



The AERC Alcohol Academy

1st year review: September 2010

Executive summary

The AERC Alcohol Academy was founded in 2009 with a grant from the Alcohol Education and Research Council (AERC). The Academy was established to promote excellence in local alcohol harm reduction, primarily through supporting local alcohol strategic leads. An initial scoping project identified that there was considerable favour for developing work that supported the learning, development and networking for alcohol harm reduction leads.

Progress summary

The AERC Alcohol Academy has in its first year:

- Established itself as a recognised Community Interest Company (CIC) committed to promoting excellence in local alcohol harm reduction
- Delivered a range of workshops, seminars and events to promote learning, networking and development amongst alcohol leads
- Identified an important role in identifying and developing responses to ‘key issues’ facing the delivery of local alcohol harm reduction
- Developed a number of [briefing papers](#) and working groups that respond to these key issues to identify the issue, provide guidance and alert policy makers to recommendations
- Supported the dissemination of learning, best practice and development through regular communications using channels including: a dedicated alcohol leads e-forum; Academy website (www.alcoholacademy.net) and www.alcoholpolicy.uk
- Established itself as a recognised authority for alcohol leads, policy makers and others seeking advice, input or support
- Established itself as a recognised alcohol training provider, which has allowed it to generate income as a ‘not-for-profit’ CIC. Profits must be re-invested in achieving its aims of excellence in local alcohol harm reduction

Key 1 year survey findings

- The Academy’s various functions received an overall rating value of 4.06 on a 1-5 scale, 5 being the highest (‘very high value’), 0 being the lowest ‘No value’).
- Raising key issues with policy makers and updates and information via Alcohol Policy UK were rated as having the highest value. The alcohol leads e-forum received the lowest (value of 3.64 on a 1-5 scale as above)



- 75% of people had read Academy briefing papers, giving an overall rating of 4.12 to their value (on a 1-5 scale)
- Alcohol commissioning skills and the responses to home drinking were identified as the most important areas the Academy were working on
- Alcohol Policy UK, supported by the Academy to deliver alcohol news and information, received an average value rating of 4.09 (on a 1-5 scale)
- Government policy, research reports and events and workshops were rated as the highest value areas to cover on Alcohol Policy UK
- The overall value of the Academy in supporting local alcohol harm reduction was rated at 4.15 (on a 1-5 scale), with 78% rating it as either 'very high' or 'high' value

Key challenges & issues

- The largest challenge is currently capacity to deliver all identified work streams and opportunities that have presented. This could potentially be threatened by a failure to secure future funding or sufficient income as a CIC in a period of severe cuts
- The Academy is still a relatively new CIC. Establishing its identity and ensuring its role is understood will require ongoing monitoring – some people have misinterpreted the Academy as the AERC. Initially it appeared some organisations or leads adopted a cautious approach to the Academy, or may have seen it as competition (especially in respect of training delivery). However as it has progressed there has been increasing support from the key bodies (such as the Department of Health) and better understanding of the Academy's role.
- To some extent, it is not specific alcohol strategy leads that require the most skills development but those leads and commissioners that have alcohol within a wider remit. As a result these roles may have more acute learning needs and benefit most from learning and development opportunities

Key recommendations:

- Continue to gather, share and disseminate alcohol related research, learning and best practice through channels including Alcohol Policy UK, the Academy website and alcohol leads e-forum
- Continue to support alcohol leads through live networking and learning opportunities including regional workshops, seminar events and symposiums
- Continue to identify and develop responses to 'key issues' affecting the delivery of local and national alcohol harm reduction approaches
- Consider revising the Academy strap line to '*promoting effective alcohol harm reduction*'. Replacing 'excellent' with 'effective' alcohol harm reduction may add clarity to the objectives and emphasise commitment to evidence based practice.



Removing 'local' may better reflect important objectives of influencing policy at a national level.

- Continue to work closely with Department of Health leads at national, regional and local levels, particularly to ensure that the transfer of responsibilities to the new Public Health Service reflects the Academy's objectives for alcohol harm reduction
- Continue to work with the Home Office alcohol strategy unit and other departments relevant to alcohol strategy, particularly as opportunities arise to better integrate health and crime and disorder agendas
- Further promote existing Academy resources and work to alcohol leads and uptake of free Academy membership
- Expand the Academy's capacity by seeking to secure sufficient income to fund further core work
- Develop the Academy's operations as a CIC to enable it greater capacity to deliver its core work programme of free support for alcohol leads and attention to and development of key issues
- Develop capacity to be able to deliver further free alcohol and brief interventions training for practitioners
- Establish a full board of at least 6 non-executive Directors by 2011



1 year progress report

Progress, developments and next steps

In its first year the Academy has delivered on work areas as proposed, but it has also developed on significant opportunities to work in a number of other important areas, particularly in respect of identifying and addressing key issues and policy gaps. Progress and developments on both original ambitions and new opportunities are considered below.

