of empathy only towards family and others that might experience addiction but not to strangers.

Gethin feels that media communications such as newspapers and TV programmes can sometimes be quite biased which results in *'one sided stories because it never tells you what the actual person is thinking'* and that the media *'need to do research before showing it everywhere'*. This suggests an understanding of the difference between the reality of addiction and the representations that many media outlets convey.

In terms of considering the role of society in helping prevent/resolve addiction Gethin does not deviate from his prior held individualistic explanations. *'I personally believe that it's the person's business unless they want help or need help urgently. If they know the consequences*

*and don't want help then it's all their fault if they have health issues etc.'* Gethin expressed later in his survey how enlightening he found the volunteers' stories in the school event and there is a sense in this quotation that people with addictions should have help if they want it. However, ultimately the 'undeserving' narrative still reigns strong in his perspective and a tendency to under-estimate the need for wider support to aid the path to recovery as exemplified in the following quote '*Substance use won't always be as hard to quit if they try hard enough*' .

Desistance stories such as those shared by volunteers at CLP events are useful aids in improving addiction education and can help young people negotiate their increasing independence and discovery of the realities of the wider world. However, if not fully critically explored, stories of desistance can also create the impression that anyone can recover from addiction if they just try harder. Gethin's perspectives on recovery from addiction mirrors a neoliberal individualism which emphasises the responsibility of citizens to make *the right decisions* whilst overlooking the wider socio-cultural and structural forces that impact upon people's lives. Gethin's understanding of addiction has clearly developed through taking part in the CLP event but the influence of his preconceived assumptions that surround addiction are also evident. The recommendations to further emphasise the points in volunteers stories where they were able to *start* making better choices (and what connections allowed them to do this) could be one way of further encouraging critical thinking around key moments in volunteer's lives and their journey towards desistance. Most pupils are able to feel empathy for the volunteers who tell their stories but there is an assumption across some of the young people that the volunteers are exceptional people who have got themselves out of addiction whilst overlooking the support needed to help them do this.

### **Carly: a transformed empathetic understanding of addiction**

The CLP for Carly (and the majority of pupils who attended the events) changed her understanding of addiction and her perceptions of those that use substances. Prior to the event she expressed how damaging and wasteful substances were and used words to describe people who use substances as: *selfish, addicts and junkies* After the event Carly's words to describe substance misuse were; *an industry, harmful and an escape*; and the people who use substances as *alone, struggling and broken* which reflects a re-humanisation of the people suffering from addiction as well as a fuller understanding of the wider structure of drug selling, exploitation and its consequences.

In her survey it was clear that Carly was impacted by the CLP as she reflected on her views on addiction before and after the event; '*Before the session I didn't really look beyond the surface of things. I knew it [substance use] wrecks people's lives when they do it and it effects the people around them.*' And continued; '*Before the event I thought that people misuse substance don't care about people who love them and that they don't care about what it does to their own health. I think now that substance abuse happens to vulnerable people and they can be targeted. They get roped into it because of the environment around them and it starts off as a way for them to fit in or just because it's what they've always known.*'

There was a clear recognition from Carly that the media representation of drug/alcohol use was less than accurate and would often sensationalise stories about people impacted by addiction (specifically celebrities) in a way that either glamorised or shamed their behaviours. *'You often see celebrities in the media being exposed as druggies and there are lots of TV shows that often show people doing alcohol and drugs in a glamorised way and neither are accurate representations of substance misuse.'*

Following the CLP event Carly reflected further on her views with regards to the support that people using substances should receive. *'I think there should be more support groups for people so they don't see a need in using drugs or alcohol too much. I definitely think rehab should remain and improve for recovering addicts as well as community groups like AA as I think having a good support system is what they need. It is not the addict's fault and they are usually vulnerable people'*. This perspective was further emphasised in other participant's survey responses who also highlighted the responsibility of the government in general and health care services to provide support for people suffering from addictions.

For this participant the volunteers' stories were the part that really helped them understand the impact of addiction on the lives of others as she commented on how insightful these were.

Carly's testimony begins with a somewhat closed and static perception of substance use and ends with a deeper more multifaceted understanding of addiction.

## **2.7.6 Summary of Key Findings and Recommendations**

Following the thematic analysis and participant case studies the following outlines the main findings and recommendations.

