



### **Three key steps to reduce the harm caused to families through substance use**

A policy manifesto for the next UK Government written by the Alliance of Family Support Organisations; a network of charitable organisations in England that support and represent families affected by substance use.

### **Background**

**Over five million adults in the UK are negatively affected by the drinking or drug use of a family member or friend<sup>i</sup>.**

Being affected by a loved one's substance use can have devastating consequences. Many family members and carers face multiple challenges throughout their lives, including mental health problems, isolation, trauma, stigma, physical strain, financial hardship, conflict, and loss. Children and young people affected by parental substance use can face significant and unique challenges too including abuse and neglect.

It is paramount that we support those negatively affected by the substance use of a family member through specialist support, to ensure they can make changes in their lives to overcome these challenges and achieve their own recovery, regardless of whether their family member is able to or not. Investing in family support can also create potential savings to the public purse.

Stigma does not just attach itself to people with an addiction; it continues to be a barrier both to those affected by substance use and their families. It prevents people from speaking out and causes them to become marginalised in society. Greater awareness and understanding of the stigma and discrimination they face is vital to ensure people are given the opportunity to thrive.

**The Government must outline clear actions for how it plans to create a system where no one falls through the gaps, there is no stigma attached to anyone affected by addiction, and addiction is viewed as a public health issue.**

*The Alliance of Family Support organisations* proposes three key steps to reduce the harm caused to those affected by substance abuse:

1. Investing in and valuing our families through **fair access to care**.
2. Supporting families through drug- and alcohol-related deaths with **specialist bereavement support**.
3. Supporting children affected by parental substance use through **early intervention**.



## **1. Investing in and valuing our families**

Following the Harm to Hope Drugs Strategy, substantial additional funding has been made available for general drug and alcohol services that support people with their own substance use. However, evidence suggests very little funding is filtering through to specialist family support<sup>ii</sup>. Many family services, where they exist, are having to deal with increased referrals despite consistent underfunding of the sector. This increased demand is possibly a knock-on effect of cuts to social services, cost of living problems, and the growing complexity of issues people and families are facing.

Specialist drug and alcohol family services should be afforded a fair portion of the funding available to reflect the important and specialist role they undertake in supporting a loved one's recovery, and to ensure family members get the support they need in their own right, whether their loved one is engaged in drug or alcohol treatment services or not.

**Guidelines should be strengthened to encourage local areas to invest more fairly, setting expectations around the percentage of the total budget that's allocated to specialist family support, and recording and publishing the number of families being supported. These relatively minor changes to commissioning guidance could significantly impact the wellbeing of families.**

Investing in family support can help families and carers to better help their loved ones, potentially creating significant savings to the public purse, including the NHS, social care costs and through reducing crime. There is a triple return on investing in specialist family support as families can better support their loved ones to access care earlier and sustain recovery; family members themselves can enjoy improved wellbeing; and family support helps prevent the intergenerational transfer of trauma.

## **2. Tackling drug- and alcohol- related deaths and supporting bereaved families**

The latest drug related death statistics for England and Wales in 2022 show the highest numbers since records began, at 4,907 deaths that year<sup>iii</sup>. There were 10,048 deaths from alcohol in 2022 in the UK, also the highest since records began<sup>iv</sup>.

**Every life lost to drugs or alcohol is a tragedy and preventable, and losing a loved one in this way can be incredibly difficult. To prevent future deaths, making sure that people can get the support they need must be a top priority, along with provision of specialist bereavement support to those who have lost loved ones in this way, through services at the local or national level. Specialist support for families can also help tackle the stigma faced by those who have lost a loved one to drug and alcohol use.**



### **3. Early intervention for children**

An estimated 3 million children in the UK are growing up with a parent struggling with an alcohol problem<sup>v</sup>. These children can face significant challenges throughout their childhood, including abuse, neglect, and trauma.

Furthermore, the Government's Drug Treatment Monitoring System (NDTMS) statistics for 2022/23 showed that of the nearly 50,000 children whose parents (or other adults living with them) had entered drug or alcohol treatment, **35,000 children received no early help**<sup>vi</sup>.

Stability and care at home are vital for us all and, without early intervention, children affected by parental substance use are much more likely to struggle in later life and present in other areas of welfare, justice, or NHS waiting lists.

Children and young people have been facing additional challenges and complexity since the covid pandemic, leading to increased mental health problems and school absences. In addition, there are highly worrying risks around exposure to organised crime and county lines which continue to destroy the lives of children and families which must be addressed.

**A systems-led approach for children and young people is urgently needed, to ensure adequate care is provided to children affected by parental substance use, or that of a sibling or other close family member. We recommend a joint national working group is established between representatives from family sector, social services and drug treatment services to identity the best practice moving forward.**

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<sup>i</sup> <https://adfam.org.uk/files/Overlooked.pdf>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://adfam.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/State-of-the-Family-Support-Sector-2023.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup>

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2022registrations>

<sup>iv</sup>

[https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/bulletins/alcoholrelateddeathsintheunitedkingdom/registeredin2022#:~:text=The%20number%20recorded%20in%202022,COVID%2D19\)%20pandemic%20year.](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/causesofdeath/bulletins/alcoholrelateddeathsintheunitedkingdom/registeredin2022#:~:text=The%20number%20recorded%20in%202022,COVID%2D19)%20pandemic%20year.)

<sup>v</sup> <https://nacoa.org.uk/research-resources/research/>

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/substance-misuse-treatment-for-adults-statistics-2022-to-2023/adult-substance-misuse-treatment-statistics-2022-to-2023-report>