



# Beating cancer for everyone

Our equality, diversity and inclusion in research strategic approach 2025–2030



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# Foreword



Research transforms lives and is at the heart of our mission to beat cancer. To achieve this mission, we need to fund exceptional researchers to unlock new and better ways to prevent, diagnose and treat cancer. This means attracting the most talented people from a broad range of backgrounds to cancer research, and supporting a breadth of innovative ideas so that more people affected by cancer benefit from our discoveries. We remain committed to promoting a positive, fair and inclusive culture, working with others to foster an environment where our researchers can thrive.

We're proud of the progress we've made since we published our first equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) action plan in 2021. We've broadened access to our funding, improved the inclusivity of our clinical research and introduced initiatives like our Black Leaders in Cancer PhD Scholarship Programme and strengthened our Women of Influence programme to help attract and retain exceptional cancer researchers.

But the burden of cancer isn't distributed equally across the population. Together with others, we need to go further to make sure research benefits more people.

The first priority in our refreshed five-year approach outlines our ambition to transform

our understanding of cancer inequalities and health disparities through research. This complements our wider efforts to reduce inequalities, such as our work to improve equal access to proven cancer interventions.

As the world's largest charitable funder of cancer research, we'll use our convening power to drive more interdisciplinary research. This will improve our understanding of the role of biology and how it intersects with other environmental and social factors to contribute to cancer inequalities and health disparities. On top of this, we'll use our influence to embed more inclusive research practices based on trust and engagement with patients and the public.

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Together with others, we need to go further to make sure research benefits more people.”

Our commitment to addressing cancer inequalities and championing a more diverse and inclusive research community is reflected in our longer-term organisational, EDI and research strategies. Our data on diversity

across our research funding indicates that challenges remain for some people looking to progress in their research careers. Building on our foundations and learnings from the last few years, the second priority of our strategic approach lays out our goal to be a fair funder, developing a more inclusive and diverse research community.

We won't be able to meet these ambitions alone. Working with others will be pivotal to realising the ambitions of this strategic approach and we're grateful to the cancer research community – patient representatives, researchers and partners – who've engaged with us in developing it.

Together, we continue to drive progress so that our research benefits from a diverse range of talented people helping to beat cancer for everyone.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Iain Foulkes', written in a fluid, cursive style.

Dr Iain Foulkes  
Executive Director of Research and Innovation



# Our vision for a better future

We want to bring about a world where everybody lives longer, better lives, free from the fear of cancer.

Cancer affects people differently, with differences in causes, rates, types, stage at diagnosis, and access to and response to treatment. As the world’s largest charitable funder of cancer research, from discovery science to clinical trials, we’re committed to making sure beating cancer means beating it for everyone.

We fund exceptional people to deliver world-leading research. Through the work of more than 4,000 scientists, doctors and nurses at all career stages, we’re delivering high-quality, cutting-edge research that’s unlocking new ways to prevent, diagnose and treat cancer. By attracting talented people from diverse backgrounds and promoting fair and inclusive research environments, we’re committed to driving impactful research and innovation that will make the greatest progress in beating cancer together.