### **Finding 1 Fear and judgement of addiction:**

Although there was a mix of different attitudes regarding substance use and its users *before* the CLP event, the majority view was that addiction was an individual problem and that individuals who became addicted were to blame for this and were morally reprehensible. The key words used to describe people who use substances before the CLP event demonstrated an enacted stigmatisation of people who use substances which led to what Goffman (1963) would refer to as a spoiled identity. A spoiled identity occurs following a recognition by a person/persons of a stigmatising attribute (e.g. drug use) which discredits the person and reduces someone 'from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one' (Goffman, 1963/1990, p.12). Goffman explains how our environments demand us to establish the social category of strangers (based on their occupation/status) which we then utilise to consider their social identity. 'We lean on these anticipations that we have, transforming them into normative expectations, into righteously presented demands' (p.12). From here we begin to characterise the stranger and create a *virtual social identity* of whom we expect them to be. In this study we found participants characterised people who use substances in the following four main ways *before the event*; as a *tainted character*, *someone to fear*, *someone to blame* and less frequently as *a product of their circumstance*. In summary before the CLP event,

pupils tend to be influenced by one-dimensional stereotypes of people who use substances which led to mainly derogatory keywords being associated with them.

### **Finding 2 Broadening understandings through CLP:**

When pupils were asked their thoughts about substance use and its users *after* the CLP event there was a clear change in the majority view towards a wider, multifaceted understanding of the factors that can lead to dependency on substances. There was some overspill of more individualist ideas but this was lessened considerably compared to ideas before the event. Participants tended to acknowledge the reality of the situations experienced by users of substances and not understand them wholly by their addiction; a framework identified by Goffman (1963) as understanding their *actual social identity* as opposed to relying on perceptions. Some responses demonstrated a replacement of individualist 'blame' narratives with social background as an inevitable causal factor leading to addiction. Overall the dominant shift towards the de-stigmatisation of the person who uses substances and a humanisation of their experiences was discovered through the following main themes; *the reality of addiction, empathetic reasoning and wider social awareness*.

### **Finding 3 Empathetic reasoning and connections:**

The emotional reaction of school pupils participating in this evaluation was clear, following the CLP event. This emotional response was mainly expressed in a positive way and reflected through an empathetic understanding of the volunteers' stories and their lives with addiction. As well as the recognition that outside factors might lead and contribute to substance dependency the emotional reaction to personalised stories helped participants reconsider the social identity of the substance user through feelings that moved them to perceive them differently.

### **Finding 4 Role of media in simplifying and stigmatising addiction:**

Participants in this study felt that media representations of substance use tended to be inaccurate and portrayed people who use substances in derogatory and negative ways. A minority of students acknowledge some of the more positive portrayals but generally their responses showed that generally the mainstream media tended towards sensationalism, stigmatisation and bias when addressing the issue of substance dependency in all forms of media. The sorts of one-sided and dehumanising tropes that participants identified as existing in the media, mirror in many ways the sorts of ideas prevalent in participants' views of substance use/users before the CLP event. This highlights the powerful influence the media has on framing people's ideas on important social issues. It furthermore highlights the ways in which the CLP event has the power to equip school pupils to think critically about the ideas presented to them through different mediums.

### **Finding 5 Supporting people who use substances:**

The vast majority of pupils who had participated in the CLP event agreed that people who use substances should be supported to help them break their dependency cycle. Participants also

commented on the sorts of interventions they felt could prevent substance dependency which involved help from criminal justice services and policy change. The main themes derived from participant responses are *punitive support measures* (the introduction of sanctions and police power), *therapeutic support* (both from professionals and friends and family) and *wider structural/societal support* (the widest of the categories discussing the need to eradicate poverty and further educational opportunities). A small minority of participants felt that help should not be given to people who use substances.

#### **Finding 6 The key role of volunteer life stories in the CLP:**

The participants of the CLP event were asked which their favourite part of the day was. The vast majority cited the real-life stories as their favourite with many participants choosing to leave comments for the volunteers at the back of the survey in the 'any other comments' section. Alongside the volunteers' stories pupils also enjoyed the 'drug dealer' role play. Together this demonstrates the power of narratives in conveying meaning and understanding about significant social experiences.

