



**Drugs and Alcohol Helpline &  
HIV and Sexual Health Helpline**

**Annual Report  
2023**

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

The HSE Drugs/HIV Helpline was established by the Drugs/AIDS Service of the then Eastern Health Board in June 1997. It started with the recruitment of five part-time staff, to provide a National Helpline service, based at Cherry Orchard Hospital, Ballyfermot, Dublin 10. They provided free support, information, guidance and referral pathways to the public on drug treatment and informed on HIV transmission risks, screening and treatment.

The service was established as the '*HSE Drugs/HIV Helpline*' in 1997 but by 2010 it had evolved into 2 separate service offerings. It was decided that it would be best promoted as two distinct Helplines (though still provided by a single staff team, using the same Freephone Helpline number for both services). Therefore, from 2010 we began to promote separately:

*The HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline and The HSE HIV and Sexual Health Helpline*

Helpline staff use active listening skills, brief interventions, motivational interviewing and counselling skills on calls and emails in a non-directive, non-judgemental manner to provide the following to service users:

- Support to the person, listening and acknowledging their needs and the impacts of their situation
- Information on the effects and health risks of drugs and alcohol, as appropriate
- Information on services and supports, including how to access sexual health screening or HIV treatment, if required.
- Health promotion and harm reduction information, as appropriate
- A space to talk through their options and to consider their next steps

In 2011, an Email support service was established and by 2023 this accounted for a quarter of contacts with the service.

## 2. BACKGROUND

The same staff team operate both the HSE Drugs and Alcohol Helpline and the HSE HIV and Sexual Health Helpline. Both services can be contacted on Freephone 1800 459 459 or by emailing [helpline@hse.ie](mailto:helpline@hse.ie) and are open to the public from Mondays to Fridays, 9.30am-5.30pm.

Calls or emails can take 5-60mins and afterwards a call log is completed for each contact. The Helpline manager later analyses this data for reports etc. The Helpline is primarily a support service and so we do not survey or question service users for statistical purposes. Rather, the data from contacts is what has emerged naturally in the course of calls and emails and so we do not have full data on every service user.

Eg. An email from a service user seeking treatment for their partner who has an alcohol problem and is living in Kerry. From this contact, we may not learn the genders or ages but we log data on the substance being used; what county they are calling from and what services we signposted them to.

The Helpline was operational throughout COVID19 pandemic and during that period there were heightened intensities of issues including suicide, isolation, people withdrawing from drugs or alcohol without medical support as well as drug related intimidation. At that time, it was decided to begin noting *Psycho Social impacts* and *Themes* as mentioned in calls / emails, so as to get a greater sense of the depth of issues being dealt by the service. Often a single call or email will include multiple impacts or themes.

### **3. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

This report aims to give the reader insight in the nature of contacts to the service in 2023, looking at trends and comparisons between this year and previous years. The Helpline encounters a population that differs from those appearing in National treatment figures as calls and emails are generally from and about people who are not currently attending treatment services.

The objective of this report is that it would play a role in informing stakeholders of the needs of this population, the value of the helpline service and the importance that this service is resourced and staffed appropriately.

### **4. METHOD**

Anonymous data from calls and emails was collected as part of a call logging system since the service began in July 1997. All data since this time has been entered into Microsoft Excel databases which enable us to monitor patterns over time and disaggregated by key variables such as drug type, psychosocial issues and location. Closed ended data were quantified in terms of numbers and percentages, while free text data was grouped in themes, which were then quantified.

### **5. LIMITATIONS OF THE DATA**

- 5.1 As we do not survey service users, our data is only representative of those who revealed the information to us naturally over the course of our conversation with them. This means that for example, we have information on the location of (4307) 72% of contacts in 2023 and have note of what substance is being used in 83.4% of Drug / Alcohol contacts in 2023.
- 5.2 We have no limit to the number of drugs that we can note, if mentioned by a contact and we do not identify primary substance of use. Therefore, the data that we have to date is on drugs used, rather than distinguishing what drug is their primary problem drug.

- 5.3 5439 (91%) of contacts in 2023 were first time contacts. We therefore get a snapshot of that persons situation with no follow up in relation to outcomes after the call/email.
- 5.4 43% of calls are 10mins or under in duration. This limits what information can be obtained naturally in the call, which in turn reduces the data that we can use for reports.

## 6. GLOSSARY

- 6.1 *Contacts*: This refers to all support and information calls and emails dealt with by the Helpline service. This includes callbacks as sometimes if phones are busy people will leave a phone number and we call them back. All contacts refers to all emails and calls to the Helpline seeking support, information or guidance.
- 6.2 *All Addiction Contacts*. This refers to all calls and emails in relation to drug, alcohol, gambling or other addiction issues. The person may not necessarily identify as being addicted in order for it to be categorised in all addiction contacts, for the purpose of this report.
- 6.3 *All HIV/Sexual Health Contacts*. This refers to all calls and emails in relation to any sexual health query including those about HIV, STI's, Hepatitis and Contraception
- 6.4 *Dual Diagnosis*: For the purpose of this report we are referring to the co-occurring mental health issue (including ADD/ADHD and similar) and a substance use issue.
- 6.5 *Young person*: Our data is recorded for 0-15yr olds and 16-20yr olds. When reporting we count both as young people.
- 6.6 *Concerned person*: This refers to any person concerned about another person who is using drugs, alcohol, gambling or another behaviour that can be addictive.

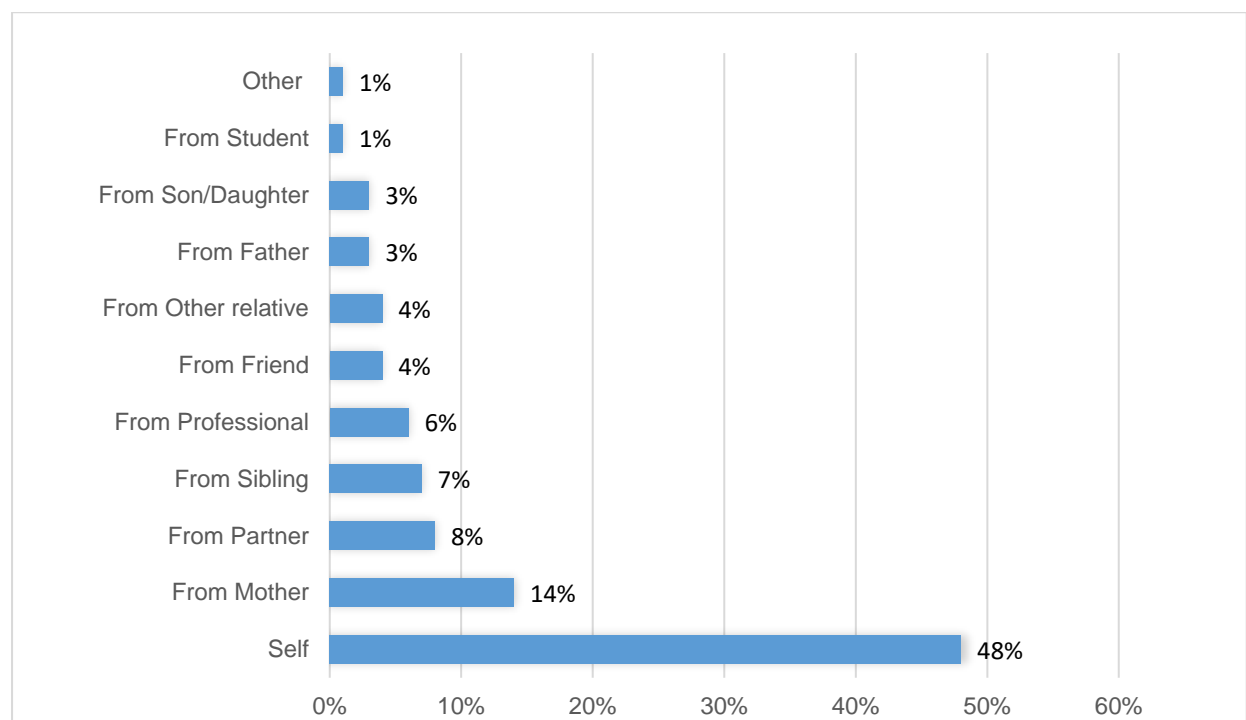
# 7. RESULTS

## 7.1 Who contacted the Helpline?

We know the relationship of the caller/ emailer to ‘the person of concern’ in 98% (5849) of all contacts in 2023. Of these, 48%(2797) were contacting us on behalf of themselves. The remaining contacts were from partners, family, friends, professionals and students doing research and are illustrated in *Figure 7.1*.

Noteworthy is that 73%(2232) of the people contacting the Helpline about another person (a third party) in 2023, were female.

*Figure 7.1. Percentage breakdown of who contacted the Helpline in 2023. N=5849*

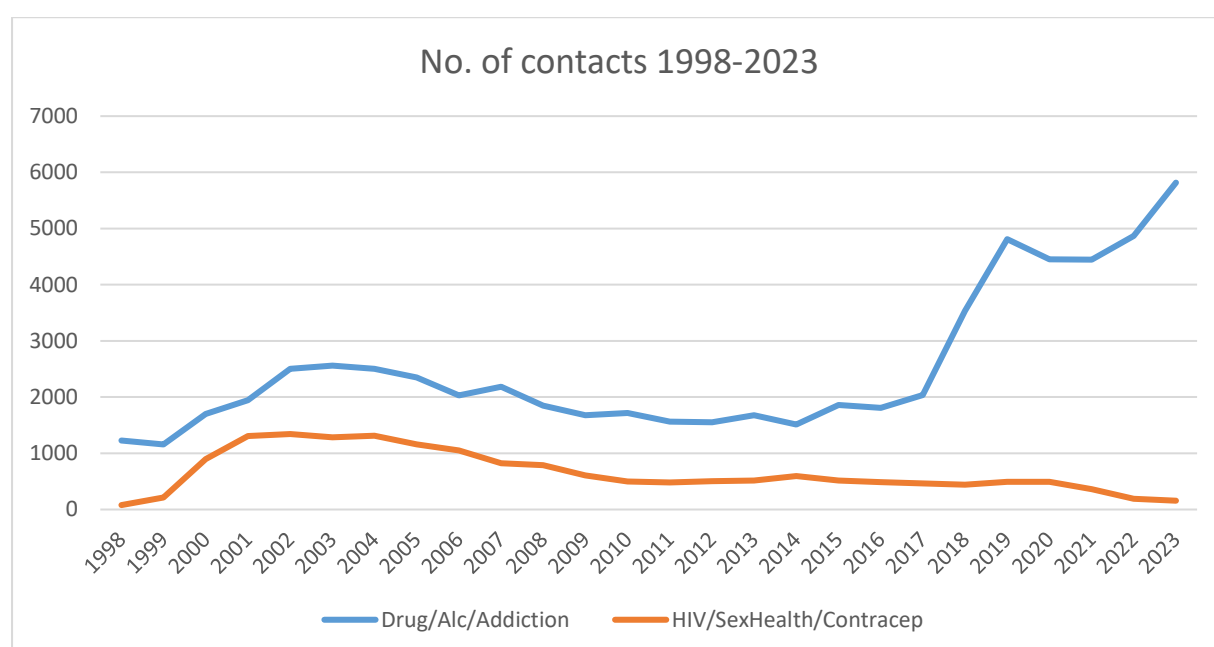


## 7.2 Analysis of Helpline calls and emails 2023

There were 5983 calls and emails (or contacts) in 2023 and 5439 (91%) of these were from first time contacts to our service.