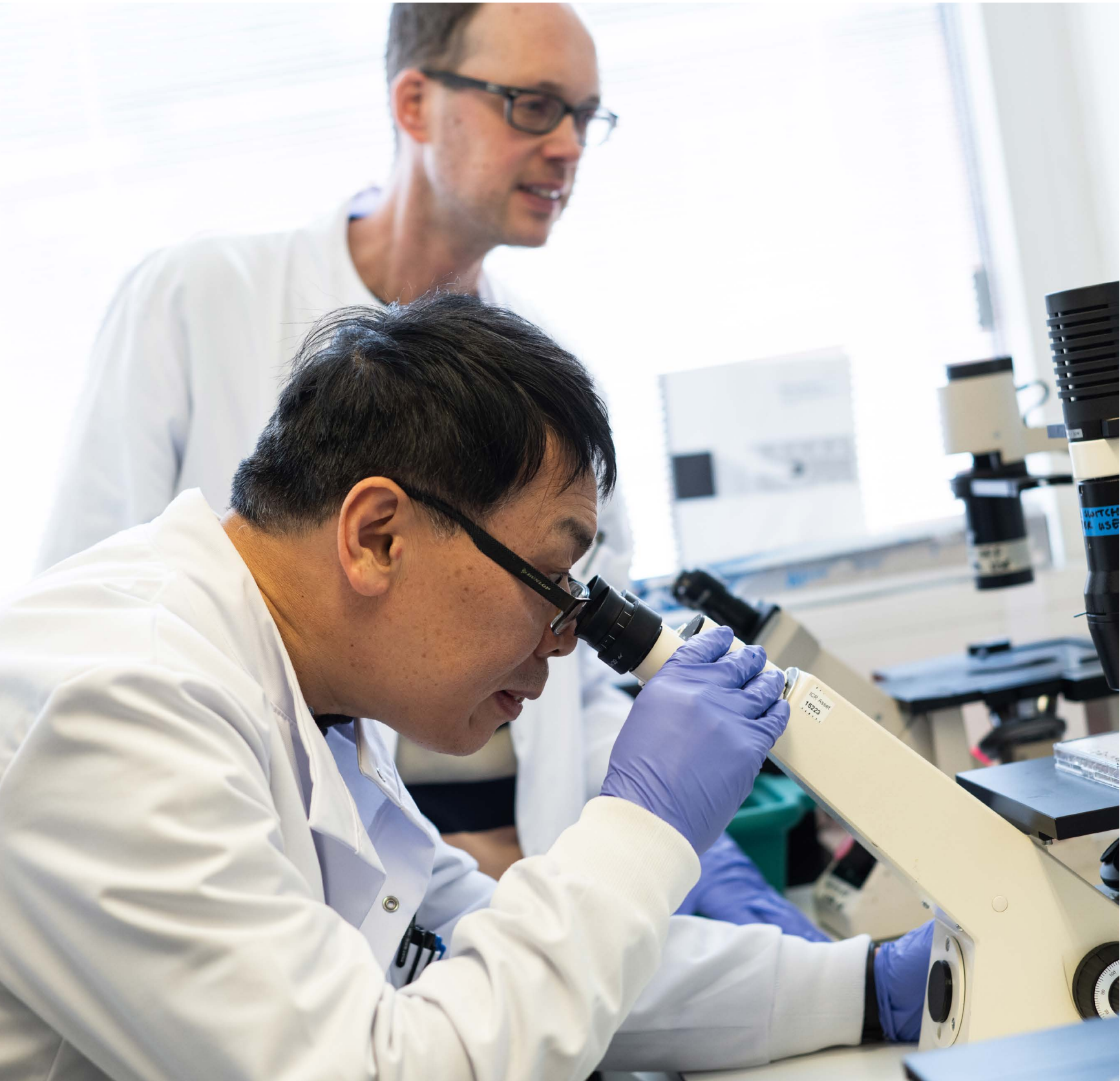
## Our journey so far

We published our first EDI in research action plan in 2021. To assess our progress and help shape our priorities for the next five years and beyond, we undertook a comprehensive review – including a benchmarking exercise by an independent consultant – to understand best practices and where our EDI maturity sits in comparison with our peers. We also gathered valuable insights from cancer researchers, patient representatives and external EDI experts and funding bodies.

We’re pleased with the strong progress we’ve made, including:

- implementing new funding policies and practices
- supporting talented early career researchers from underrepresented groups
- promoting inclusive research design and practice

Despite this progress, we know we need to keep identifying and addressing challenges so we can achieve our objectives.