#### **Finding 7 Potential improvements to the CLP:**

The majority of participants across the three schools were unable to cite any part of the CLP event that they did not like. There were some pupils however who were a little confused about the role play and some cited the initial section of the event (the PowerPoint slides with the information about addiction) as being too long and needing more interactive activities.

#### **Finding 8 Key outcomes of the CLP for pupils:**

Students were asked to reflect on what they had learnt from the CLP schools event and their responses fit into four main themes: *self reflection, the tragedy of drug use, the re-humanising of people who use substances and the social responsibility in addressing substance dependency*. These core messages taken away from the event can be seen to derive mainly from the emotional connections pupils gained from hearing the authentic narratives which generated empathy towards the volunteers' experiences which in turn allowed for a deeper understanding of the complexities of substance use.

#### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations are provided to help ensure that all young people are provided with an education that provides effective, relatable and current information about the realities of addiction (such as that provided by the CLP). This evaluation report has already uncovered the many ways that the CLP effectively enables young people to better understand substance use and people who use substances and recommendations 4- 6 suggests tweaks to the event that would further enhance its key features. Recommendations 1-3 address wider issues for the concern of educators, policy makers and government representatives and if responded to can help improve addiction education in secondary schools whilst further addressing the wider social issues related to young people and addiction.

### **Recommendation 1 Recognising and addressing harmful stereotypes:**

The level of awareness of the complexities of addiction amongst attendees to school CLP events is generally low and therefore there is a real opportunity to actively breakdown some of these one-dimensional stereotypes geared at those who use substances. The CLP event provides an important opportunity to breakdown the prevalent generalisations of people who use substances and to further enhance understandings surrounding aspects of recovery and desistance. Addressing damaging stereotypes around addiction starts by understanding wider social contexts in the lives of others and as a consequence leads to a better understanding of individuals and the choices they make. The building of pupil's social responsibility in this way can help contribute to a diverse PSHE curriculum and allow their critical thinking and citizenship skills to grow exponentially.

### **Recommendation 2 Harnessing empathetic understandings:**

Empathetic reasoning has the real potential to allow for greater emotional and cognitive connections with others which is crucial in helping us strengthen bonds individually, within the community and on a wider international scale (Riess, 2017). The volunteers' stories in the CLP harnessed empathy towards those with substance dependency for the majority of pupils participating in the CLP event. This is one of the CLPs key features to enable deeper understanding and help develop the pupils' capacity for compassion. Developing empathetic reasoning and establishing ways to create connections and affinities becomes a key learning opportunity for the school pupils participating in the event. These skills are likely to also map to young people's personal, social, health and economic education and their development into socially conscious citizens within their communities. Furthermore we recommend that the CLP event features as just one event amongst a wider schedule of innovative educational workshops around substance misuse within schools throughout the key learning stages.

### **Recommendation 3 Investment in the CLP as an important part of the wider curriculum:**

The strength of the schools' CLP events can be seen throughout this report through the mapping of pupil's increasing understanding of substance use and substance dependency. The key to the CLP's success is the volunteers' involvement in the event and the respect and connections pupils make with them that challenge their prior held assumptions about people who use substances. Investment in the CLP model would allow for rolling out other projects throughout the country, and an end to the postcode lottery related to substance and addiction education for young people in the UK. Educators, policy makers and MPs should attend a CLP event themselves to experience and witness its impact and better understand the value of such a programme in contributing to elements of the wider national curriculum and in nurturing the next generation of ethically informed citizens of the world (a current aim of the new curriculum for Wales, Department of Education and Skills, 2020).

The CLP could be an important part in tackling the growing problem of young people and addiction and demonstrate a commitment to developing the personal, social and health care (PSHE) curriculum (or equivalent) that truly encourages young people to make informed choices around substance use. Ideally the CFP should form one portion of a wider series of

events and sessions within the curriculum to further embed learning and enable learners to develop critical thinking about the world around them.

#### **Recommendation 4 Inclusion of de-brief in the CLP event:**

The use of a de-brief session at the end of the CLP event at its host school, would offer CLP organisers, educators and pupils a space to consider, reflect, feedback and further inquire about the events of the day. For some pupils the event is emotional and may be triggering and one function of the de-brief sessions would be to safeguard pupils for whom some personal concerns could be surfaced by the event. A debriefing section could further help underline some of the key discussion points and learning opportunities throughout the session and avoid potential re-simplifications of the problems associated with addiction that some participants displayed in their survey responses.