Addiction contacts increased by 374% from 1998(1227) to 2023(5817). Figure 7. shows that there was a notable 73% increase from 2017(2037) to 2018(3534). This increase continued, so overall there was a 185% increase from 2017(2037) to 2023(5817). For HIV/Sexual Health contacts increased by 99% 1998(79) to 2023(157), but there has been a 66% decrease in contacts from 2017(466) to 2023(157).

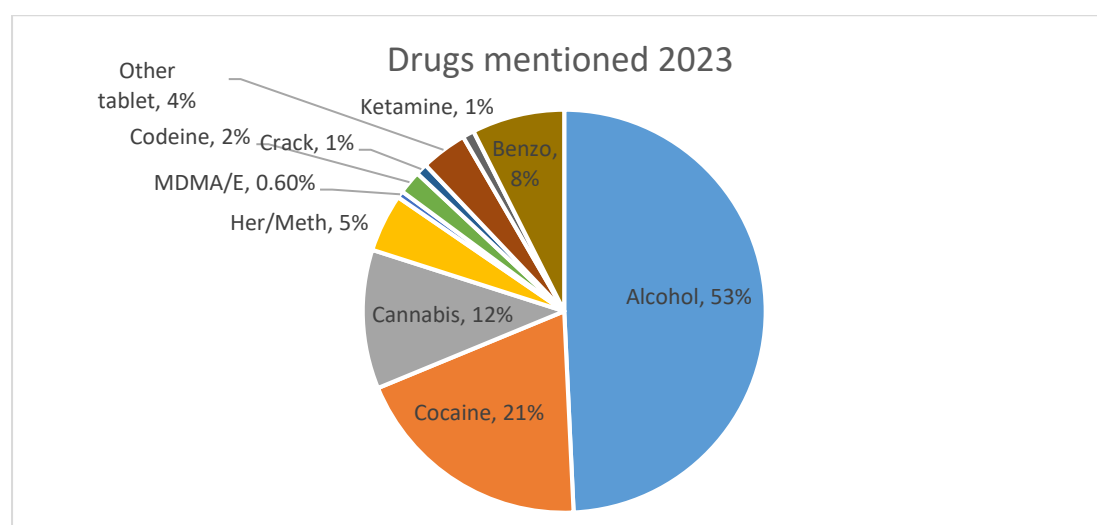
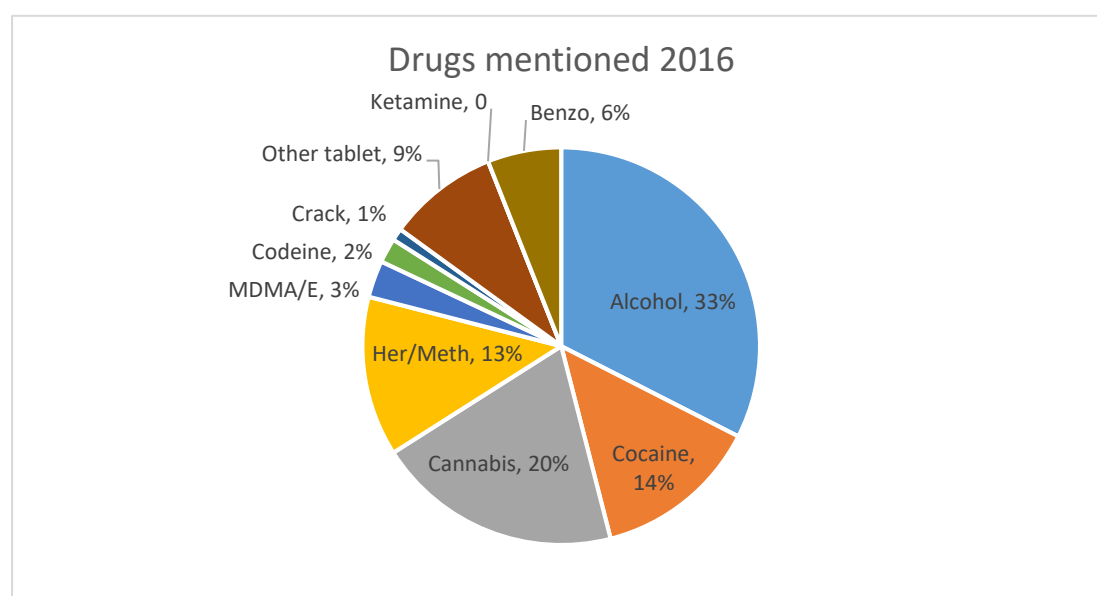
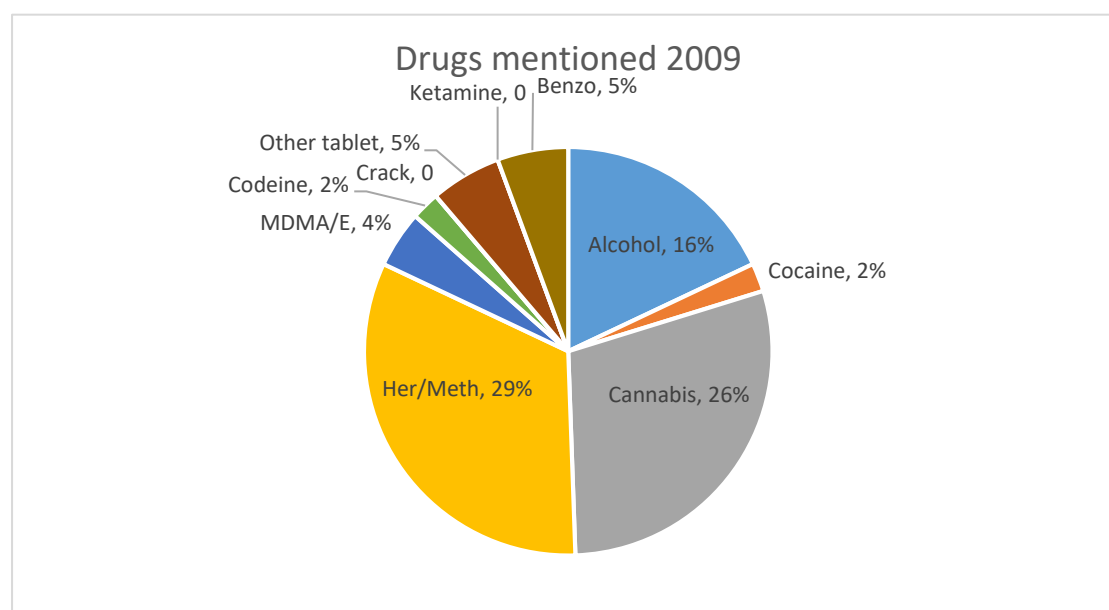
*Figure 7.2: All Addiction contacts and HIV/Sexual Health contacts 1998 to 2023*



The three pie charts in Figure 7.3. illustrate the changing profile in drugs being discussed across 7 year gaps. For the purpose of these charts we looked at the total number of drugs mentioned that year and calculated the percentage for each drug type so as to enable a percentage comparison for 2009, 2016 and 2023. These charts illustrate the increasing proportion of contacts about Alcohol and Cocaine and the decreasing proportion of contacts about Heroin, Methadone and Cannabis.



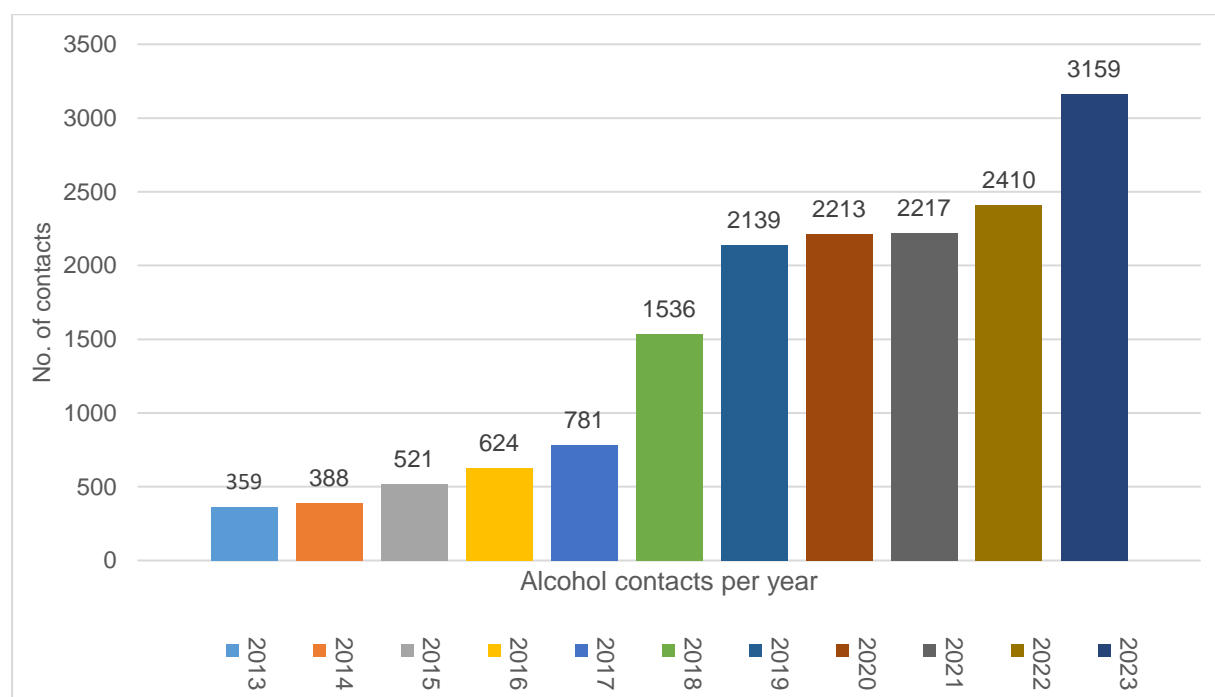
**Figure 7.3. Drugs mentioned by percentage 2009, 2016 and 2023**



### 7.3 Alcohol

An Alcohol contact is a call or email where alcohol is mentioned as a substance of use. There was a 779% increase in Alcohol contacts from 2013 to 2023. Though a yearly increase can be seen from Figure 7.3, we note the 96% increase from 2017 to 2018 and a 31% increase from 2022 to 2023. Alcohol featured in 53% of all contacts in 2023.