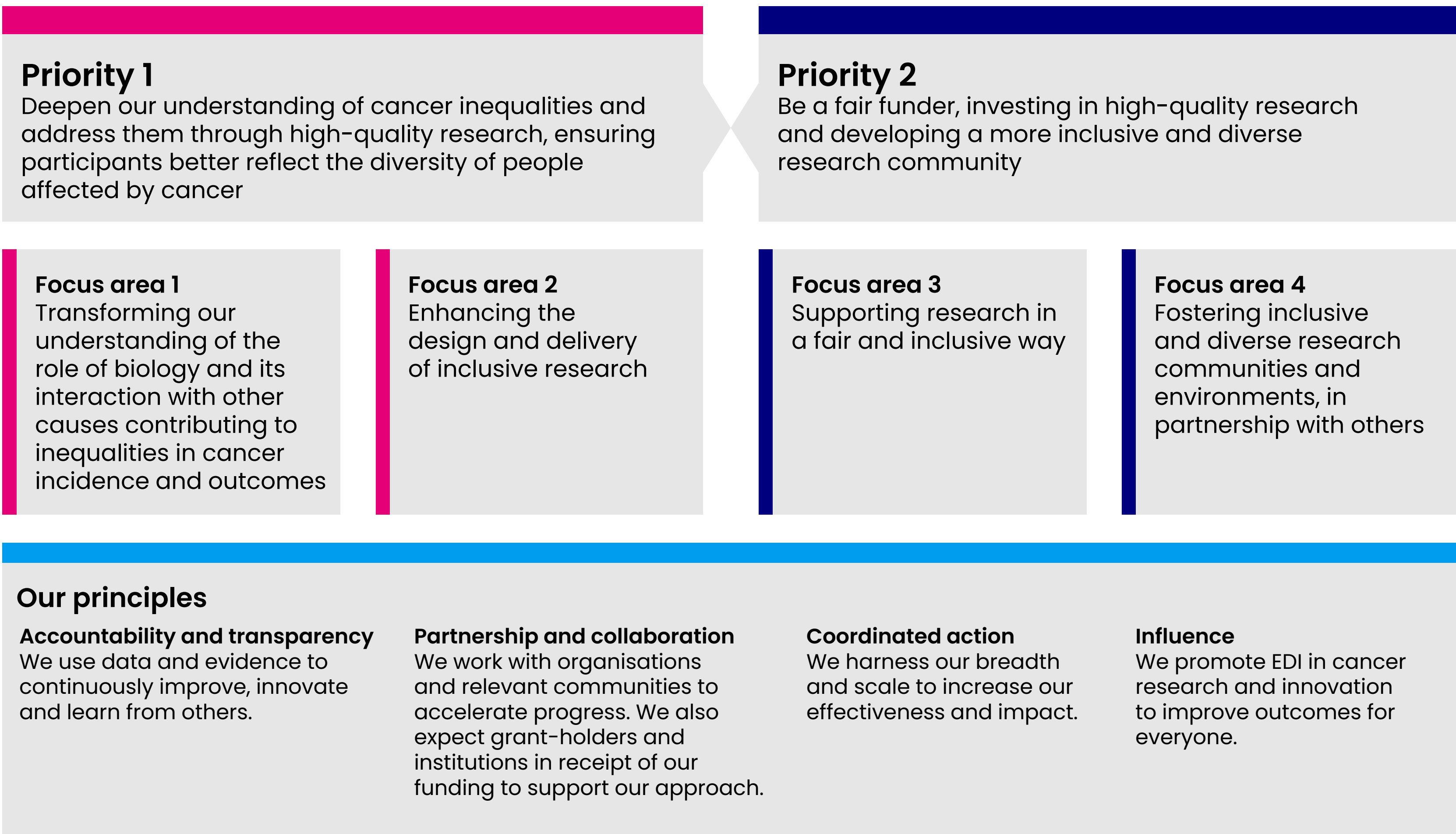
# Our refreshed strategic approach

Our five-year strategic approach is a statement of intent and a blueprint to deliver the first two strategic priorities in our **Cancer Research UK EDI strategy**:

- 1. Reduce cancer and health inequalities through our work and partnerships
- 2. Develop a more inclusive and diverse research community through the research we fund

Our approach builds on past successes, strong foundations and learnings. Our priorities and focus areas are guided by evidence and where we can make the biggest impact with the resources we have available. We've also extended into new areas, such as understanding the role biological mechanisms play in contributing to cancer inequalities.

Our strategic approach has two overarching priorities and four interconnected focus areas.





Priority 1:  
Deepen our understanding of cancer inequalities and address them through high-quality research, ensuring participants better reflect the diversity of people affected by cancer

Nearly 1 in 2 people will get cancer in their lifetime [1] and cancer affects people unequally, with significant variations in risk factor exposure, incidence, stage at diagnosis, treatment and outcomes across the UK [2]. These differences are complex, underpinned by a range of contributory factors, and may arise from or be exacerbated by biological differences between groups. Limited understanding of these biological differences and their associated mechanisms may contribute to worse outcomes linked to inequalities.

Additionally, research participants often aren't fully representative of relevant populations affected by cancer, limiting the impact of some research findings [3, 4].

Evolving our research approaches to address these two critical problems is essential to developing more effective

interventions to prevent, detect and treat cancer, improving outcomes for everyone.

We will achieve this by concentrating on the following focus areas:

**Focus area 1:**  
Transforming our understanding of the role of biology and its interaction with other causes contributing to inequalities in cancer incidence and outcomes

**Focus area 2:**  
Enhancing the design and delivery of inclusive research

This will complement priorities outlined in our **Cancer and health inequalities strategy**.





Priority 2:  
Be a fair funder, investing in high-quality research  
and developing a more inclusive and diverse  
research community

We fund exceptional people based on merit and aim to give everyone an equal opportunity to work, thrive and progress in fair and inclusive research environments. However, we recognise that not everyone has this experience, and people may be disadvantaged by their background or other characteristics.