1. Workshops, seminars and events

The Academy proposed that it would deliver workshops and events to support local alcohol leads, primarily organised on a regional basis. The Academy has delivered a range of events and has agreements to deliver more of these, though there has been some re-alignment of the Academy's resources resulting in fewer regional workshops than planned to date. This is based on a number of factors that are subject to change, possibly likely to result in increased demand given forthcoming public sector cuts.

The development of the Department of Health funded regional Alcohol Improvement Programme (AIP) has largely offered opportunities for the delivery of regional alcohol seminars and workshops in many areas. A number of regions have identified priorities and readily taken up the Academy's offer of free workshops and seminars, whilst other regions are currently planning suitable dates. Some regions have appeared not yet ready for the delivery of regional workshops - other work agendas or a need to establish regional priorities appear to be the main barriers. Possibly in one or two cases, Regional Alcohol Managers (or equivalent ownership) may feel as though they do not require or any outside support at this stage.

It should be noted that the Academy has not actively pursued regions where workshops have not been delivered or are currently planned as the Academy believes there are more valuable uses of its resources at present (as detailed later in this report). Nonetheless the potential but very real threat to the regional alcohol programmes' existence in facing forthcoming cuts means that there could be a significant gap opened for regional and national programmes of work and associated events. Future demand and opportunities for Academy led workshops and events may therefore significantly rise as the work programme progresses and resources become more scarce.

Key AERC Alcohol Academy events delivered to date are outlined below:



AERC Alcohol Academy launch event

The launch event took place in June 2009 in London and covered a range of subjects relevant to local alcohol leads. The aim of the event was to explore some current issues facing local alcohol harm reduction, allow coordinators to network and share ideas, and test the best model for delivering workshops

See here for the [Academy launch event](#) summary and presentations

Yorkshire & Humber regional workshops

Workshops covering subjects requested by alcohol leads in the Yorkshire and Humber region were delivered in November 2009. Subjects ranged from managing alcohol-related crime and disorder in the night time economy to understanding drinking demographics of higher risk drinkers.

See here for the [Yorkshire & Humber workshops](#) summary and presentations

North East Regional Workshops 1&2

Workshops covering subjects requested by alcohol leads in the North East region were delivered in February 2010. The first half-day workshop addressed alcohol and older people and the second day was the first event covering the subject of combined alcohol and cocaine use (or 'cocaethylene').

See here for the [North East workshops 1 & 2](#) summary and presentations

North East Regional Workshops 3&4

Workshops covering further subjects requested by alcohol leads in the North East region were also delivered in February 2010. The first half-day workshop addressed alcohol and domestic violence and the second day explored alcohol issues amongst children and young people.

See here for four of the presentations from the [North East workshops 3&4](#)

Brief Interventions: commissioning and delivery issues symposium

The symposium aimed to explore challenges in the delivery of brief interventions and responses for improving alcohol intervention approaches. Presentations on the day explored other challenges as well as successful responses and commissioning practices for alcohol. Particular discussion on the day identified some lack of clarity over different brief intervention approaches and resulted in the subsequent briefing paper 'Clarifying brief interventions'.



See here for presentations and event summary for the [brief interventions symposium](#)

South West Alcohol and Older People event

The one day event was open to alcohol or older people strategic leads and practitioners in the South West. The event included a range of presentations and workshops exploring the key knowledge, challenges and opportunities to improve practice around alcohol and older people.

See here for event presentations from the [South West alcohol and older people event](#)

2. Networking, sharing information and best practice

As an original objective, the sharing of information, learning and best practice has taken priority in the work of the Academy. The Academy has established and managed a specialist 'e-forum' (specialised email group service) which currently has a membership of 70 specialist alcohol leads. The forum is used by members to share practice, learning, resources, or ask questions or raise queries with their peers. The Academy has also used the forum to directly deliver specific information (or outside requests for input) to a specific group of strategic alcohol leads.

The scoping exercise also identified that alcohol leads recommended Alcohol Policy UK (www.alcoholpolicy.net) as the simplest and most accessible way to share brief information, best practice and developments within the field. Alcohol Policy UK had previously been used by Ranzetta Consulting to update the field where time permitted, but within the remit of the Academy it has been used regularly (near daily updates) to highlight the most recent developments and practice. Alcohol Policy UK readership has continued to climb and is now averaging over 11,000 page views per month.