Despite the key strength of the life stories featured in CLP events, some young people could regard the volunteers' life stories as 'exceptions to the rule'. The untold stories of people who use substances outside of the project could therefore fall into the same stereotypes held by participants before the CLP event. To ensure volunteers' stories do not exist as 'special exceptions' to an otherwise 'unfavourable' subgroup of society in the minds of the participants, an exercise drawing on parallels between the volunteers' stories and wider trends in the stories of people who use substances, could help address this.

Similarly some pupils appeared to replace their initial response to addiction as being an 'individual's fault' to assuming instead that an individual's social background could be identified as a causal factor in substance dependency. To address this potential issue the complexity of addiction and the fact that anyone can become addicted to substances could be discussed in the debrief.

Finally the debrief would give the opportunity for the young people to thank the volunteers and feedback to them which is something that they currently are unable to do in the CLP explicitly (but participants seemed to enjoy feeding back to volunteers within the surveys they completed for this evaluation).

#### **Recommendation 5 Critical discussion of media representations of addiction:**

As the media hold such a powerful influence over the ways in which the general population, but especially young people, perceive the world around them, it would be useful to consider addressing this in future CLP events. Discussion of media representations of addiction could be included in the introductory section when addiction is first explained. Most pupils in the CLP event were able to recognise the difference between the authenticity of volunteers stories about addiction and recovery compared to the 'evidence' or information gleaned from various media channels about the topic. Nevertheless it is important to engage young people in explicit discussion surrounding the validity of some of the representations of people who use substances that they might see on social media, video games, the TV etc. This explicit

signposting will further encourage a critical reflection of the harmful misconceptions that exist around addiction.

### **Recommendation 6 Clarification of the role-play component in the CLP event:**

In the school CLP event there is a need to explicate the purpose of the role play section and how the volunteers' stories are truly authentic despite the 'acting' in the role play. The confusion amongst some pupils suggest the need for a clearer outlining of the purpose of the role play immediately following the section and also at the end of the event. With some of the feedback pointing to some lapses in interest/energy due to the length of the CLP, it is suggested that interactive elements are introduced to the presentation components of the CLP event (and use of breaks depending on school policy).

## **2.8 Conclusion**

This final report has provided an executive summary and the main headline findings and recommendations in Part One. Part Two of the report outlined some key literature related to the project, the work of the Choose Life Project and the content of the CLP event which pupils from the three schools attended. The aims and method of the research were outlined and the thematic data analysis of the findings as well as the participant case studies helped give voice to the pupils who participated in the research. As the evaluation project makes clear the CLP has much potential to make a significant impact on educating young people in secondary schools on substance use and the lives of those who are impacted by addiction. Its creative pedagogic practice helps better represent and convey the realities of living with addiction and encourages empathetic reflection of pupils who participate in the event. By reflecting on the recommendations and with further support for the CLP, schools' drugs and substance education policies could be truly reformed and help transform young people's understandings of addiction which in turn has the potential to reduce young people's substance use issues.

## **2.9 Five recommended readings**

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### 3. APPENDICES

#### 3.1 Appendix 1: Gatekeeper Information Sheet and consent form



##### **GATEKEEPER INFORMATION SHEET**

Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: 22/HSS/002

Title of Study: A Qualitative Evaluation of the Choose Life Events in Schools

*Dr Cassie Ogden, School of Humanities and Social Science*

Your school is invited to take part in a research study. This only applies to pupils attending the Choose Life Project and no pupils have to take part if they do not wish to. Please read this information for further detail.

Please feel free to contact me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

##### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The aim of the study is to explore the impact on pupils who attend a Choose Life Project event. It aims to look at pupils' attitudes to and understanding of substance abuse and substance use recovery both before and after the Choose Life Project event to see what impact attending the event has. The school evaluation of the project is important to us as we want the project to be as engaging, informative and transformative as possible. Your pupils responses to the survey will be valuable in terms of the future running of the project and its efficacy.

##### **Why has our school been invited to participate?**

Your school is one of three schools who have been invited to participate because you have expressed interest in running a Choose Life Project event in your school.

##### **Do I have to take part?**

No. The school is under no obligation to agree to the research aspect of the study. If you don't wish to take part in the evaluation study your school the CLP can still take place. If you do agree to take part each pupil attendee of the CLP will be invited to complete a survey. They however will be under no obligation to complete this. Participation is voluntary.

