

HERE4U Scotland: An evaluation of a novel smartphone application to reduce the risk of drug-related deaths

Executive Summary

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Overview

The project aimed to assess the uptake, implementation and acceptability of this harm reduction-focused mobile app. Here4U Scotland is an innovative mobile app developed by Brave Technology Cooperative in Canada and localised for Aberdeen, Scotland. The app was designed to offer remote supervision and support to individuals using drugs alone. The Scottish Government's Digital Lifelines Scotland (DLS) program funded the piloting of the app in Aberdeen, hosted by Alcohol and Drugs Action, a local harm reduction service.

Background

Scotland has witnessed rising drug-related deaths (DRDs) over the past two decades, prompting urgent measures to be discussed like supervised consumption sites. However, political, and legislative complexities have hindered Scotland's adoption of sanctioned sites thus far. As an alternative app-based innovations like Here4U Scotland demonstrate promise, expanding accessibility through virtual connection and support.

The app offers remote, non-judgmental guidance from a trained 'supporter' during solitary drug use. Through this, it intends to

- Improve users' connections to services and community;
- Reduce unsafe consumption via harm-reduction advice;
- Establish a connection to a trusted local support service.

Methods

To evaluate the project interviews were conducted with app users, supporters and broader stakeholders in harm reduction and local services. Interviews considered the usability and acceptability of technology, the personal aspect of using technology to interact with supporters, and the impact on organisations and the broader macro-environment. In exploring the views and experiences of these groups, key themes emerged.

Key Findings

From January to August 2023, nineteen ADA service users were provided with smartphones. The app was launched but did not become fully functional until April 2022 after it was tested with the Ambulance service. A total of 74 calls were logged from January to August 23. Across interview groups the following findings were evident:

- The app provided convenient access to support. Satisfaction and relationships were strengthened between limited users and supporters;
- Easy setup with the app was widely reported, although connectivity to Wi-Fi or data and location issues occurred;
- Stakeholders were enthusiastic about digital expansion more generally but noted resource constraints and the lack of 24/7 availability of the app currently.

Users:

- Valued privacy, relationships, safety, convenience, and mental health support;
- Expressed concerns about data sharing, digital literacy, and 24/7 access were raised.

Supporters:

- Gained flexibility although some lacked visual assessment capability;
- Suggested specialist training and recruitment were needed for expansion.

Potential improvements suggested:

- Enhanced features like video calling, and drug alerts;
- Ongoing funding, dedicated staff needed;
- Strategies for expanding trust-building;
- Agency coordination on emergencies.

Recommendations

Several recommendations are made to boost adoption, accessibility, and ongoing development:

1. Engagement and co-design with the service and users

- Regular user feedback workshops needed to collaboratively guide features and content;
- Transparent communication around improvements made from suggestions.

2. Accessibility & inclusion

- Expand to 24/7 availability with additional locales;
- Address digital literacy through guidance resources;
- Localisation for factors like language, and cultural norms.

3. Support & adoption

- Comprehensive training programs for new supporters;
- Success stories, and usage incentives to spur sign-ups;
- Guidance around onboarding barriers.

4. Trust-Building & partnerships

- Community events to foster connections with services;
- Interagency coordination protocols for emergency response.

5. Evolution & sustainability

- Ongoing funding streams through government, third sector;
- Continuous data analysis for timely drug alerts, and trend notifications;
- Exploration as a public safety tool for a wider audience.

The core emphasis should remain on communication with users and supporters to create shared ownership. Through consistent co-design, the translation of remote supervision into increased individual and collective responsibility could be pivotal in enhancing harm reduction efforts.

Conclusion

There is sufficient evidence through this evaluation to demonstrate the app's potential value in providing remotely supervised consumption and harm reduction. Further development could refine features and processes to optimise the impact of such technologies to reduce drug-related harm. These early results are promising but there are changes required in user behaviour to use technology when needed. This requires further study. Long-term success relies on continued input and adaptation to user and supporter needs through an inclusive co-design approach. Sustained effort on the ground along with resourcing to build emergency coordination frameworks and trust-based communities are critical.