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## A digital campaign to increase awareness of Alcohol Exposed Pregnancy

It is widely accepted that alcohol is a teratogen (from its ability to cross the placenta and cause fetal malformations in addition to other conditions) and that persistent, high level prenatal alcohol exposure can lead to disability (1). There is emerging evidence that even low to moderate drinking during pregnancy can cause harmful effects, referred to as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum disorders (FASD) (2,3), with lifelong implications for the effected individual and their families. These include increased interaction with health services, social care and the criminal justice system(4).

There is increasing recognition that FASD is a significant public health issue in the UK where prevalence of prenatal alcohol exposure is an estimated at 41% (5) and FASD is thought to be present in at least 3% of the general population (6).

In 2018, the Greater Manchester Health and Social Care Partnership (GMHSCP) committed £1.6m in funding towards an initial 'proof of concept' programme to reduce Alcohol Exposed Pregnancies (AEP), with the ultimate ambition of ending new cases of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). The programme started in May 2019 and runs until 31st March 2021. As part of the programme, C21 Creative Communications Ltd were commissioned to undertake a digital Communications, Engagement and Behaviour Change campaign across the Bury, Oldham, Rochdale and Tameside areas of Greater Manchester.

### Aim of the Digital Campaign

From May to July 2019, the programme tested how a public marketing campaign could contribute towards reducing alcohol exposed pregnancies and preventing new cases FASD in the city-region. This was the first digital campaign addressing the issues associated with alcohol use in pregnancy.

Through research with would-be families, adoptive parents of children living with FASD and a range of local, regional and national partners, we developed '#Drymester': an initial ten-week digital-led awareness campaign in four local authority areas.

The aims of the campaign were to raise awareness of:

- Risks of drinking alcohol during pregnancy
- Chief medical officers guide around approach
- Impacts of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD)

The approach had a clear, consistent message of 'No safe time, no safe amount'. A broad audience including potential new mums (women age 18 to 35) and partners, families, friends (women and men aged 18 – 50) was targeted, and the campaign included supporting materials for midwives, GPs, health and community partners.

### The Delivery

The campaign was delivered in two phases, with an evaluation between the two. In Phase 1, awareness was established in the four areas (May to June 2019). After an evaluation, Phase 2 focused on building community ownership and participation across GM (October to December 2019).

### Key findings of the evaluation of the initial phase

Internal analysis of the initial digital campaign showed strong reach (4.5 million views), among the primary audience of would-be-mums, but also found that male partners were being reached too (80% women, 20% men). Additional insights highlighted further pointers for a successful phase-two roll out, including that Facebook and Youtube were the most effective channels, and that there were 435,070 engagements via social media (views, clicks, likes and shares). The most effective platform was paid-for social media advertisements (3.2 million views), and content was most often viewed on mobile phones and on Fridays.

Over half of people (53%) who saw the campaign responded positively, and more than 1 in 5 thought it 'excellent'. Nobody thought it was 'not very good' or 'poor'. The campaign was believed to be important, clear, believable and non-judgemental, in dealing with a potentially sensitive subject matter.

The internal campaign analysis was supplemented by independent evaluation, commissioned from social research agency Bluegrass Research. They conducted online and face-to-face interviews shortly before the start of the campaign, and afterwards – involving 1304 people from across the four boroughs where phase one campaign activities were focused. Data were then weighted per borough to match latest census data to give an accurately representative sample of the population.

The evaluation showed that prior to the campaign, 73% of participants felt that it was an important message, increasing to 86% for pregnant women and those planning to become pregnant. Nearly three quarters (72%) of people felt that it was an easy message to understand, increasing to 86% for pregnant women and those planning to become pregnant. Two thirds (67%) felt that it was a believable message, increasing to 74% for pregnant women and those planning to become pregnant.

After the campaign, people’s attitudes towards drinking while pregnant or planning a pregnancy was different depending on whether or not they saw the campaign. Although agreement with several statements saw only small changes, disagreement with them shifted markedly, for example the majority (80%) of those who saw the campaign disagreed that it was ‘OK to drink as you normally would until you get a positive pregnancy test result’, whereas only half (53%) of those who had not seen the campaign disagreed with this statement (figure 1).