##### **What will happen if the school takes part?**

If you decide to take part, each pupil will first be handed a participant information sheet before the CLP event to inform them of the study. After the event they will be handed a survey and pen to complete at your school. The survey might take between 20-30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. No personal questions will be asked in this survey and it will explore the impact of attending a Choose Life Project event and how it might have changed their understanding and attitudes towards substance misuse. Teachers and other members of staff in the school will not see the completed questionnaires.

**Are there any possible disadvantages or risks from taking part?**

There are no disadvantages or risks in taking part in the study.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no direct benefits for taking part in the study, it is hoped that the findings may be used to justify a much larger study with the hope of extending the Choose Life Project beyond these selected schools. Also, your pupils may find reflecting on their experience of the event, relating it to their studies and personal development and understanding of wider issues, insightful.

**What will happen to the data provided and how will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

No personal information is collected in this study and therefore the survey results will be completely anonymous.

**What safeguarding features are in place for this project?**

The project itself has extremely little risk attached to it as it only involves the completion of a survey that collects **no personal data** from any of the pupils. Any safeguarding issues with regards to the Choose Life Project itself should be addressed with Mr Steve Duffy the founder of CLP and event organiser. As a registered charity the Choose Life Project has its own safeguarding procedures and ethical guidelines that will be followed alongside the safeguarding policies of the school should any concern arise.

**What will happen to the results of the research project?**

Cassie will produce a report for Steve Duffy the Choose Life Project Manager. The report will be shared with the steering group and it may be used to secure funding for a much larger study with a view to supporting the expansion of the Choose Life Project beyond the selected schools that Steve currently works with.

**Who is organising the study?**

This study is organised by Liverpool John Moores University and Dr Cassie Ogden is the researcher.

**Who has reviewed this study?**

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Liverpool John Moores University School of Justice Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: 22/HSS/002).

**What if I have a concern about the study or something goes wrong?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me (Cassie Ogden: c.a.ogden@ljmu.ac.uk) and I will do my best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern with within 10 working days and give you an indication of how I intend to deal with it. If you still remain concerned or unhappy or wish to make a complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at Liverpool John Moores University who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

Chair, Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee; Email: [FullReviewUREC@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:FullReviewUREC@ljmu.ac.uk); Tel: 0151 231 2121; Research Innovation Services, Liverpool John Moores University, Exchange Station, Liverpool L2 2QP

### **Data Protection Notice**

Liverpool John Moores University is the data controller with respect to your personal data.

Information about your rights with respect to your personal data is available from:

<https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/legal/privacy-and-cookies/external-stakeholders-privacy-policy/research-participants-privacy-notice>

### **Contact for further information**

Dr Cassie Ogden Email: [\\*\\*\\*\\*\\*](mailto:*****)

Address

Office number

**Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering to take part in this study.**

**Title of Project:** A Qualitative Evaluation of the Impact of a Choose Life Project Event on Pupils in England and Wales

**Name of Researchers:** Dr Cassie Ogden

Please tick to confirm your understanding of the study and that you are happy for your school to take part and your facilities to be used to host parts of the project.

*The Gatekeeper is agreeing to provide access to the Announcement about the study to pupils and parents who are invited to attend the Choose Life Project event, and the Participant Information Sheet to pupils attending a Choose Life Project event.*

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information provided for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
  
2. I understand that participation of our school and pupils in the research is voluntary and that they do not have to complete the survey without giving a reason and that this will not affect legal rights.
  
3. I understand that no personal information will be collected during the study.
  
4. I agree for our school and pupils to take part in the above study.
  
5. I agree to conform to the data protection act.

Name of Gatekeeper:

Date:

Signature:

Name of Researcher: Dr Cassie Ogden

Date:

Signature:

### 3.2 Appendix 2: A Covering letter for pupil attendees



Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Dr Cassie Ogden and I am a Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Liverpool John Moores University. In collaboration with Steve Duffy, Manager of the Choose Life Project and in collaboration with three Schools in the North West of England and Wales, I am conducting a study of the personal impact of a Choose Life event on pupils in terms of their attitudes towards and understanding of substance abuse and recovery.

