

## Cognitive Impairment: The Alcohol Change UK perspective

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## The starting point

At any one time the majority of dependent drinkers are not engaged in services, and of those who do engage approximately 50% will quickly drop out.



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## A common response

- *“If a client is in denial there is little we can do to help them.”* Alcohol worker



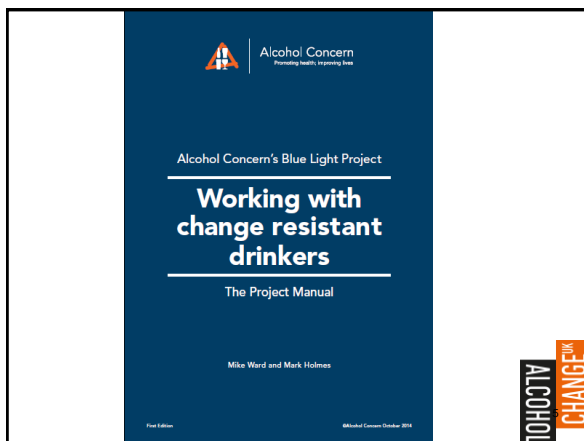
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## The need to change

- A motivation focused approach fails a very large, needy, vulnerable and risky group of clients.



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## However:

- At the end of the Blue Light pathway there are some particularly complex clients who are not changing and whose vulnerability means that they require some more intensive or more structured work to manage their behaviour and protect them from harm.



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## Choice??

- Too often these individuals are seen as making a lifestyle choice.
- We need to understand the barriers to change that prevent these individuals from moving forward.



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## Understanding barriers to change

The perfect storm of physical conditions

- Depression
- Physical health problems e.g. fatigue due to liver disease
- Confusional states e.g. liver disease, pancreatitis and urinary tract infections
- Sleep disorders
- Poor nutrition
- Foetal Alcohol Damage
- ...and they are dependent.



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## Alan

- Homeless 53-year-old who died in a fire in 2020.
- Cause: accident with a cigarette in a garage where he was sleeping
- Long history of alcohol and drug misuse, physical & mental health concerns, repeated impulsive suicidality
- Longstanding and repeated involvement public services including the police, adult social care and health services.
- Alan had been involved with the criminal justice system since age 19:
  - 585 arrests.
  - 301 convictions in relation to 516 offences.



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## Alan

In one 3 day period just before his death, Alan had the following service contacts:

- Police called to incident in a fast food restaurant
- Ambulance called to same incident
- Alan taken to hospital due to head injury
- Alan admitted for observation but self-discharges
- Police bring him back to hospital but he is discharged
- Contact between Police and Probation about Alan's residence and potential exploitation



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## Alan

- Attends Substance Misuse Service intoxicated
- Police called to Substance Misuse Service
- Mental Health Trust receive call from a church saying Alan is with them and suicidal
- Unplanned presentation at Substance Misuse Service
- Multi-agency meeting held at Probation about Alan
- Conversations between Probation Service and other services such as the Brain Injury Service about Alan



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## Lesley

- "I stopped drinking - then baking business turned my life around"



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Picture from BBC website



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- Why does Lesley recover while Alan dies in a fire?



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## Alan

- He had at least one very serious TBI 15 years earlier due to jumping in front of a train.
- In the last 14 months of his life he had 15 head injuries.

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## Safeguarding Adult Reviews

- In review after review, I am seeing people who are struggling with alcohol and who have patterns of significant head injuries.
- *Dr Aly Norman, Plymouth University: History repeating? Failing to learn the lessons from Safeguarding Adults Reviews on Acquired Brain Injury (Journal of Adult Protection)*



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## The current response

It is easy to view this group of drinkers as:

- "Choosing their lifestyle"
- "This man likes living in his own filth"

The situation is much more complex than that and Cognitive impairment is a key barrier to moving forward