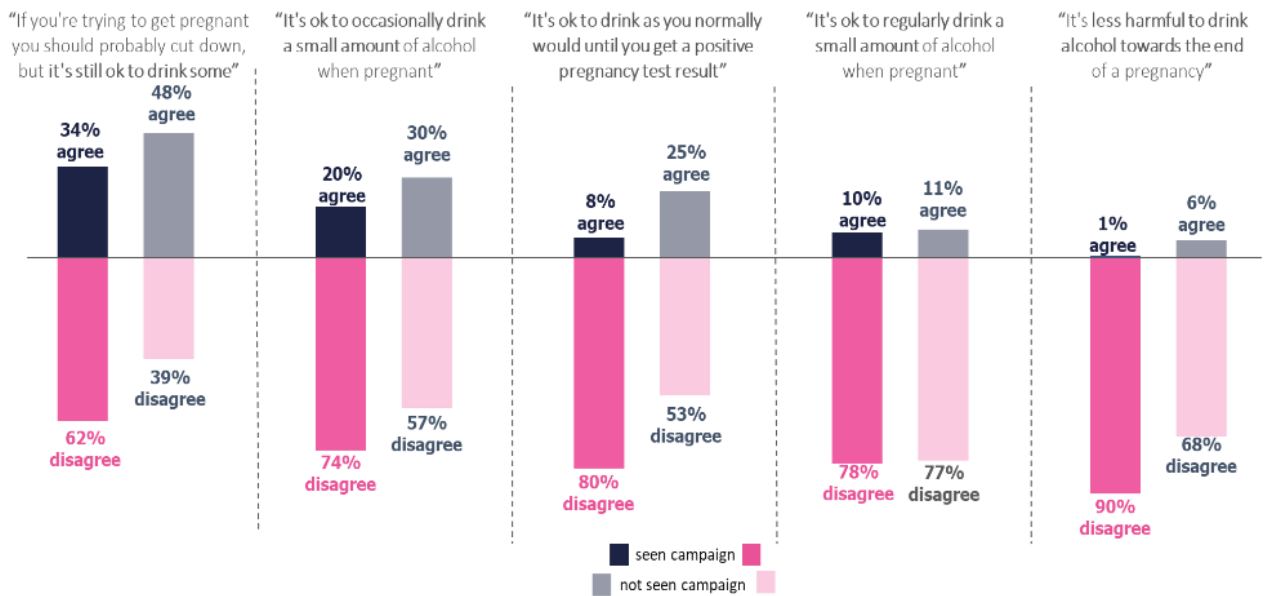


Figure 1. Differences in attitudes between members of the public who had seen the campaign (dark pink and dark grey) compared to those who had not (light pink and light grey)

## Phase 2

On the back of this success, GMHSCP commissioned Phase 2 of #Drymester – running for a further 10 weeks from mid-October 2019 to end-December 2019. The key objective for Phase 2 was to encourage more active engagement.

A specialist midwife working in the maternity strand of the AEP programme describes how the #Drymester campaign materials help her in her role:

*‘It is fantastic to be able to show women the website whilst having the discussions. It is user friendly and appealing and provides evidence-based information in a dynamic way. Other midwives have commented that they feel the website helps to reinforce the guidance without them needing to “dictate to women”. I recently had a woman who has returned for a later appointment and told me she shared the website with a newly pregnant friend before she even saw a healthcare professional, and they both have made some of the mocktail recipes!’ (Jennifer Michaels, specialist midwife).*

#Drymester has been shortlisted for 2 national awards, the CIM Marketing Excellence Awards – Best not-for-profit/charity/social marketing campaign, and the Brave Awards 2020 recognising campaigns that promote uncomfortable conversations and tackle taboos.

### Conclusion

Recent systematic reviews confirm the association between alcohol consumption during pregnancy and harmful outcomes in pregnancy (7), and call for unambiguous messaging around the potential risk of alcohol during pregnancy. The Greater Manchester #Drymester campaign, the first of its kind, has been well received and shows promising impact on awareness of the risks of drinking during pregnancy. Its clear messaging and hashtag #Drymester has been recognised nationally, notably by the press to support the call for clear messaging (8). It is hoped that #Drymester will have a significant impact on alcohol harm in the region and even the country, and for generations to come.

C21 Creative Communications Ltd is a creative communications agency providing innovative, integrate marketing solutions.

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