I am looking for participants to complete a voluntary survey with open ended questions about the impact of attending a Choose Life Project event. The survey should take no longer than 30 minutes to complete. You have been identified as a potential participant as you are a pupil who will have attended a Choose Life Project event at one of the three selected schools. If you are willing to participate in the study, time has been built in at the end of the event to complete the survey.

The Participant Information Sheet is attached for you to read. If you have any questions about the study then please come to speak to/ email me directly via [c.a.ogden@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:c.a.ogden@ljmu.ac.uk) and I will do my best to answer any questions that you may have about the research. Alternatively you can speak to either myself or Steve at the event.

If you are willing to participate in the study then you will be given a survey to complete at the end of the Choose Life Project event.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information.

Cassie Ogden

### **3.3 APPENDIX 3: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

Research Ethics Committee Approval Reference: 22/HSS/002

Title of Study: A Qualitative Evaluation of the Choose Life Events in Schools

*Dr Cassie Ogden, School of Humanities and Social Science*

You are being invited to take part in a research study. You do not have to take part if you do not want to. Please read this information which will help you decide.

It is important for you to understand why the study is being done and what participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Contact me (raise your hand to get my attention) if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

#### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The aim of the study is to explore the impact on pupils who attend a Choose Life Project event. It aims to look at pupils' attitudes to and understanding of substance abuse and substance use recovery both before and after the Choose Life Project event to see what impact attending the event has.

#### **Why have I been invited to participate?**

You have been invited to participate because you will have attended a Choose Life Project event in your school.

#### **Do I have to take part?**

No. You can ask questions about the research before deciding whether to take part. If you do not want to take part that is OK. Submitting the questionnaire implies your consent to participate in this study.

You can stop being part of the study at any time, without giving a reason and by not handing in your survey you will be withdrawn from the study. We will keep information you have written and handed in on the survey which will not contain any personal information.

#### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to take part, you will be handed a survey and pen to complete at the end of the Choose Live Project event at your school. The survey might take between 20-30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Don't worry about how long it takes you, there are no right or wrong answer we are just interested in learning more about what you thought about the event. Cassie and Steve will be there should you have any questions about this. No personal questions will be asked in this survey (i.e. you will not have to write your name on the survey or provide any other personal details and the researcher will have no way of knowing how has

completed it). The survey will explore the impact of attending a Choose Life Project event and how it might have changed your understanding and attitudes towards substance misuse. Your teachers and other members of staff in the school will not see the completed questionnaires.

### **Are there any possible disadvantages or risks from taking part?**

There are no disadvantages or risks in taking part in the study.

### **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no direct benefits to you for taking part in the study, it is hoped that the findings may be used to justify a much larger study with the hope of extending the Choose Life Project beyond these selected schools. Also, you may find reflecting on your experience of the event and relating it to you studies and your personal development and understanding of wider issues, insightful.

### **What will happen to the data provided and how will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

The information you provide as part of the study is the **research study data**. Any research study data from which you can be identified (e.g., from identifiers such as your name, date of birth, audio recording etc.), is known as **personal data**. This can include more sensitive categories of personal data (**sensitive data**) such as your race, ethnic origin, politics, etc. Your participation in this study will **not involve the collection/use of personal data** by the investigator

### **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

Cassie will produce a report for Steve Duffy the Choose Life Project Manager. The report will be shared with the steering group and it may be used to secure funding for a much larger study with a view to supporting the expansion of the Choose Life Project beyond the selected schools that Steve currently works with.

### **Who is organising the study?**

This study is organised by Liverpool John Moores University and Dr Cassie Ogden is the researcher.

### **Who has reviewed this study?**

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Liverpool John Moores University School of Justice Research Ethics Committee (Reference number: 22/HSS/002).

### **What if I have a concern about the study or something goes wrong?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, please contact me (Cassie Ogden: c.a.ogden@ljmu.ac.uk) and I will do my best to answer your query. I will acknowledge your concern with within 10 working days and give you an indication of how I intend to deal with it. If you still remain concerned or unhappy or wish to make a complaint, please contact the Chair of the Research Ethics Committee at Liverpool John Moores University who will seek to resolve the matter as soon as possible:

Chair, Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee; Email: [FullReviewUREC@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:FullReviewUREC@ljmu.ac.uk); Tel: 0151 231 2121; Research Innovation Services, Liverpool John Moores University, Exchange Station, Liverpool L2 2QP

### **Data Protection Notice**

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### **Contact for further information**

Dr Cassie Ogden Email: [\\*\\*\\*](mailto:***)

Address

Office number

**Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering to take part in this study.**

**Should you wish to discuss any issues raised in the event today please remember you can always talk to an adult you trust, pupil pastoral support at school or any support helpline such as those listed below:**

#### **Childline**

0800 1111

childline.org.uk

Support for children and young people in the UK, including a free helpline and 1-2-1 online chats with counsellors.