In addition to identifying and sharing a range of information, news, best practice and learning, the Academy has also promoted and supported the delivery of other key resources promoting alcohol learning and development. Of particular importance has been the work of the AIP and the Alcohol Hub of Commissioned Projects and Policies (HubCAPP). Though initially there was some concern over possible threat of competition/duplication, it has become apparent that these projects occupy different spaces within the field. Significantly it also has appeared such is the scope and need for the sharing of information, learning and practice that there is little if any competition over 'space' in which to promote this work. Good relations between the national AIP and other projects have allowed the mutual support and promotion of the various work strands.



3. Identifying and developing key issues

Probably the most significant area for the Academy since its inception has appeared to be the opportunity to identify and help address key issues and challenges facing local alcohol harm reduction. In many respects, it is the delivery functions of the Academy that have enabled progress to be made on such 'key issues', but it has become clear that there is a real need for further 'defining' of (and increased recognition towards) a number of key challenges.

Progressing action on 'key issues'

In many respects the Academy believes that objectives in relation to identifying and developing key issues relate to addressing certain barriers in bridging policy, research and local implementation/practice. The Academy's key objective of 'promoting excellence in local alcohol harm reduction' essentially means that it wishes to support policy and practice that will have the greatest effect in reducing alcohol-related harm.

Mostly this means promoting evidence-based practice – which involves local alcohol leads understanding practice and research and knowing how to implement it. However in other particular areas there is a lack of established evidence-based approaches, which means that developing, assessing and sharing 'innovative practice' is of significant importance. Central government has a responsibility to translate evidence and research into guidance and support to regional and local bodies. However as is well publicised with drug and alcohol policy, evidence based policy may often be compromised by political expediency.

In respect of key issues facing the delivery of local alcohol harm reduction, the Academy has therefore worked to develop a role to:

- Ensure national alcohol policy recognises and responds to gaps and key issues affecting the delivery of local alcohol harm reduction
- Ensure national policy reflects appropriate evidence based approaches rather than reflect political expediency or vested interests
- Ensure that research and learning within the academic field is suitably disseminated and digested for strategic alcohol leads and commissioners
- Ensure that academia develops new programmes in response to research needs identified by local alcohol leads tasked with implementing alcohol policy.

These objectives can be demonstrated by the Academy's work to identify and progress action on the following 'key issues':

Alcohol and older people



The Academy has given significant attention to addressing the significantly under-recognised issue of alcohol use amongst the elderly. It is apparent there are a number of complex areas for development in order to better identify and respond to alcohol issues amongst the elderly. These issues largely appear to include:

- The need for better understanding of the prevalence of alcohol use and harms amongst the elderly.
- The need for better understanding of effective alcohol interventions and treatment for the elderly.
- Development of alcohol interventions for the elderly in Primary Care as a key setting (assessing screening tools – MAST-G and FAST have been suggested)
- How alcohol treatment and interventions can better reach older people.
- Improved knowledge and sharing of existing best practice approaches.
- Exploration of key issues that may be useful in responding to the issues, such as whether a separate recommended consumption guideline would be useful for the elderly and the role of training for carers.
- A better policy recognition of alcohol issues amongst the elderly in both alcohol and older people's national strategy and related agendas.

In addition to running a number of workshops and events to promote knowledge and understanding of the issues, the Academy has organised and delivered two working groups to progress further action in this area. The Academy has established an alcohol and older people practitioner's working group through which it has coordinated specialist experts on the subject to jointly identify issues and actions needed at service level.

The Academy has also established a national alcohol and older people working group which has brought together a number of key leads (such as national charities and national leads) to agree policy recommendations and options for further action. Next steps include:

- Further supporting alcohol leads to respond to and prevent alcohol issues amongst the elderly through a forthcoming briefing paper and further events
- Continuing practitioner and national leads alcohol and older people working groups to further develop and promote learning and responses to relevant issues
- Releasing briefing papers for alcohol leads and national policy makers
- Working with researchers to develop learning and recommendations

Combined alcohol and cocaine use (cocaethylene)

The Academy recognises a key challenge of distinctly separated drug and alcohol strategies is that the need to look at particular issues of combined use is over-looked. Combined alcohol and powder cocaine use in particular appears to be increasingly



popular amongst certain groups of risky drinkers. This is of concern as the two drugs in combination can form cocaethylene, a unique compound which has been linked to a range of increased health and social risks.

The Academy has produced the [briefing paper](#) '*Cocaethylene: responding to combined alcohol and cocaine use*' to review the available data, assess implications for alcohol policy and make recommendations. The Academy has also worked with key psychosocial treatment experts and substance misuse trainers to develop a specific combined alcohol and cocaine training package.

