

# Research strategy

April 2020 to March 2023

Alcohol harm is not inevitable.  
Research is at the heart of our  
plan for change.



## Foreword

Alcohol causes serious harm in our society – every year many thousands of people die and many more are harmed as a result of their own or someone else's drinking. At Alcohol Change UK we are committed to reducing that harm. High-quality research is essential to our efforts to drive behaviour change and to shift the national conversation about alcohol.

We believe that, in order to achieve sustained reductions in alcohol harm, we must also use robust and rigorous research evidence to guide policy and practice. We seek to contribute to an increased and enhanced knowledge base, and to communicate this knowledge to inform and stimulate change.

We hold our values at the heart of our work: ambition, compassion and truthfulness. These values underpin our new Research Strategy. It sets out an ambitious plan grounded in deep compassion for people affected by alcohol harm. Through our funded and in-house research, and creative and accessible communications, we seek to share rigorous, impartial research about alcohol harm.

Over the coming years, whatever they may hold, we will generate research evidence that will equip us and others to drive the changes required to reduce the serious harm caused by alcohol.

**Dr Emmert Roberts**

Chair of the Alcohol Change UK Research and Policy Committee

# Introduction

Every year alcohol-related harm leads to thousands of lives lost and millions of lives negatively affected. The most recent figures available show that 7,551 people died in 2018 as a result of alcohol-specific causes (ONS, 2019). Alcohol harm can affect any one of us, from any walk of life. Individuals, families, communities and broader society all feel its effects. But alcohol harm is not inevitable.

Alcohol Change UK works for a society that is free from the harm caused by alcohol. We create evidence-driven change by working towards five key changes: improved knowledge, better policies and regulation, shifted cultural norms, improved drinking behaviours, and more and better support and treatment.

Alcohol Change UK is a leading alcohol charity formed by the merger of Alcohol Concern and Alcohol Research UK.

## **We are:**

- Truthful – We seek and tell the truth.
- Compassionate – We care deeply about everyone seriously harmed by alcohol, whoever they are.
- Ambitious for change – We are optimistic and determined.

In 2018 we created our new organisational strategy; our new Research Strategy draws on the strategic aims outlined for the organisation, and from extensive consultation with our stakeholders.

Since the last Alcohol Research UK Research Strategy in 2015, and the publication of 'Researching Alcohol Harm: 30 years of impact' in 2016, Alcohol Research UK and subsequently Alcohol Change UK have funded a wealth of research projects. We have held national conferences in London and Cardiff and shared our research knowledge through our external public communications, our work with parliamentarians and policy-makers, and with practitioners in the alcohol harm field.

Research and evidence are vital and should underpin the way we think about alcohol harm reduction. Not all research is easily accessible by those who can bring about that change. That is why we are committed to better understanding the complexities that link alcohol and harm, strengthening the evidence-base, and helping with the funding, curation and communication of high-quality research and evidence.

We want our funded research to deliver actionable evidence that can inform policy decisions, changes in practice and reductions in alcohol harm for individuals, families, communities and society as a whole.

We will review our Research Strategy every three years.

## Our research goals April 2020 to March 2023

With a commitment to rigorous impartial research about alcohol harm, we will fund, commission and conduct high-quality research which adds to the evidence base. We want alcohol policy and practice to be developed on the basis of robust research evidence; new ideas about alcohol harm reduction created, tested and shared; and the knowledge base enriched by the experience of those affected by alcohol harm. To achieve these aims we have four goals:

- 1 Deliver an innovative programme of research grants that transforms the evidence base on alcohol harm, in order to shift cultural norms around drinking and improve drinking behaviours.
- 2 Commission and conduct relevant and timely research that informs better policy, regulation, support and treatment.
- 3 Communicate research evidence to the public, policy-makers, researchers, clinicians and service providers.
- 4 Influence the wider research agenda to prioritise relevant and timely work on alcohol harm.

**1. Provide research grants that transform the evidence base on alcohol harm, in order to shift cultural norms around drinking and improve drinking behaviours.**

### 1.1 New Horizons grants programme

The three-year New Horizons grants programme for academic research will support innovation in alcohol harm research. With a focus on new topics, theories and domains, and challenging orthodoxies, the programme will fund up to four projects to explore related topics under a single theme. The first round of grants will be awarded in early 2021, the second in the financial year 2023–2024. Projects will last for around two years.

The theme for the first New Horizons grants is 'Groups, Communities and Alcohol Harm'. We will call for proposals that explore how people's use of alcohol relates to their membership of, or identification with, groups and communities. Groups and communities may encompass demographic groupings (such as gender or age), groups of people with similar medical conditions, or social communities (such as cultural, national, religious, geographic or social communities of identity). We will welcome proposals from all academic disciplines and involving a wide range of methodological approaches.

We will encourage and support funded researchers to work in a complementary way; sharing design ideas and emerging findings and working together to achieve impact with their work. We want the New Horizons programme to deliver fresh, innovative and forward-looking research. We strongly encourage applicants to propose projects that bring together different disciplines to bring new perspectives and methodologies to their work.

Grants made under the New Horizons programme will help to achieve two of our organisational priorities:

- Shifted cultural norms: we want to see the development of more informed and balanced drinking cultures across the UK, with alcohol playing a less central role.
- Improved drinking behaviours: we want to help more people gain the motivation, confidence and ability to exert control over their drinking; with less need for specialist support.

## 1.2. Supplementary small grants

In order to maximise the impact of our grant-making we will seek opportunities to collaborate with other funders and institutions to support important emerging research. We will assess these on a case-by-case basis and review our approach and impact annually.

