



Overcoming the misuse of solvents,
gases and other legal highs

Volatile Substance Abuse (VSA) Training Resource

**This resource is targeted at relevant personnel in
Alcohol and Drug Partnerships, and any others who have a
professional interest in VSA prevention.**

**The aim of this resource is to help drug treatment services and others to
embed VSA provision into their service delivery.**

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Introduction and Background:

Volatile Substance Abuse (VSA) is defined as the deliberate inhalation of a volatile substance to achieve a change in psychoactive state. Volatile substances are a range of chemicals found in everyday household products that evaporate at room temperature and give off a sniffable vapour. They include gases (e.g. butane from lighter refills), aerosols (e.g. deodorants and hairsprays) and solvents (e.g. petrol and some glues).

VSA is uniquely dangerous. The products are everyday consumer products: They are in our homes, schools and workplaces. Completely safe when used as intended, these products can kill on any occasion of abuse.

St George's University of London produced an annual report of UK VSA mortality since the early 1970s. Scotland has consistently had one of the highest regional death rates. The last available [report](#) (2012)¹ recorded a total of 327 deaths in Scotland between 1971 and 2009. National Records of Scotland (NRS) have also measured VSA mortality in Scotland. The NRS figures run from 2000 to 2018, identifying a total of 211 deaths associated with VSA in that period. There were 14 deaths associated with VSA registered in 2018.

VS users presenting to services are relatively rare despite the fact that problems continue to be reported across the Country. This may be due to a number of reasons such as:

- VSA is often experimental in nature, and experimental users do not often require or present for treatment support or services. However, those experimental users can and do present in a medical emergency. And those experimental users may die.
- Alternatively, long term or dependent VS users may be reluctant to seek help due to perceived stigma, (including self-stigma), and/or may be excluded from services due to a number of factors.
- It's not always clear where VS-users can go for help:

"I went to a drop in place and asked about getting help for my daughter. She's been buzzing gas for months, about 6 cans a day and I'm scared. I'm scared shitless all the time. She becomes a stranger, a maniac who screeches away to herself in her room. They said they didn't take solvent cases and told me to take her to the doctor. We went and the doctor referred us to a drugs service. They gave us some leaflets about solvent abuse and told us how dangerous it is. Then they referred us back to the first place we went to!"

***Mother of VS-user,
Grangemouth***

- Not all substance misuse services feel confident working with VS-users.

"We've got a group of 6 using gas and deodorants here at the moment.....what do we do? How do we protect them? How do we protect ourselves? We've gone to

¹ Ghodse et al, Trends in UK deaths associated with abuse of volatile substances, 1971-2009, International Centre for Drug Policy (ICDP), St George's, University of London, 2012.

***the shops we think they're getting stuff from, but it's not made much difference.
They just go somewhere else"***

***Project Worker in a young
person's residential unit,
Forth Valley***

In Scotland, the provision of treatment services for all types of substance misuse is an explicit tenet of the national policy framework, *The Road to Recovery*:

"An appropriate range of drug treatment and rehabilitation services to promote recovery, from all types of substance use, not just opiate dependency, which is based on local needs and circumstances, must be available in each part of Scotland"

No VSA specific treatment agency currently exists in Scotland nor is a specialist VSA treatment service necessary.

Building the capacity of existing generic drug treatment services to proactively include, promote and embed VSA in service mapping and provision is the main objective of this resource.

The resource has been designed for both classroom based delivery within and by organisations or via individual self-study.

Further Support

Re-Solv is funded by The Corra Foundation until April 2020 to provide free professional training and support throughout Scotland.

Please visit our website www.re-solv.org, or get in touch if you would like any further support or information.