*Figure 7.4: Alcohol contacts 2013 – 2023*



*Table 7.1: Alcohol users gender breakdown, 2023*

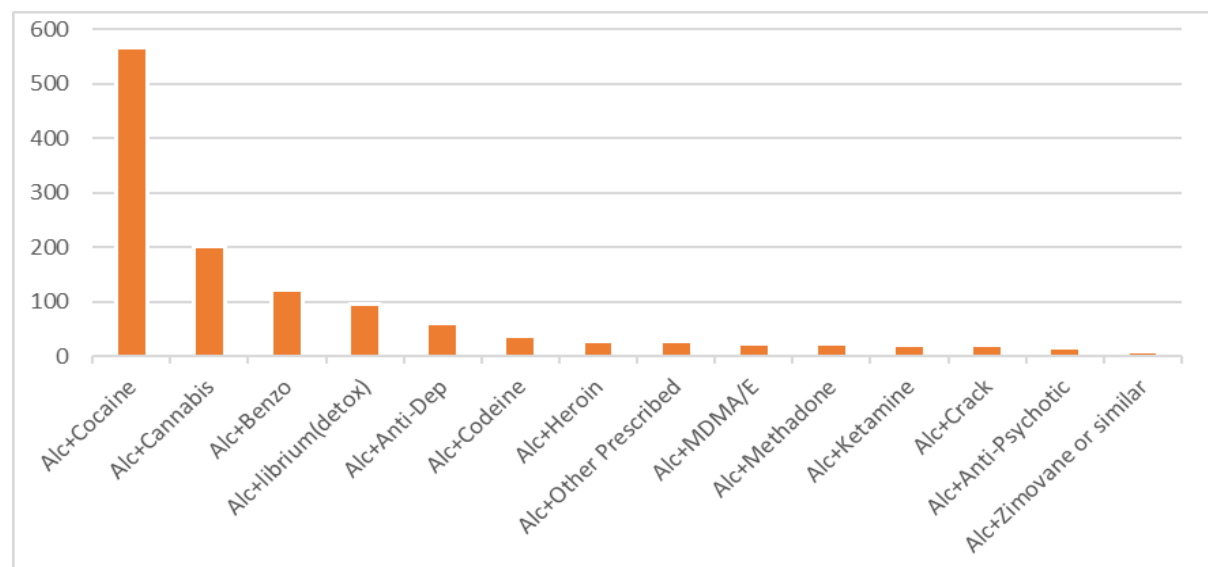
	All Alcohol contacts	Female users	Male users	Unknown gender /blank
<b>2023</b>	3159	1019 (32%)	1799 (57%)	341 (11%)

We looked further at who contacted the Helpline about Alcohol in 2023 and found that 1535 (48.5%) of alcohol contacts were talking about their own drinking; 1470 (46.5%) of alcohol contacts were from a friend, partner or family member of a drinker and 133 (4%) were from professionals with regard to a person that they work with who is drinking. These professionals are typically Doctors, Social Workers, Probation Officers, Solicitors, Employers and Teachers.

## 7.4 Poly substance use

Of the 3159 Alcohol contacts in 2023, we know that 1083 (34%) were talking about alcohol in combination with other substances (poly drug use). We note that 566(18%) of alcohol contacts were using both Alcohol and Cocaine; 203(6.5%) were using Alcohol and Cannabis; 123(4%) were using Alcohol and a Benzodiazepine (whilst separately 96(3%) were taking Librium for Alcohol detox). 62(2%) referred to taking Alcohol and an Anti-depressants.

*Figure 7.5. Substances used alongside Alcohol as mentioned in calls & emails in 2023*



From 2022(408) to 2023(567) there was a 39% increase in combined alcohol and cocaine use.

*Figure 7.6: Number of calls/emails regarding combined Alcohol and Cocaine use 2013 to 2023*

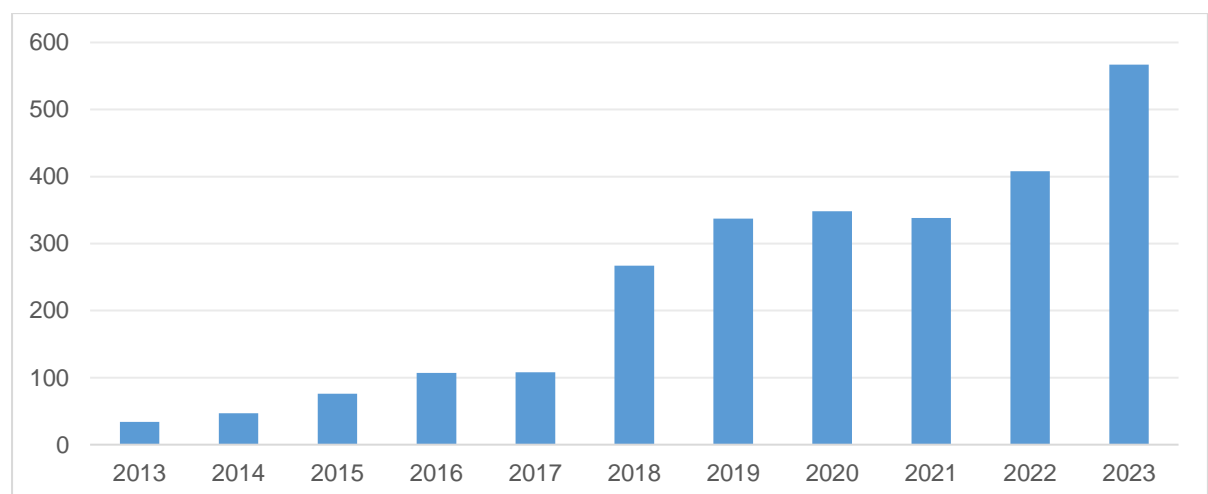
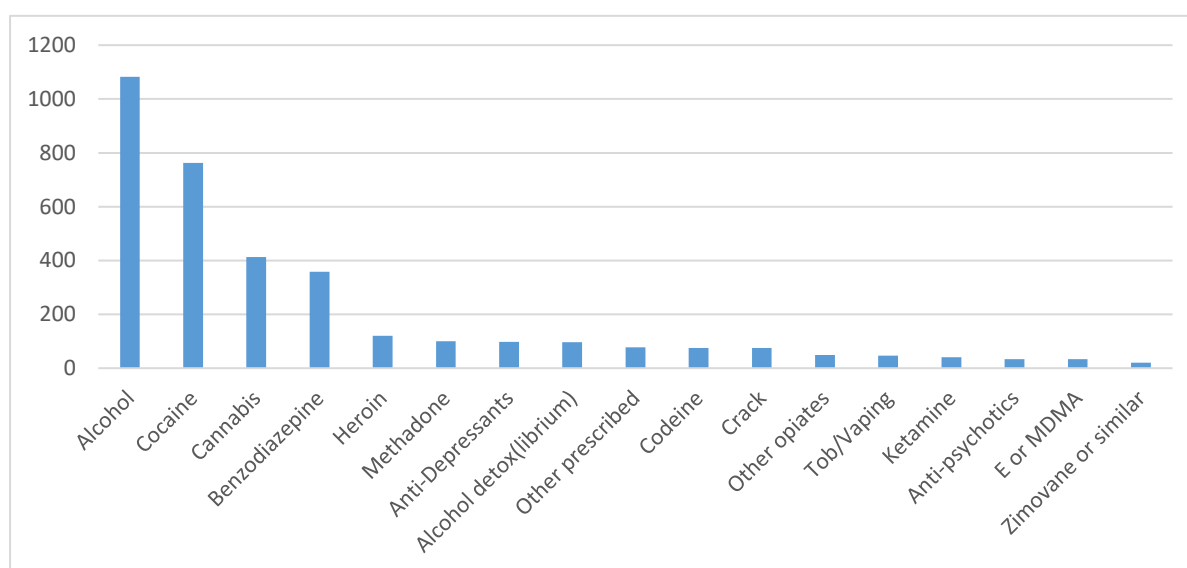


Table 7.2: Combined Alcohol and Cocaine users gender breakdown 2023

	<b>All Combined Alcohol and Cocaine contacts</b>	<b>Female users</b>	<b>Male users</b>	<b>Unknown gender/blank</b>
<b>2023</b>	567	105 (19%)	437 (77%)	25 (4%)

Looking at Poly drug use, we know that 1571 (26%) of Helpline contacts in 2023 referenced using more than one substance. There are many combinations so Figure 7.7 looks at the top 17 substances included in Poly drug use.

Figure 7.7 Poly drug use with this drug included, 2023



## 7.5 Cocaine

There was an 840% increase in Cocaine contacts from 2013 to 2023. Cocaine featured in 21% of all contacts in 2023. Though a steady increase can be seen from Figure 7.8, we can also note the 132% increase from 2017 to 2018 and a 28% increase from 2022 to 2023.