## **2. Commission and conduct relevant and timely research that informs better policy, regulation, support and treatment**

Our programme of commissioned and in-house research will help to achieve two more organisational priorities:

- Better policies and regulation: we want to see a policy environment that prioritises the reduction of alcohol harms in all their forms based on robust and reliable evidence.
- More and better support and treatment: we want to see a vibrant and diverse treatment sector that is effective, properly funded, well-commissioned and coordinated, and easy for people with drinking problems and their families to navigate.

We will commission short to medium-term research on topics of relevance to our UK priority policy areas. Priorities will be identified and reviewed annually to respond to opportunities and needs, and to allow us to create evidence to support our policy aims.

We will commission and conduct further research to explore how alcohol treatment services might better reach under-served groups and people with additional support needs, and how treatment services for other support needs might better support their clients to reduce alcohol harm. Led by our team in Wales, this work will aim to:

- 1 be exploratory and innovative
- 2 be relevant and applicable across the UK
- 3 focus on inequalities and under-served groups
- 4 recommend practice improvements across a range of sectors

## **3. Influence the wider research agenda to prioritise relevant and timely work on alcohol harm**

As well as improving knowledge by funding and commissioning research, we will also work with others to bring alcohol onto their agenda. We will work collaboratively with other funders to encourage them to fund work on alcohol or relevant topics, and with researchers to inform their funding bids, project designs and dissemination.

## **4. Communicate research evidence to the public, policy-makers, researchers, clinicians, commissioners and service providers.**

We will continue to share and promote research findings on alcohol and relevant subjects with a wide range of audiences. We all, as citizens, need access to relevant knowledge that can help us to make informed decisions about our drinking and it is our role to help with the curation and communication of the evidence.

We will make research evidence accessible and meaningful to the public, to people working in or commissioning treatment services, to policy-makers whose decisions have the power to reduce or increase alcohol harm, and to researchers in all fields of study. We will use our wide online reach to share reflections and summaries of findings. We will continue to share knowledge through our national conferences in England and Wales, by speaking at events nationwide and by seeking opportunities to write for a range of publications. Finally, we will expect our funded project teams to deliver dissemination activity that reaches beyond researchers to other audiences as relevant.

## Our guiding principles

### **Ethical and impartial**

Alcohol Change UK is an independent charity and we fund, commission and conduct research that is ethically sound and impartial. We do not accept funds from the alcohol industry; more information about our investment fund is available on our website<sup>1</sup>. We expect that grant recipients will submit their projects for appropriate ethical scrutiny by relevant institutional committees.

### **Robust and high-quality**

Our research processes help to ensure that the research we fund, commission and conduct is high-quality and robust. We draw on the knowledge and technical skills of our Expert Advisory Group, which comprises academics, people with lived experience of alcohol harm, clinicians, policy experts and other key stakeholders. We apply appropriate peer review requirements on funding applications and expect funded teams to submit their findings to peer reviewed publications. We are a member of the Association of Medical Research Charities and support their principles of peer review: accountability; balance; independence; rotation; and impartiality<sup>2</sup>.

### **Relevant**

We recognise the critical value of listening to the experiences of those who are affected by alcohol harms. We will ensure that the work we fund and commission is relevant to the needs and priorities of people with lived experience of alcohol harm by recruiting people with this perspective to our Expert Advisory Panel. We will encourage the teams we fund to find meaningful ways to bring the voice of people affected into their work at all stages.

### **Inclusive**

We recognise that research benefits from diversity, so we seek to promote equality, diversity and inclusivity in our research practices. We do this by:

- 1 actively sharing open funding calls with a wide range of potential applicants and encouraging applications from new alcohol researchers and collaborative teams,
- 2 introducing an element of anonymised review into the selection process, and
- 3 continually reviewing our processes to recognise and remove bias.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://alcoholchange.org.uk/about-us/how-our-work-is-funded>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.amrc.org.uk/principles-of-peer-review>

## **Value for money**

As a charity, all our expenditure must be in service of our charitable objects; to reduce alcohol-related harm to individuals, families and communities. It is our responsibility to fund, commission and conduct research that represents good value for money. This does not necessarily mean choosing cheaper projects over more expensive, but that cost and efficiency will inform our decisions.

## **Efficient and proportionate processes**

As a funder, we want our application, selection and monitoring processes to be reasonable and proportionate; we must ensure that we fund the right projects whilst not placing a disproportionate burden on applicants or successful grant recipients. Our grant application process is designed to encourage collaborative working between successful recipients.

## **Impact focussed and accessible**

Although we do not distinguish between theoretical and applied research projects in our funding and commissioning decisions, we wish to fund research that generates improved knowledge and impact in academic research contexts, enhances public awareness and understanding, and that informs better policy and regulation. We will make findings from our funded, commissioned and in-house research available through our website and other communication channels, and ask our grant recipients to publish in open-access publications.

## **Collaborative and working in partnership**

We will work collaboratively with researchers we fund, we will encourage effective and useful collaboration between teams we fund, and we will seek to work in partnership with other funders and institutions to add value to the research landscape and knowledge base around alcohol harm. We will continue to work with academic networks and sector alliances (such as the Alcohol Health Alliance and Alcohol and Families Alliance) to influence their research agendas and to bring our expertise and networks to bear on their work. We are a member of the Association of Medical Research Charities and will continue to play a role in network activities.

**Alcohol Change UK** works to significantly reduce serious alcohol harm in the UK. We create evidence-driven change by working towards five key changes: improved knowledge, better policies and regulation, shifted cultural norms, improved drinking behaviours, and more and better support and treatment.

Find out more at [alcoholchange.org.uk](https://alcoholchange.org.uk).

Alcohol Change UK is the operational name of Alcohol Research UK. Registered office 27 Swinton Street, London WC1X 9NW. Registered charity number 1140287. Company limited by guarantee in England and Wales number 7462605.