#### **FRANK**

0300 123 6600

talktofrank.com

Confidential advice and information about drugs, their effects and the law.

#### **Refuge**

0808 200 0247

refuge.org.uk

Help and support for young people affected by domestic violence.

#### **Samaritans**

116 123 (freephone)

jo@samaritans.org

Chris, Freepost RSRB-KKBY-CYJK

PO Box 90 90

Stirling FK8 2SA

samaritans.org

Samaritans are open 24/7 for anyone who needs to talk. You can visit some Samaritans branches in person. Samaritans also have a Welsh Language Line on 0808 164 0123 (7pm–11pm every day).



**The Mix**

0808 808 4994

85258 (crisis messenger service, text THEMIX

themix.org.uk

Support and advice for under 25s, including a helpline, crisis messenger service and webchat.

**Youth Access**

youthaccess.org.uk

Advice and counselling network for young people, including details of free local services

### 3.4 Appendix 4: Schools Open-Ended Survey

The following open ended survey is designed to explore the impact of a Choose Life Project event on your understanding and attitudes towards substance misuse\* and substance users. You will not be asked to give any personal information and therefore all answers will be anonymous (i.e. there will be no way of knowing who has completed the survey) and you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to. You can stop completing the survey at any time. Thank you for participating.

Please note once you have handed in your survey you can no longer withdraw from the study as we will be unable to locate which survey response was yours.

Please tick to confirm.

I have read the information sheet provided and I am happy to participate. I understand that by completing and returning this questionnaire I am consenting to be part of the research study and for my data to be used as described.

Name of the Event Attended:

\*The term substance misuse is used throughout this survey which is a phrase used to describe the use of alcohol, illegal drugs, or over-the-counter or prescription medications in a way that they are not meant to be used.

#### Questions based on your ideas on substance misuse before the event

- 1) What were your thoughts about substance misuse and the people who misuse substances **before** you attended the event? Write as much or as little as you like.

#### My thoughts about substance misuse *before* the event

#### My thoughts about people who misuse substances *before* the event

- 2) Please provide three to five key words that describe your thoughts about substance misuse and people who misuse substances **before** the event.

**Key words to describe my thoughts about substance misuse *before* the event**

**Key words to describe my thoughts on people who misuse substances *before* the event**

**Questions on your ideas on substance misuse **AFTER** the event**

- 3) What were your thoughts about substance misuse and the people who misuse substances **after** you attended the event? Write as much or as little as you like.

**My thoughts about substance misuse *after* the event**

**My thoughts about people who misuse substances *after* the event**

- 4) Please provide three to five key words that describe your thoughts about substance misuse and people who misuse substances **after** the event.

**Key words to describe my thoughts about substance misuse *after* the event**

**Key words to describe my thoughts on people who misuse substances *after* the event**

5) a) On a scale of 1-10 (1 = entirely inaccurate and 10 = perfectly accurate) how accurate do you think the representations of substance misuse and substance users are in the media (which can include newspapers, TV programmes and social media)? \_\_\_\_\_

b) What do you think of the ways newspapers, TV programmes and social media discuss substance misuse? (e.g. do you think they are fair or tell one-sided stories?)

Write as little or as much as you like.

6) a) In your opinion is substance misuse an entirely personal issue or can society do more to help prevent substance misuse?

Write as little or as much as you like.

b) In your opinion should substance users be supported to help recover from substance misuse and if so how?

Write as little or as much as you like.

7) What is the most important thing you learnt from the event?

Write as much or as little as you like.

8) What was the best part of the event?

Write as much or as little as you like.

9) Is there any aspect of the event that you did not like or you feel could be made better? If so please explain.

Write as much or as little as you like.

10) Please use this space to add anything else you would like to say.

Thank you for your time and participation.