Figure 7.8: Cocaine contacts 2013-2023

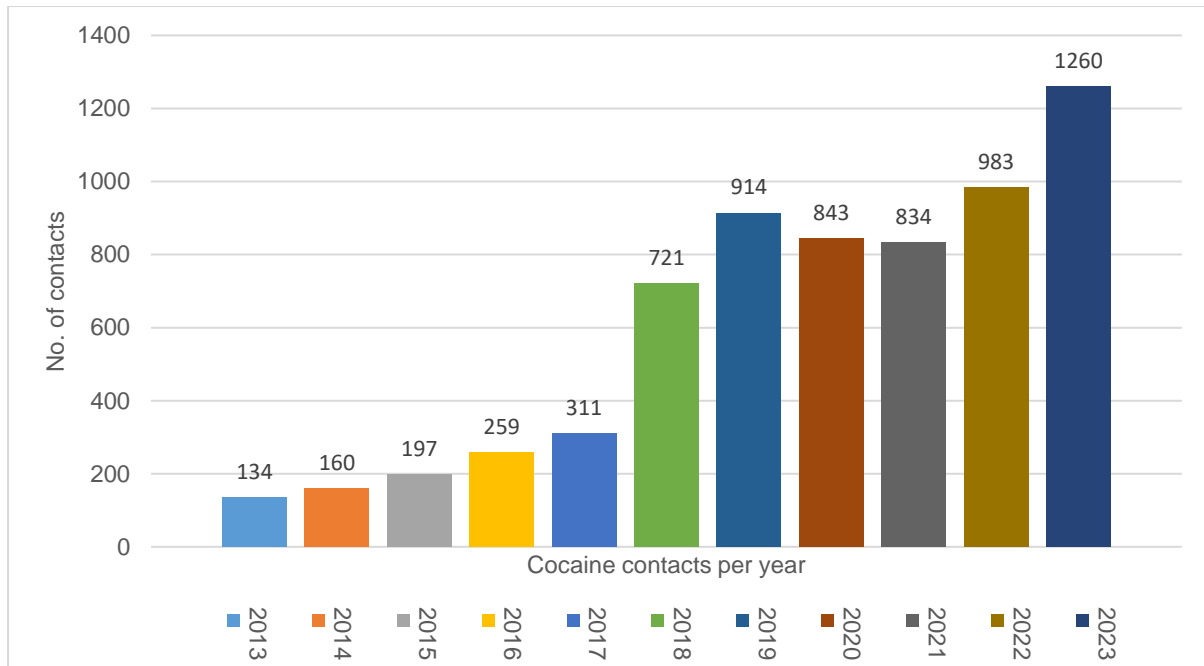


Table 7.3: Cocaine users gender breakdown 2023

	All cocaine contacts	Female users	Male users	Unknown gender /blank
2023	1260	212 (17%)	974 (77%)	74(6%)

## 7.6 Cannabis

Cannabis has been the most consistently referred to substance on the Helpline since the service began in 1997. There was a 50% increase in contacts about cannabis from 2013 to 2023. Cannabis featured in 12% of all contacts in 2023.

Figure 7.9 Cannabis contacts 2013-2023

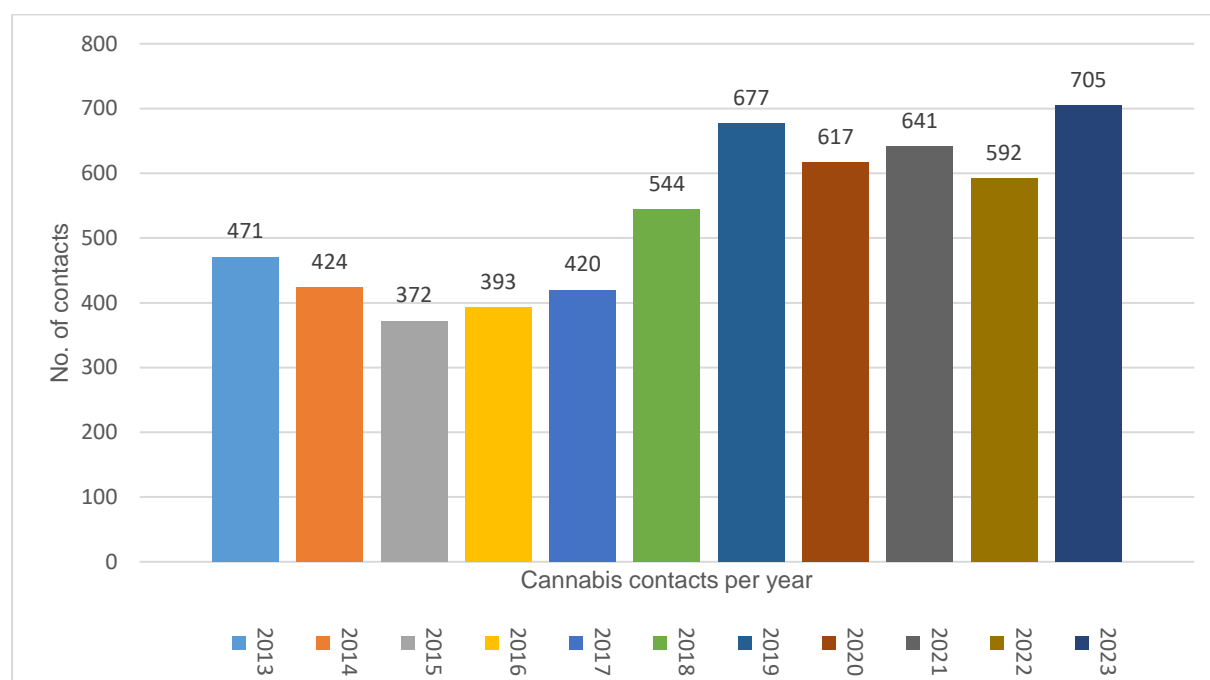


Table 7.4: Cannabis users gender breakdown 2023

	All cannabis contacts	Female users	Male users	Unknown gender/blank
2023	705	146(21%)	525(74%)	34(5%)

## 7.7 Benzodiazepines

Benzodiazepines accounted for 8% of contacts in 2023. Though the numbers are relatively low, we note that there has been an increase in recent years and an 83% increase from 2022 to 2023. These figures do not distinguish between ‘street benzos’ and prescribed benzodiazepines.

Figure 7.10 Benzodiazepine contacts 2013-2023.

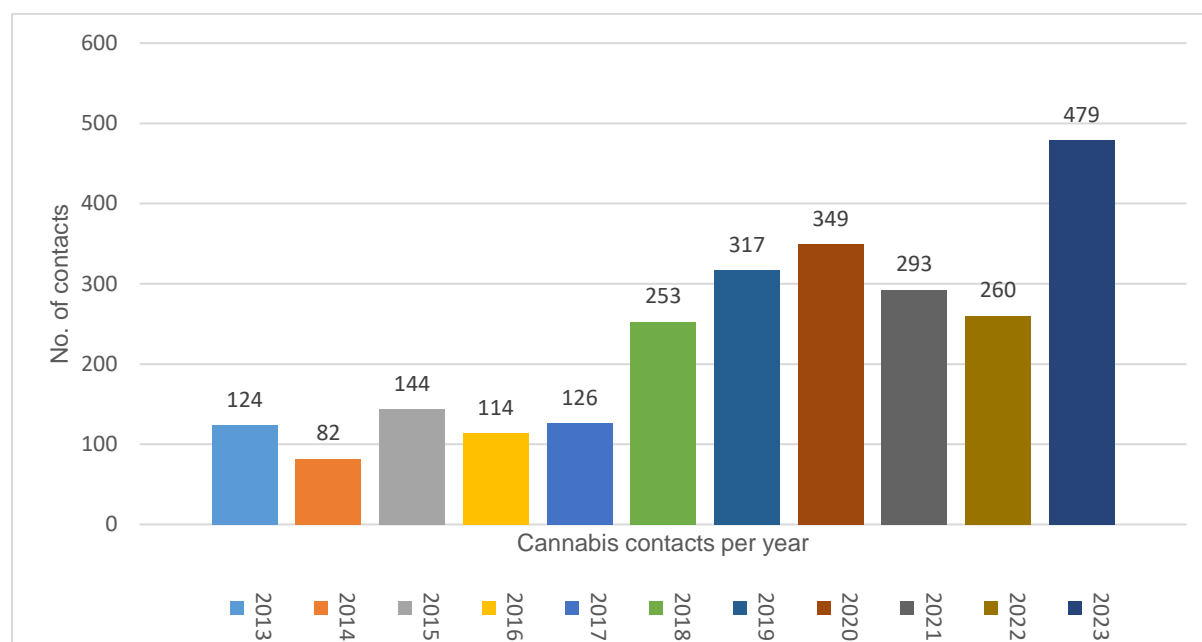


Table 7.5. Benzodiazepine users gender breakdown 2023

	All benzo contacts	Female users	Male users	Unknown gender/blank
2023	479	155 (32%)	305 (64%)	19 (4%)

## 7.8 Opioids

Heroin, Methadone and Codeine are the most referred to opioids in calls and emails to the Helpline. Opioids featured in (643)11% of all contacts in 2023.

From Figure 7.11. we can see that between 2013 and 2023 there have been changes in the nature of Opioid contacts. Contacts mentioning Heroin increased by 6% from 2013(174) to 2023(185). In the same period, contacts mentioning Methadone increased by 61% from 105(2013) to 169(2023); contacts mentioning Codeine increased by 258% from 38(2013) to 136(2023) and contacts mentioning Other Opioids increased by 450% from 18(2013) to 99(2023). These Other Opioids were Tramadol; Oxycodone; Suboxone; Morphine, Buprenorphine as well as unnamed opioids.