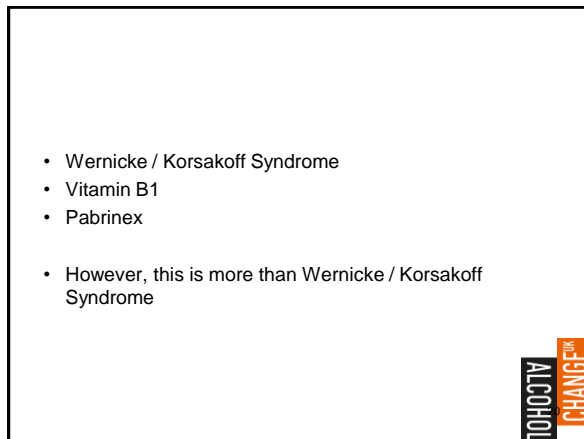
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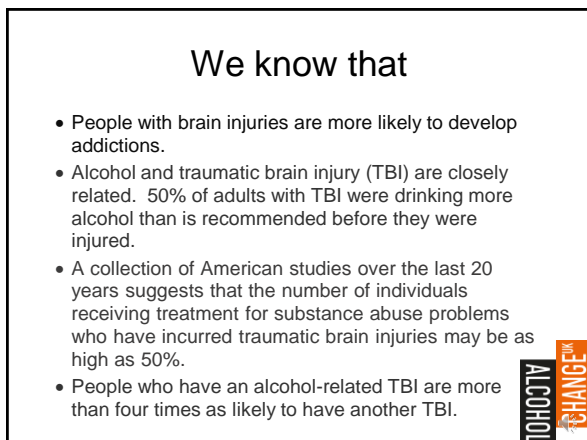
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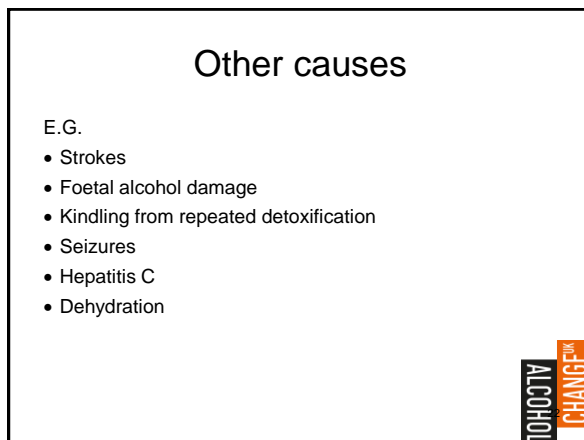
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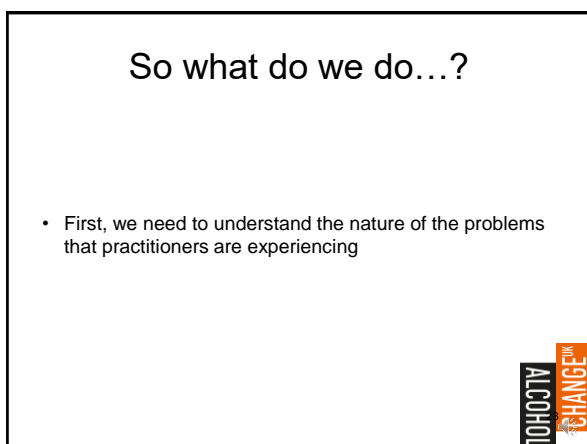
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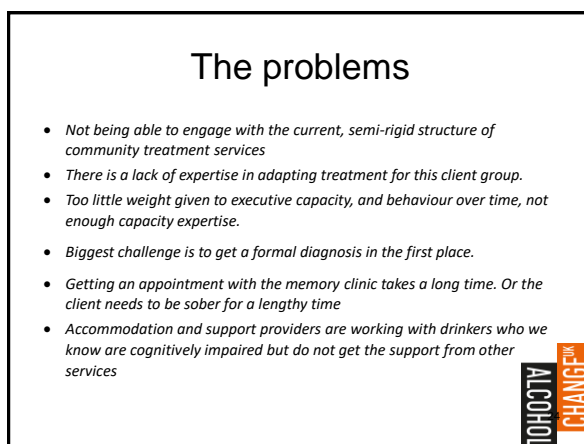
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## The problems

- People don't see the scale and nature of this problem: the impacts of cognitive impairment can easily be dismissed as the effects of alcohol consumption.
- The boundary with serious mental illness / personality disorder is blurred
- Legal literacy
- Community services won't take these clients
- Residential and accommodation providers won't take these clients



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## Seven possible next steps

- Local needs assessment
- Training on these working with cognitive impairment including assessment and screening tools
- Legal literacy
- Disseminate the ACUK guidance documents
- Work with Memory clinic / neuropsychiatry to clarify care pathway
- Perhaps a consultation pathway if not a referral pathway.
- ACUK housing project



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## Local needs assessment and surveys

- Surveys of practitioners' experience
- Work to quantify the scale of the issue
- E.g. work in the Midlands



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Mapping of Alcohol Related Brain  
Damage Services



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## Training

- Cognitive Impairment in Dependent Drinkers (0.5 days)
- Blue Light project training – working with change resistant dependent drinkers (1 day)