The briefing paper raised identified significant concerns in view of the potential increased risks and an apparent significant upwards trend in the prevalence of combined use. The paper identified a number of areas for development and identified 3 key recommendations:

- Brief interventions and psychosocial treatment can be effective for both alcohol and cocaine users - optimum approaches should be explored for combined users
- Practitioners should be offered training and guidance to better understand and respond to the needs of combined alcohol and cocaine users
- The impact of combined alcohol and drug use needs further research and increased recognition within drug and alcohol strategy approaches

The Academy is keen to further develop understanding and research in relation to combined alcohol and cocaine use and its implications for alcohol harm reduction. The Academy has established a number of experts who are keen to support further work and is currently reviewing options for developing this issue further.

Alcohol commissioning skills

The Academy scoping exercise identified 'alcohol commissioning skills' as a key learning need for alcohol leads. The Academy recognised this as a priority given that 'alcohol commissioning skills' are not defined and often fall way behind to substance misuse commissioning priorities. The Academy successfully approached the DH to fund a scoping project that would identify the best method and content for an alcohol commissioning skills learning programme. This work is currently in its early phase of development but will be progressed as a priority as the Academy sees this an urgent area of important development.

Brief interventions: commissioning and delivery issues

The Academy welcomes the significant attention and investment over recent years into the delivery of brief interventions, or 'Identification and Brief Advice' (IBA) as promoted by the Department of Health. However a number of challenges are apparent in ensuring that IBA



is delivered efficiently and effectively across a range of tier 1 settings within the context of integrated care pathways. Some key issues include:

- Investment in IBA training and delivery often increases identification of dependent drinkers. This often increases referrals to specialist services which are often under-resourced and sometimes cannot already cope with existing demand
- There is varied interpretation and delivery of brief interventions and related approaches
- Significant barriers remain in terms of ensuring the delivery of IBA, including insufficient or appropriate incentivisation and support for various tier 1 workers, particularly GPs

The Academy recently produced the briefing paper [‘Clarifying brief interventions’](#) and will be further working with key alcohol policy and strategic leads to ensure brief interventions can be commissioned and delivered as effectively as possible.

Further areas

The Academy has also identified a number of further areas relevant to the success of local alcohol harm reduction and is working to develop work to progress action. These include:

- The relevance and use of alcohol-related crime and disorder legislation. For example, Section 141 of the 2003 Licensing Act: The sale of alcohol to drunken persons – forthcoming briefing paper
- Home drinking: an unacknowledged issue - How damaging is the bias of alcohol policy towards crime and disorder? Forthcoming briefing paper (see Academy presentation [here](#))
- Integrating the alcohol agenda – one of the biggest potential opportunities to alcohol harm reduction is to ensure better ownership of alcohol issues within other organisational, policy or treatment arenas. Whether it be the recognition of alcohol issues by older persons services, or the need to recognise the role of alcohol within mental health issues, the continuing challenge of ensuring how the alcohol agenda can be better integrated requires ongoing championing and development.

4. Supporting stakeholders and partners

The Academy has played an increasing role in supporting alcohol-related work programmes, projects and research. The Academy has viewed this as an important opportunity to promote its objectives whilst developing expertise and links within the field. The Academy has been asked to speak at a range of conferences and events which has similarly offered the opportunity to promote effective alcohol harm reduction. The Academy



has been asked to join a number of advisory panels, steering groups and strategic meetings on regional and national levels.

5. Influencing policy and consultation

The Academy works closely with central policy leads, especially in seeking to address key issues facing the delivery of alcohol harm reduction. However it is also recognised that it is ultimately politicians that determine top level policy, which includes an important role particularly in determining population based approaches to alcohol harm reduction. The Academy has no intention of developing any lobbying functions as is acutely aware of the complications (and other bodies) involved in doing so. However it sees an important role in responding to alcohol-related consultations and other opportunities to suitably influence policy or surrounding dialogue. The Academy most recently responded to the Government consultation on labelling and encouraged those within the alcohol field to do so.

6. Moving forward

The Academy has identified a wide-range of issues affecting the delivery of local alcohol harm reduction, and believes it has started some important work to help address these. In many respects there is serious concern about the continuing extent of alcohol-related harm and the size of the challenge ahead, not least considering forthcoming spending cuts likely to affect the field. However the Academy believes that the social enterprise model it has adopted to deliver its objectives will be very relevant to the future of innovative responses required when facing such challenges.

The Academy has been slowly but increasingly able to generate income as it has gathered momentum and profile, largely through the delivery of training. Whilst this has boosted the capacity and scope of its work somewhat, the Academy's existence and the work to meet its core objectives has been made possible only by the AERC grant. The Academy therefore proposes to consider applying for future grant funding from the AERC to support the continued development of excellence in local alcohol harm reduction.

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