Figure 7.11 Opioid contacts 2013-2023

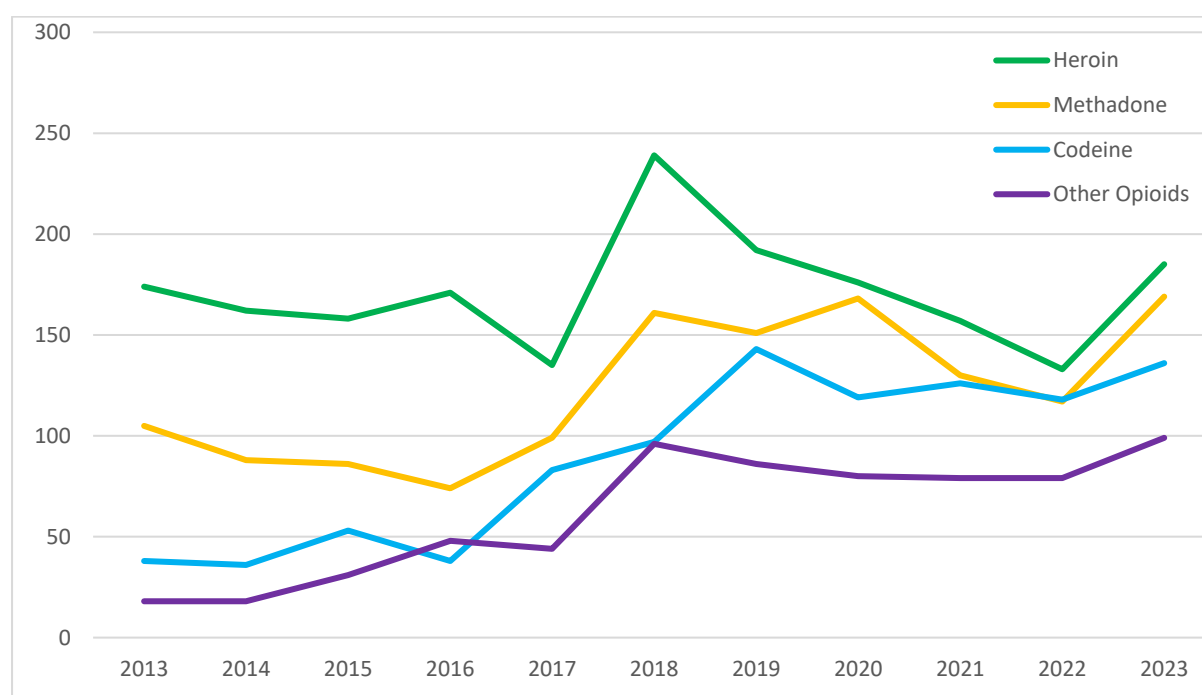


Table 7.6: Opioid users gender breakdown 2023

	All Opioid contacts	Female users	Male users	Unknown gender/blank
	Heroin (185)	55 (30%)	116(63%)	14(7.5%)
	Methadone (169)	46 (27%)	94 (56%)	29 (17%)
	Codeine (136)	63 (46%)	54 (40%)	19 (14%)



## 7.9 Synthetic Cannabinoids

Queries in relation to nicotine vaping and synthetic cannabinoid consumption have increased in recent years, though they still are in much lower numbers than other drugs mentioned. How we log these contacts is evolving as we learn more about different substances. Often a person will mention vaping but does not know what substance is being vaped (as the person calling us is not always the user). In this case we will log the call/email as Tobacco/Vape. If a specific substance is mentioned such as Spice, HHC, THCP or THC we log them accordingly for our records. These feature in just (84)1% of contacts in 2023 but of note is that that was an 83% increase on the 2022 figure (46).

*Table 7.7: Contacts relating to CBD, THC, Synthetic cannabinoids and vaping 2023*

	<b>Tobacco incl vaping &amp; nicotine pouches</b>	<b>CBD products &amp; THC</b>	<b>Spice</b>	<b>Other Synthetic Cannabinoids</b>
<b>2023</b>	54	13	2	15

## 7.10 Co-occurring substance use and mental health issues

In 2020, we began logging more detailed information on reported mental health of Helpline contacts. In 2020, co-occurring substance use and mental health issues accounted for 9% of contacts. In 2021, it was 12% of contacts; in 2022, it was 13% of contacts and in 2023 this accounted for 27% of all contacts.

In 2023, we noted that

- 23%(1398) of all contacts mentioned anxiety and/or depression;
- 5%(288) mentioned having a previous mental health diagnosis;
- 4%(270) mentioned suicide or self-harm;
- 4%(259) mentioned having previously linked with a psychiatrist or mental health service;
- 2%(131) are on an anti-depressant; an anti-psychotic or a hypnotic;
- 1%(90) mentioned having an ADD/ ADHD diagnosis.

If we focus on those who contacted the Helpline about alcohol(3159), 24% (751) talked about feeling anxious and/or depressed; 5%(156) revealed that they have a mental health diagnosis and 4%(136) revealed that they had already linked in with a psychiatrist/ Mental Health Team and 4%(125) had contemplated or acted on feelings around suicide or self-harm. Also of note is that of those contacting us about alcohol 7% revealed that they were also using a benzodiazepine (not Librium) and 2% were on an anti-depressant.

If we focus in on people who revealed that they have an ADHD/ADD diagnosis or similar (N=90): 41%(36) were using Alcohol; 40%(36) were using Cannabis and 31%(28) talked about using Cocaine. 11% (10) were using benzodiazepines; 7% (6) were using ketamine and 4%(4) were using codeine. 41% (37) of people with ADHD/ADD or similar were using more than one substance (poly substance use).

## 7.11 Themes and Topics

42% of all contacts in 2023 were *Seeking Treatment*. The 'Themes and Topics' detailed in *Table 7.8*. illustrates the types of support people are seeking when they contact the Helpline. More than one theme can emerge in an individual call or email.

Table 7.8: Main themes and topics to emerge in calls and emails 2023

Themes and Topics in 2023 (N=5983)	
Seeking treatment	2529 (42%)
Seeking help for concerned persons	1334 (22%)
Cost of treatment/Tier 4 funding	788 (13%)
Question on how to force someone into treatment against their will	554 (9%)
Withdrawals	513 (8.5%)
Preparing to talk to or confront substance user	427 (7%)
Relapse	280 (5%)
Wanting to drink less	263 (4%)
Medical query	261 (4%)
Courts/ Urines query	47 (1%)
Legal query	35 (0.5%)

## 7.12 Psycho Social Issues

*Table 7.9.* looks at the *Psycho Social Issues* mentioned in 2023. We log whether these impacts are on the substance user or the concerned person but for the purpose of this table the combined issues are listed. Given the increase in cocaine contacts its noteworthy here that 78% (43) of the 55 contacts mentioning drug related intimidation when talking about debts due to cocaine use.

*Table 7.9: Psycho Social Issues mentioned in contacts in 2023*

All Psycho Social Impacts mentioned in 2023 (N=5983)	
Anxiety/ Depression	1397 (23%)
Missing work due to substance use	419 (7%)
Relationship Breakdown	790 (13%)
Bereavement	279 (5%)
Suicide/ Self-harm	270 (4%)
Aggression/ Violence	271 (4%)
Drink/Drug driving	117 (2%)
Sleep Problems	104 (2%)
Child Welfare Concern	84 (1%)
COVID Impacts	67 (1%)
Drug Related Intimidation	55 (1%)
Adult Child of Alcoholic	52(1%)
Older Person Welfare Concern	39 (1%)

A 'Concerned Person' is usually a partner, parent, sibling, adult child, relative or friend of a person with a substance use issue. The impacts on Concerned persons specifically can be seen in *Table 7.10 and 7.11*. Table 7.10 contrasts the three main psycho social issues as they refer to the substance user or the concerned person, while Table 7.11 looks further at impacts on Concerned person specifically. Below we note that when violence and aggression are mentioned, 4% of contacts reference violence/ aggression from the substance user, while 1% reference violence/ aggression from a concerned person. Also 6% of concerned persons reference feeling anxious /depressed and 1% referenced feeling suicidal or engaging in self-harm.

*Table 7.10. Psycho social issues and who they related to (N=5983)*

2023	Re: Substance User	Re: Concerned Person
Anxiety / Depression	1225(20%)	368 (6%)
Suicide / Self Harm	240(4%)	89 (1%)
Violence/ Aggression	242(4%)	116(2%)

*Table 7.11: Psycho social issues related to Concerned Persons in 2023(N=5983)*

Impacts on Concerned persons in 2023	
Substance users not interested in getting help	476 (8%)
Anxiety/ Depression of Concerned Person	368 (6%)
Violence/ Aggression from Substance User	242 (4%)
Suicidal ideation / Self harm of Concerned Person	89 (1%)
Child Welfare Concern	84 (1%)
Drug Related Intimidation	55(1%)
Older Person Welfare Concern	39 (1%)

### 7.13 Locations

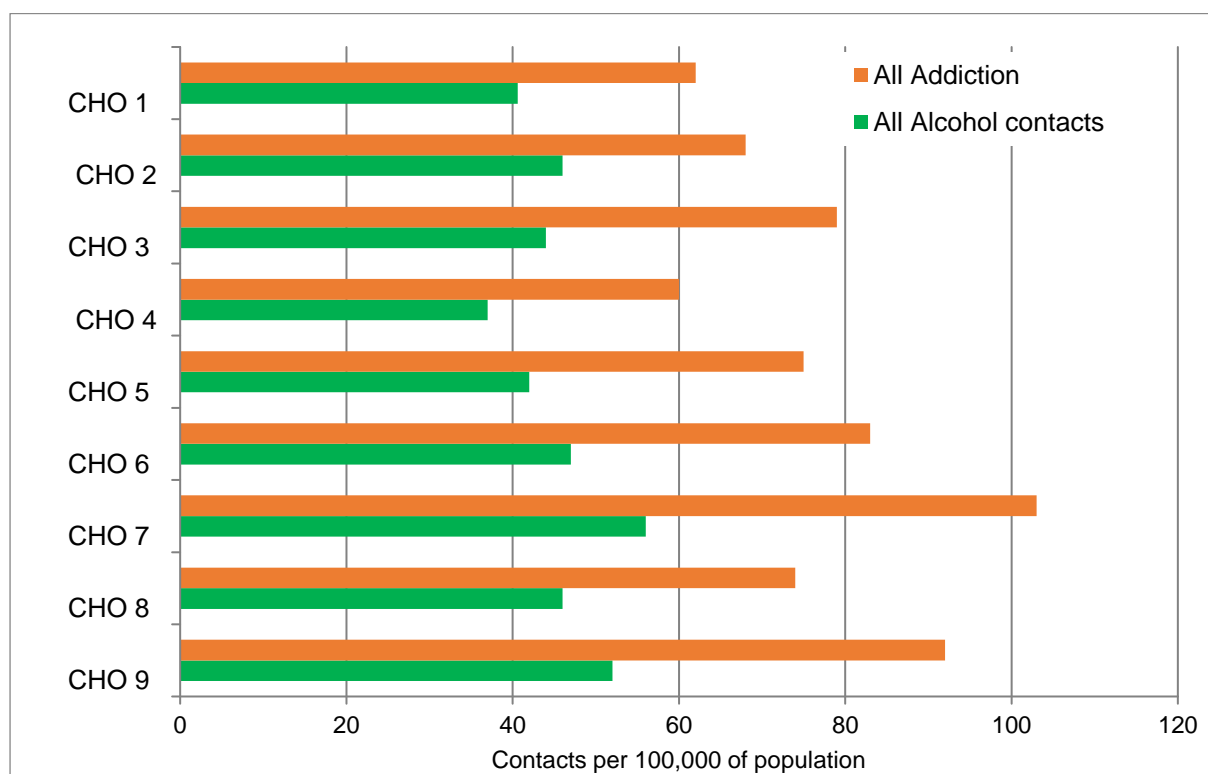
We have noted the location of 4307 (72%) of all contacts in 2023. In that we noted that 5 contacts were in prison; 34 were homeless with no location given; 47 were contacting the service from outside of Ireland and 128 stated that they were in Dublin/ Kildare/ Wicklow region but did not clarify what part.