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## Legal literacy

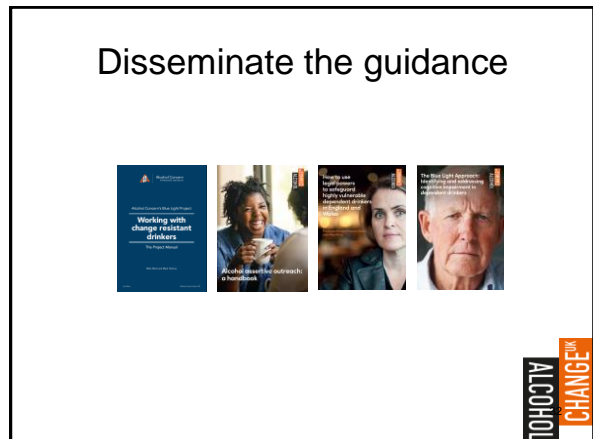
- The Care Act 2014
- Mental Capacity Act 2005
- Mental Health Act – 1983/2007
- Human Rights Act – 1998
- Environmental Health legislation (various)
- Training - Safeguarding Vulnerable Dependent Drinkers (0.5 days)



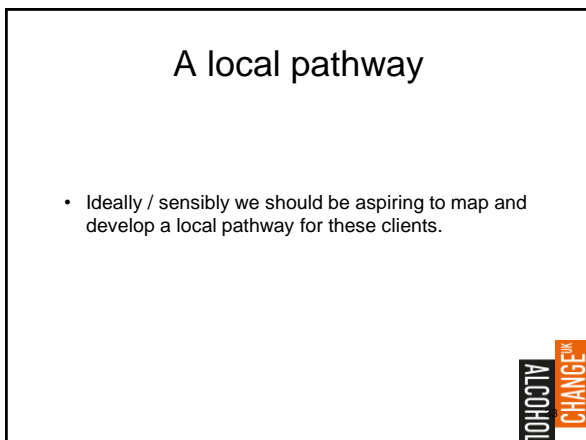
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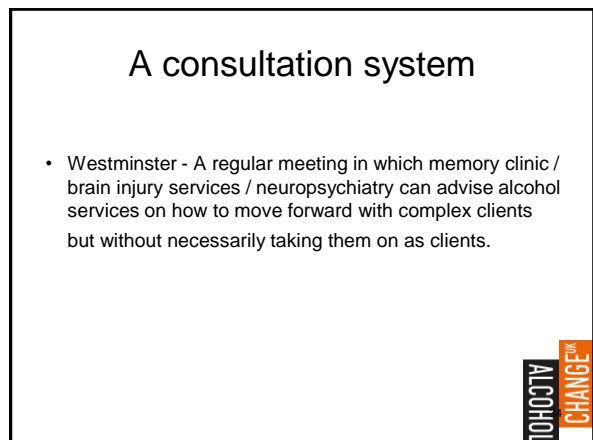
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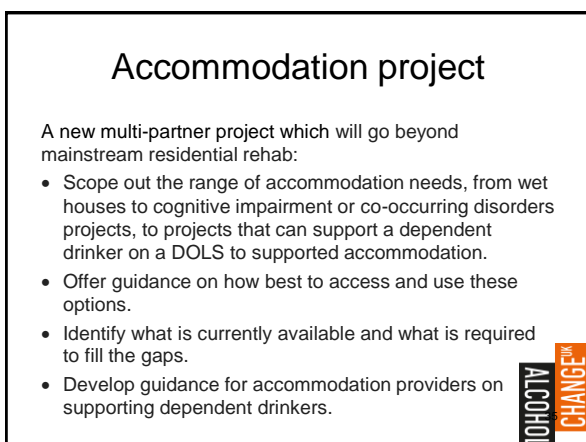
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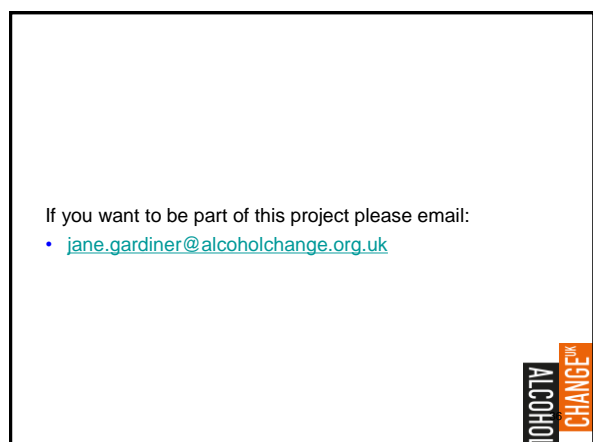
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