Health Atlas Ireland (<https://finder.healthatlasireland.ie/>) has figures for each Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) area based on 2022 census figures and we have used these to calculate how many contacts per 100,000 of the population we receive for each of the CHO areas.

*Table 7.12 CHO population and breakdown with contacts for all addictions and for all alcohol contacts, when revealed in 2023 (N=4307)*

CHO pop	CHO breakdown	All Addictions	All Alcohol
CHO 1 (416,138)	Donegal, Leitrim, Sligo, Cavan, Monaghan	260	169
CHO 2 (485,966)	Galway, Roscommon, Mayo	329	223
CHO 3 (413,059)	Clare, Limerick, North Tipp	325	182
CHO 4 (740,614)	Kerry, Cork	446	275
CHO 5 (549,720)	South Tipp, Kilkenny, Carlow, Wexford, Waterford	410	229
CHO 6 (421,373)	Wicklow, Dun Laoghaire, Dublin South West (old CCA 1,2,10)	349	198
CHO 7 (759,640)	Kildare, West Wicklow, Dublin West, Dublin South West (old CCA 9,3,4,5)	786	424
CHO 8 (681,863)	Laois, Offaly, Longford, Westmeath, Louth, Meath	502	311
CHO 9 (680,766)	Dublin North, Dublin Central, Dublin North West (old CCA 6,7,8)	629	353

*Figure 7.12. Location (when known) by CHO of Alcohol contacts v All Addiction contacts (incl Alcohol) per 100,000 of population (2023). N=4307*

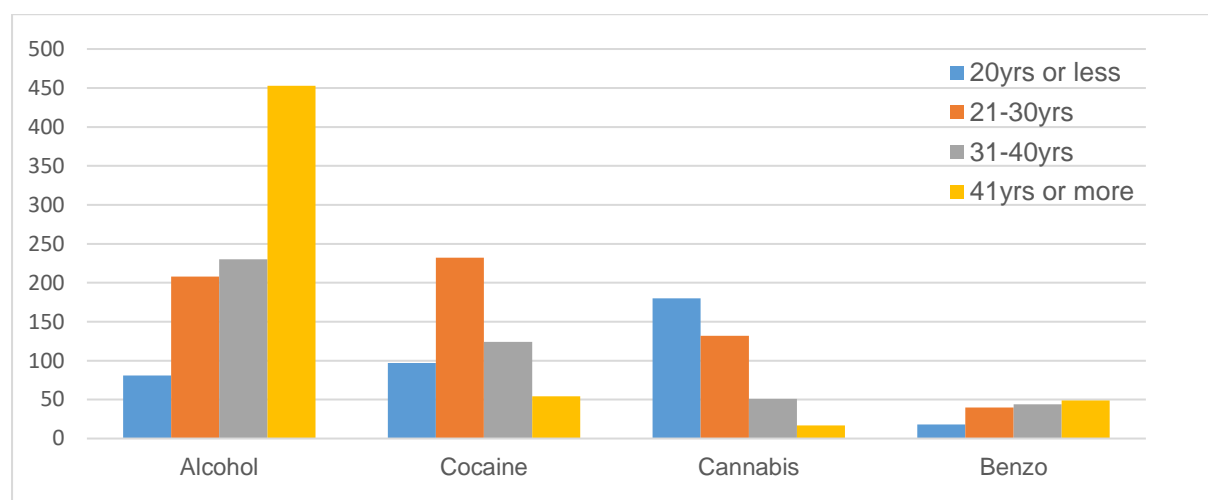


### 7.14 Age of substance users

We have data on the ages of the substance user and the substances being used for 2628 (45%) of contacts in 2023. *Figure 7.13.* looks at the four top substances being discussed in calls and emails in 2023 and the ages of those using those substances.

Of note is that from our data, for substance users aged 41yrs and over, they are most likely to be using alcohol, whereas people aged 21-30yrs are more likely to be using cocaine and people aged 20yrs or less are more likely to be using cannabis.

*Figure 7.13. Age of substance user and drug being used in 2023 N=2628*



The Helpline had 1571 contacts in 2023 where more than one drug was being used by the person of concern. Figure 7.14 below details the age brackets of poly drug users as revealed in calls or email to the Helpline in 2023.

*Figure 7.14. The number of Poly drug users by age (N=1571)*

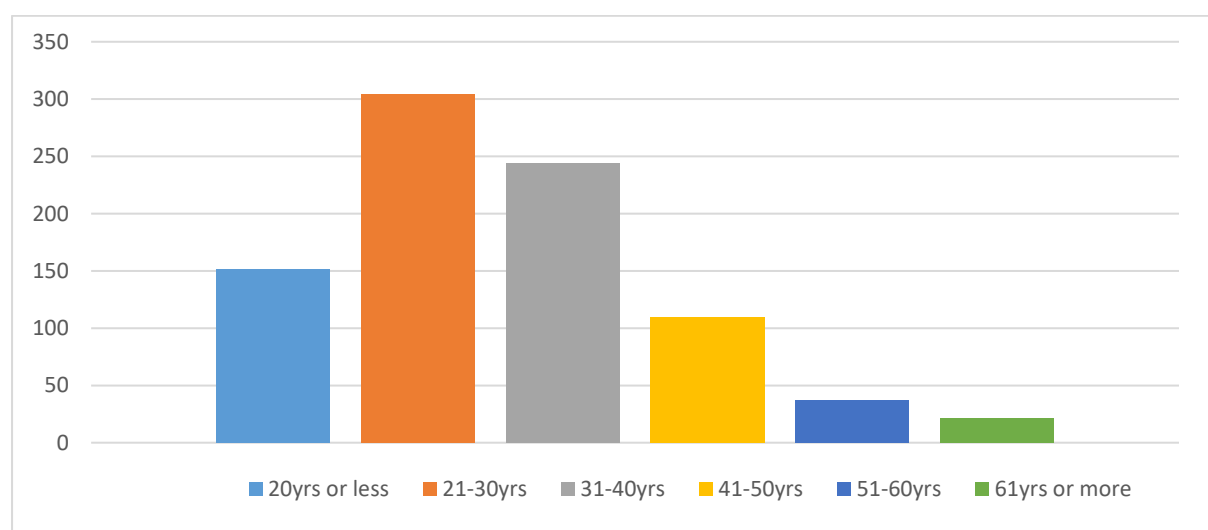


Figure 7.15. Compares male and female substance users talking about their own substance use, by age. From this, we can see that males are more likely to contact us about their substance use, particularly when they are aged 21-40yrs and they are most likely when they are aged 36-40yrs.

Women, in contrast, are less likely to contact us about their own substance use but when they do they seem most inclined to contact us when they are aged 36-40yrs or 51yrs and over.

*Figure 7.15 Substance users who contacted the Helpline in 2023, by age and gender*

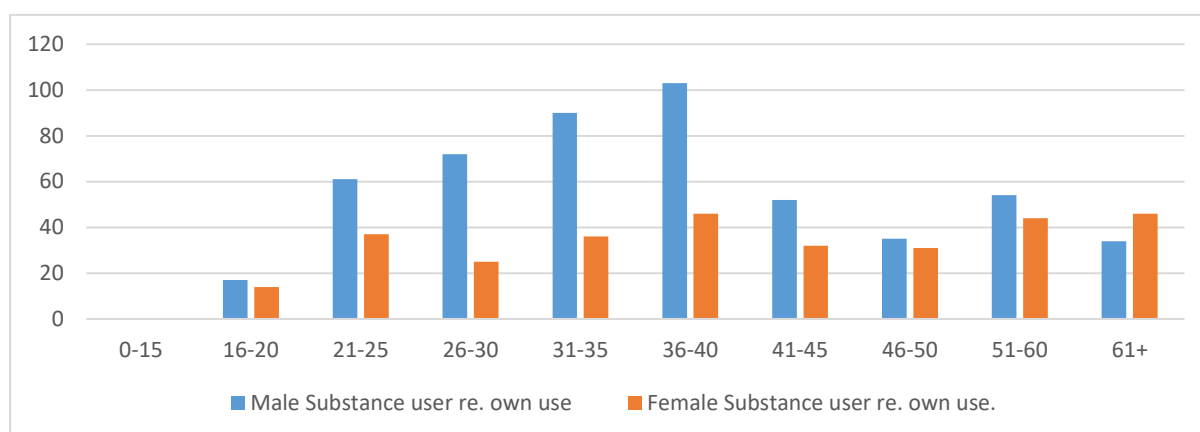
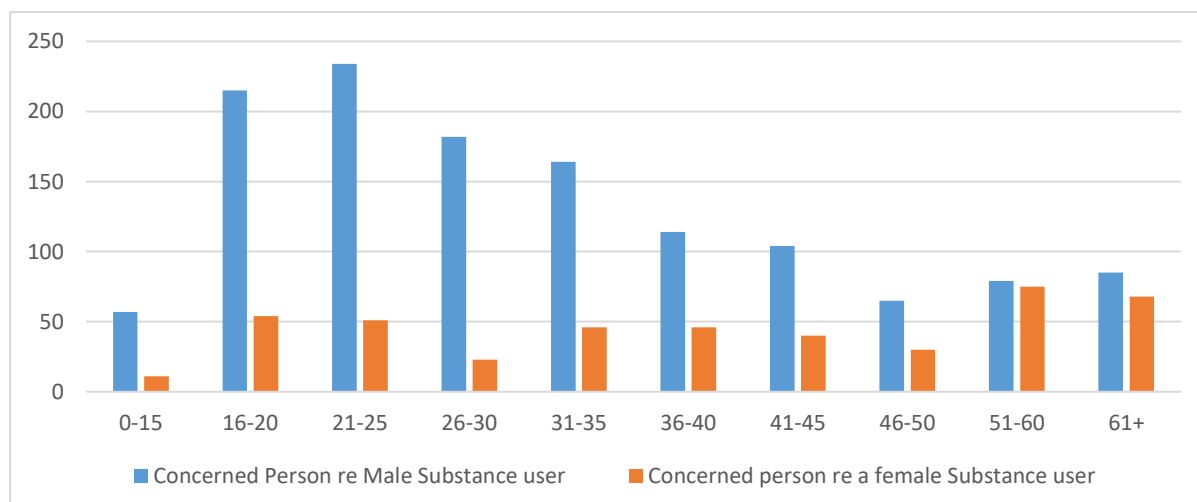


Figure 7.16. Compares Concerned persons talking about a male or a female substance user. From this, we can see that Concerned persons are far more likely to be contacting us about males than females and that this is particularly the case when the male is aged 16-25yrs and secondly when they are aged 26-35yrs. We also see that Concerned persons are more likely to contact us about a female substance user when the substance user is aged 51yrs or over.

*Figure 7.16. Gender & age of substance users, being referred to by Concerned persons, 2023*



## 7.15 Young people

Helpline staff note whether a person is aged 0-15yrs or 16-20yrs. We therefore define a young person as being aged 20yrs or under. There were 416 (7%) contacts from or about a young persons' substance use in 2023. There were 342, 3<sup>rd</sup> party contacts (a family member, friend or professional) concerning a 0-20yr olds in 2023. Also, there were 31, 16-20yr olds who got in touch about their own substance use. There were no contacts from 0-15yr olds on their own behalf. Table 7.13. shows that if a Concerned person (a parent, relative or teacher) is talking about a young persons' drug use, they are more likely to be talking about Cannabis (53%), followed by Cocaine (28%) and then Alcohol (24%). If we are talking with a young person directly, they are more likely to contact us about Alcohol (45%), then Cocaine (32%) or Cannabis (32%). When talking about themselves the gender mix is almost 45:55(Female: Male) whereas when it is a 3<sup>rd</sup> party they are far more likely to be talking about a male (80%).

When we look at topics mentioned in these contacts we see that 19% of 3<sup>rd</sup> party contacts are preparing to confront someone about their drug/alcohol use and 46% were seeking support for themselves as 'Concerned Persons'. When the call/email is directly from the young person they are most likely to be asking about treatment (64%) and noteworthy is that 45% of young people reference having Anxiety or Depression, whereas 28% of people concerned about a young person mentioned this.

*Table 7.13: Contacts about young people compared with calls/emails from young people, 2023*

	From a young person about themselves (0-20yr olds) N=31	About a young person (0-20yr olds) N=342
Female	45%	19%
Male	55%	80%
Topics/issues mentioned(some will mention more than one)		
Seeking treatment	64%	26%
Anxiety/Depression	45%	28%
Withdrawals	19%	3%
Relationship breakdown	16%	15%
Cost/ Tier 4 query	13%	5%
ADD/ADHD or similar	10%	9%
Seizures/ Medical problems	6%	1%
Suicide/ Self-harm	6%	11%
Bereavement	3%	2%



## 7.16 Services used previously and signposted to

In 2023, 33% of contacts indicated that they had contact with services or supports prior to contacting the Helpline. *Table 7.17.* gives an outline what supports the person accessed prior to contacting the Helpline and what supports the Helpline pointed them towards. Some will have accessed supports in the months or years previous to their contact or some might be linked in currently with services. 79% of people who contacted our service in 2023, were signposted to at least one service or support option by the Helpline staff. Often multiple support options will be given to service users. Noteworthy here is that 19% of all contacts had previously spoken with their GP about their substance use issue. We are happy for GPs to refer patients to us as we can support them with finding the right services for their needs, alongside the doctors medical oversight.

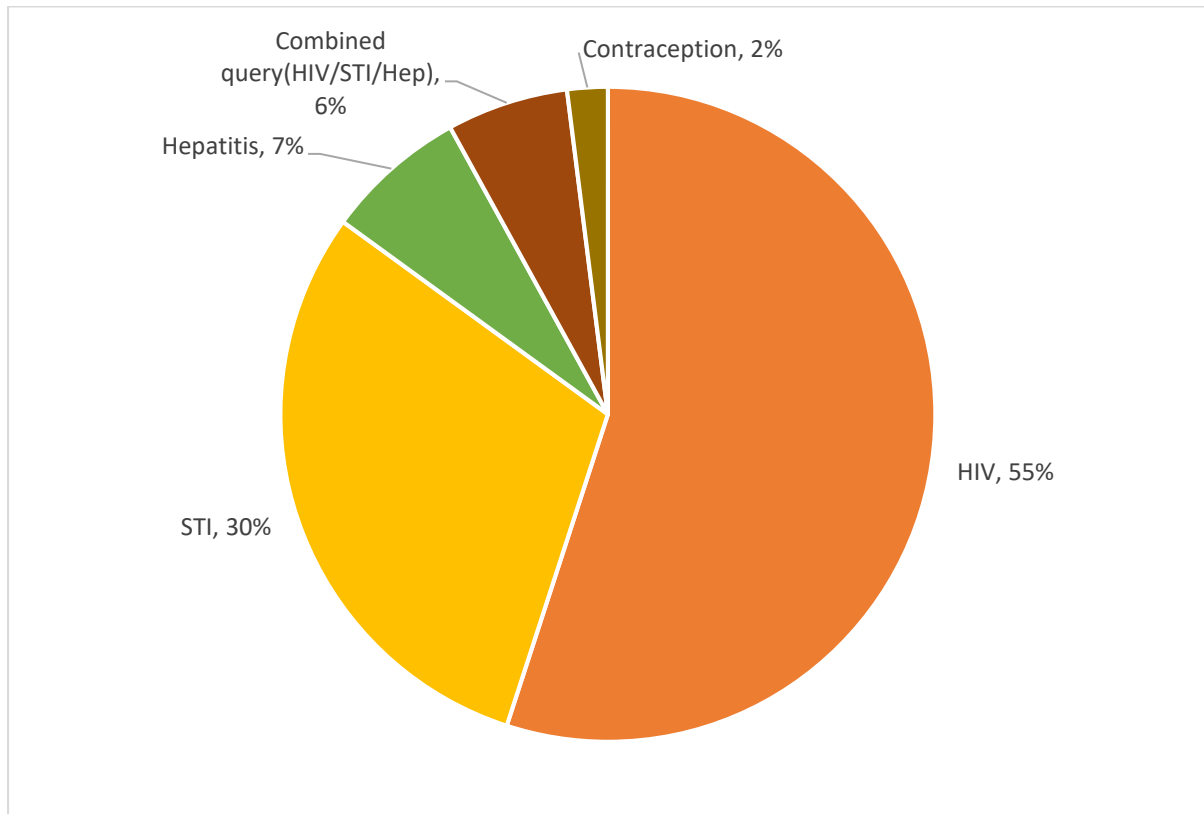
*Table 7.14. Services used previously compared with services we signposted to, in 2023*

2023	% Services used prior to Helpline contact (N=5983)	% Services signposted to by the Helpline (N=5983)
GP	19%	30%
Counsellor	10%	35%
Peer support groups	10%	49%
Day or residential treatment	7%	22%
Psychiatrist/ MH supports	4%	4%
Community Project	4%	30%
Other	2%	3%
JLO/ Garda	1%	1%
Outreach /RIS Worker	<1%	8%
STI/HIV Clinic	<1%	1%
Callback	-	44%
Internet based resources	-	24%
Online self-assessment tool	-	3%

### 7.17 HIV and Sexual Health Helpline

HIV and Sexual health contacts account for 2.6% of calls and emails to the Helpline in 2023. Overall, there has been a 101% increase in contacts about HIV/Sexual Health from 1998(79) to 2023 (157). Figure 7.17 below looks at the type of HIV/Sexual Health contacts that the Helpline dealt with in 2023.

Figure 7.17 Percentage breakdown of Sexual health contacts in 2023 N=157



## 8. DISCUSSION

The yearly number of calls and emails dealt with by the Helpline has increased, particularly since 2018.

This 2023 report shows that from 2022 to 2023 there was an 18% increase in the overall number of contacts dealt by the Helpline. Within this there was a 31% increase in Alcohol contacts and a 28% increase in cocaine contacts. There was also an 11% increase in the number of emails dealt with in 2023, when compared with 2022.

The key points from this report are

- The large and consistent increase in contacts about alcohol
- The large and consistent increase in contacts about cocaine.
- We have gained greater insight on the themes and psychosocial issues referenced by substance users and those concerned about them.
- We have a measure of how many contacts reference a mental health issue, alongside substance use.
- We can see new trends emerging such as increased combined cocaine and alcohol use; increases in synthetic cannabinoids and increases in queries about other opioids.

## 8.1. Alcohol

The 2023 Healthy Ireland Survey <sup>(1)</sup> reports that 1 in 2 drinkers in Ireland, drink harmfully or hazardously (using the WHO's AUDIT-C Screening tool). Also 1 in 4 of the population engage in Heavy Episodic Drinking. When the abstainers are excluded, the reported Alcohol Consumption among drinkers aged 15yrs and over, is 14.1 litres of pure alcohol per person in 2023 <sup>(2)</sup>

The Alcohol Treatment Demand Report 2023<sup>(2)</sup> reports 8163 cases where alcohol was the main problem. 3625 of these cases (44.4%) who began treatment in 2023, were people who had not been previously treated. The National Alcohol Treatment figures do not include GP treatment, attendance at peer support meetings or engagement with other options such as online supports or general counselling.

The Helpline dealt with 3159 people concerned about alcohol in 2023. (2696)85% of those were contacting our service for the first time (9% were repeat contacts and 6% were unknown status). 23% of the alcohol contacts in 2023 had already spoken with their GP or a hospital about their drinking, often having been prescribed Librium for alcohol withdrawals and 12% had already seen a counsellor at some point in the past and 6% had attended peer support meetings. 7% had previously attended a residential treatment programme. Looking further at GP treatment of Alcohol use, we know from the Primary Care Reimbursement Service that claims were made for 23,978 librium prescriptions, written for 6971 patients (an average of 3.4 prescription per patient) in 2023<sup>(3)</sup>. This does not include private patients where no PCRS claim was made.

It is not uncommon on the Helpline for someone to say that they had previously had more than one Librium detox in the past, without having accessed any form of addiction support alongside that detox. We also know from callers that often they feel that being given Librium for alcohol withdrawals means that they have accessed alcohol treatment, but detox alone would form part but not all of a treatment plan. Navigating addiction services can be difficult and it may be challenging for GPs to offer the full range of options to people in the course of a short GP consultation visit. It is the helplines experience that people often will need a longer conversation to help them determine their next steps and also to help them consider any barriers to seeking help. The suggestion therefore is that people attending their GP about their drinking, could be given the Helplines contact details so that we can then direct the person to local addiction counsellors, keyworkers, peer

support meetings as well as giving them a space to talk through what is happening for them at this time.

The dramatic rise in Alcohol contacts since 2018, is not reflected elsewhere in treatment or revenue data. This rise was not impacted by the COVID Pandemic (as the Helpline remained open) and has continued despite little change in staffing and no change in the opening hours of the service. Helpline data on Alcohol needs to be considered when looking at help around alcohol issues as this data represents a population largely outside of the treatment data.

## **8.2. Cocaine**

There were 1260 contacts mentioning Cocaine in 2023, representing 21% of all contacts with the service and the second most referred to substance. Though there were 2.5 times more Alcohol contacts than Cocaine contacts in 2023, the Helpline noted an 840% increase in Cocaine contacts from 2013 (134) to 2023(1260) and a 306% increase from 2017(310) to 2023(1260).

The HRB report on Drug Treatment Demand<sup>(4)</sup> found a 228% increase in instances where cocaine was the main problem drug (excluding Alcohol) reported in the 30 days prior to treatment from 2017-2023. Therefore as with the Helpline figures on alcohol, it appears that the cocaine issue is greater than is reflected in the treatment figures.

The NDTRS report noted a 388% increase among females who sought treatment for cocaine use from 2017-2023. The Helpline has noted a 468% increase in queries about female cocaine users and a 270% increase in queries about male cocaine users from 2017 to 2023, along with the overall increase in numbers.

In 2023, almost 8 in 10 (77%) cocaine contacts were about a male cocaine user, whereas almost 2 in 10 (17%) were about female cocaine users. These ratios are the same for those presenting to treatment with cocaine as their main drug of use (excluding alcohol) in 2023. Perhaps gender specific treatment options could be considered more as even though there are fewer women contacting the service about cocaine, there was a significant increase and there are notable barriers to accessing treatment for women including fear that their children will be taken from them as dealt with in the 2021, SWAAT study<sup>(5)</sup>

### **8.3. Combined Alcohol and Cocaine use**

The NDTRS treatment data<sup>(4)</sup> noted a 116% increase in combined alcohol and cocaine use from 2017(603) to 2023(1310). This accounted for 64.5% of poly drug use in treatment. In the same period the Helpline noted a much larger 425% increase in contacts about combined Alcohol and cocaine use from 2017 (108) to 2023 (547).

Given the fact that combining alcohol and cocaine increases risks <sup>(6)</sup> to the person this warrants some action through continued awareness raising work.

The broader issue of poly substance use or poly addiction could be researched further. While the Helpline is not advertised as a general addiction support service, we occasionally get queries about gambling or other addictions (89 contacts in 2023). Of these 33% (29) referenced having a drug/alcohol issue in addition to their primary addiction and 20(22%) of these were talking about Alcohol and 11(12%) were talking about cocaine use. More on this can be seen in Figure 7.5 in the results section of this report, where we can see the different substances used by people alongside Alcohol as referenced in Helpline contacts in 2023.

### **8.4. Support services information**

78% of those who told us how they heard of the Helpline, found it through an internet search for help. While access to up to date accurate information on services is vital, Helpline callers and emailers often need to talk urgently about what is happening; to tease out questions; have assumptions challenged or sometimes get new information on the topic while they consider their needs and their next steps. Here are some sample scenarios to illustrate this point:

*Sample scenario 1:* A person seeking Alcohol treatment calls saying that they have tried treatment before and that it did not work. On discussing this further, they say that they were prescribed Librium by their GP in the past. They might feel hopeless and depressed. We can clarify for them that while Librium is often prescribed to help someone stop safely, that it is ideally done with the support of a counsellor, keyworker, peer supports or structured programme so that the person can look at coping strategies, relapse prevention etc. We can also inform them about the nature of alcohol withdrawal and the risks involved and

help them look at what they are hoping for and consider what resources might be helpful to them at this time.

*Sample scenario 2:* A family member of a person in addiction thinks that AA and residential treatment are the only two options for their loved one. Having contacted private residential treatment centres, they are now contacting the Helpline to ask about funding for private residential treatment. In this case, we can look at both the callers' needs and their loved ones options. Having given them space to talk, we can explain how residential treatment is funded but also that what will suit the individual will depend on their assessed need. We then give them details of free community based support options where the person can get their needs assessed and a careplan drawn up, inviting the caller to phone back if they need to at any stage.

*Sample scenario 3.* A family member of a person in addiction has been to A&E numerous times with their family member and is frustrated and angry that they have not been admitted for inpatient treatment at the hospital for their drug or alcohol problem. We can talk with this person and the person in addiction about the ways of accessing help as well as the distinction between what substance use/ addiction treatment services provide and what the acute medical services provide. We can talk with them about options both for their own support needs and for the person in addiction.

77%(4636) of contacts with the Helpline in 2023 were signposted to services, supports and invited to call or email back.

From this report, we know that 1150 (19% of all contacts) sought help through their GP/Hospital prior to contacting the Helpline. We also know that 377 (9%) of contacts are from professionals seeking help in directing someone towards treatment and 788 of all contacts(13%) sought information on funding for treatment.

5%(311) of the Helplines contacts in 2023 were about heroin or methadone, while the number of people seeking treatment for alcohol, cocaine, cannabis and benzodiazepine together accounted for 5607 queries (with some overlap for poly drug users). While there are services that deal solely with opiate addiction, the need expressed by the Helpline data is that people are seeking treatment more for non-

opiates especially alcohol, cocaine, cannabis and benzodiazepines. Therefore, there is a need to look at whether services are matching the need.

### **8.5. Dual Diagnosis**

More than 1 in 4 of the contacts in 2023 referenced mental health issues, alongside their substance use issue.

With 27% of contacts referencing a mental health struggle along with a substance use issue, it is clear that there is a need for significant support in this area. This may include a need for a more connected form of support for those linked with only one discipline (either linked with Mental Health services only or substance use services only) and reinforces the importance of the newly established Dual Diagnosis model of care and the establishment of dual diagnosis teams.

### **8.6 HIV and Sexual Health**

There has been very significant changes in the area of HIV and Sexual health over the course of the lifetime of the HSE HIV and Sexual Health Helpline. Firstly, testing became more accessible and rapid testing options emerged, which changed a lot for people struggling with lengthy window periods waits. Needle exchange services are now accessible across the country. PEP and PrEP are now options and 25yrs later treatment has advanced to the degree that people can have undetectable viral loads and therefore are unable to transmit HIV. These factors are likely to have contributed to the reduction in HIV/Sexual Health Helpline calls and emails.



## 9. CONCLUSION

The Helpline has noted a large and consistent increase in contacts about alcohol and also a large and consistent increase in contacts about cocaine. By contacting the Helpline people are expressing a need for information, support, guidance and referral around their alcohol and cocaine issues. We now have greater insight on the themes and psychosocial issues referenced by substance users and those concerned about them. This includes an improved measure of how many contacts reference a mental health issue, alongside substance use.

## 10. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 10.1 From the data in this report, we know that there is a difference between treatment figures and the Helpline contacts figures. Therefore, this and future reports need to be considered, alongside treatment and revenue figures, by the key stakeholders (Dept of Health; HRB and HSE) when looking at the populations needs around alcohol support and treatment. This in turn can contribute to discussions on policy and service provision
- 10.2 We know from Helpline calls and emails in 2023, that 23% of Alcohol contacts have already spoken with their GPs about their alcohol issue. This is an indication that people see a value in seeking further support in dealing with their alcohol issue and therefore we need to engage with GPs to ensure that they know about the helpline and how it works. We know from the PCRS figures that 3.4 prescriptions for Librium per PCRS patient were processed in 2023. We do not know how many of these were referred to support services or counselling. We will engage with the ICGP and also with the Irish Pharmacy Union to promote the Helpline and inform these professionals about how we could support their work with patients with alcohol and drug issues
- 10.3 “Shame and Stigma can often prevent people from accessing support” according to the Drug Related Intimidation and Violence Engagement (DRIVE) ([www.driveproject.ie](http://www.driveproject.ie)). In 2023, Drug Related Intimidation and Violence was mentioned in 55(1%) of contacts with the Helpline but (43) 78% of those referred

to Cocaine use. Therefore, Cocaine support services including key working, peer support, counselling, day, evening and residential programmes need to be aware to open conversations about this issue. Similarly, Helpline Counsellors will proactively mention drug related intimidation with cocaine contacts, so as to ensure that people know that it is ok to talk about this.

- 10.4 We noted a lower number of contacts about women than men and from concerned persons about a female substance user in their lives, than males. This is particularly apparent for women aged 16-20yrs; 26-30yrs and to a lesser extent 46-50yrs. We know that there are contacts about women in the other age brackets and therefore it seems likely that rather than thinking that people are not using substances at these ages, it is more likely that there are barriers for them in seeking help. To address these barriers to accessing the Helpline about women in these age brackets, we need to target some promotion and information at those age groups focusing on reducing stigma around women seeking help to deal with their substance use <sup>(8)</sup>
- 10.5 There has been an increase in the number of contacts mentioning a co-occurring mental health issues (including ADHD and similar) and substance use issues in recent years, as the service has refined and improved how we record this information. As with alcohol, we suggest that this information be considered by key stakeholders, when considering policy and service provision.
- 10.6 In relation to ADHD, we will seek additional training for the Helpline team to adopt a neuro-diverse informed approach
- 10.7 Part of the reason why there are fewer HIV and Sexual health contacts may be due to the huge changes in prevention, testing and treatments. To give greater visibility to the Helpline number and email address, we recommend that they should be placed more prominently on the [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie) website, so if people visit the site and have questions or concerns they can be pointed towards the Helpline. This has worked with [www.drugs.ie](http://www.drugs.ie) and [www.askaboutalcohol.ie](http://www.askaboutalcohol.ie)

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# Drugs and Alcohol Helpline



Freephone

**1800 459 459**

Email: [helpline@hse.ie](mailto:helpline@hse.ie)

Confidential support and information service  
[www.hse.ie/drugsalcoholhelpline](http://www.hse.ie/drugsalcoholhelpline)

# HIV and Sexual Health Helpline



Freephone

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