The UK bioscience academic workforce continues to lack diversity across gender, ethnicity and disability [5]. Analysis of our grant application data shows we need to improve our efforts to attract talented researchers from these groups to some of our schemes [6].

The best research happens in fair and inclusive environments that promote and support equality of opportunity and encourage innovation and talent to flourish [7, 8].

We will achieve this by concentrating on the following focus areas:

- Focus area 3:

Supporting research in a fair and inclusive way
- Focus area 4:

Fostering inclusive and diverse research communities and environments, in partnership with others





# Our priorities and focus areas

## ■ Priority 1:

Deepen our understanding of cancer inequalities and address them through high-quality research, ensuring participants better reflect the diversity of people affected by cancer

Cancer affects people unequally – in terms of incidence, diagnosis, treatment and outcomes. The reasons are multifaceted and complex, rooted in structural, demographic and socioeconomic inequalities [2]. While these factors undoubtedly contribute, there’s limited understanding of the role biology plays in underpinning these disparities [9].

For example, Black women are disproportionately affected by faster-growing breast cancer subtypes, such as triple-negative breast cancer, and they’re more likely to be diagnosed with more advanced stages of the disease at younger ages (prior to eligibility for screening) [10]. To date, the biology underlying this difference hasn’t been fully explained and is important to understand so we can develop more effective detection and treatment options to improve outcomes for people with this type of cancer.

These gaps in our understanding of cancer biology are made worse by the underrepresentation of certain communities and populations in cancer research.

A recent review of our research portfolio highlighted the need for interdisciplinary research to explore the biology underlying cancer and its interaction with other factors contributing to cancer inequalities. Key barriers to such research include:

- limited availability and access to large, high-quality datasets and samples from underrepresented groups
- non-representative model systems, such as the predominant use of cell lines (cells grown in a lab) from people of European background
- a limited range of researchers focused on tackling these complex questions

This underrepresentation risks exacerbating existing inequalities when it comes to implementing new innovations.

### Team SAMBAI: Understanding disparate cancer outcomes in populations of African descent

Through **Cancer Grand Challenges**, we’re supporting Team SAMBAI (Social, Ancestry, Molecular and Biological Analysis of Inequalities) with £20m over five years.

The team – an interdisciplinary group of researchers based in Ghana, South Africa, the UK and the US – are striving to decode the factors that influence disparate cancer outcomes in underserved populations of African descent.

They’ll generate a data repository to help understand why diverse populations are affected by cancer differently, focusing on breast, prostate and pancreatic cancer, which are typically faster growing and develop at an earlier age in Black people.

Working closely with patient communities, they hope to use what they learn to develop targeted cancer prevention and treatment strategies for underserved populations.

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**This is a complex challenge that needs a breadth of information from multiple populations to address it. Our team is focused on populations of African descent, so while we may clearly define what impacts the outcomes we’re studying in this specific population, there’ll be other factors that are important in different cultures. There needs to be more research into this question to understand those factors.**”



Professor Melissa Davis, SAMBAI Team Lead and Director of the Institute of Translational Genomic Medicine, Morehouse School of Medicine



Focus area 1:  
Transforming our understanding of the  
role of biology and its interaction with  
other causes contributing to inequalities in  
cancer incidence and outcomes

Our journey so far

Our **2022 research strategy** outlines our commitment to reducing cancer inequalities through research. We’ve implemented this through specific initiatives and shifts in our research portfolio:

- We have a growing portfolio of research that’s advancing our understanding of cancer inequalities, including through initiatives such as the **International Alliance for Cancer Early Detection, Cancer Data Driven Detection programme** and **RadNet – our radiation research network**. Our institutes and centres are also starting to embed research into cancer inequalities.
- We’re one of the founding members and funders of **Our Future Health**, the UK’s largest health research programme, with a large cohort designed to increase data and sample collection from underrepresented groups.
- Through Cancer Grand Challenges, we’re supporting Team SAMBAI with £20m in funding to help tackle cancer inequalities.

Looking ahead

We aim to do the following:

- **Generate new knowledge** about the underlying biology that interacts with the multifactorial drivers of cancer inequalities, helping accelerate the development of precision cancer prevention, earlier detection and more effective treatments for a wider range of people
- **Catalyse high-quality interdisciplinary research** through our funding routes
- **Incentivise inclusive research** to build trust and drive impactful research for all communities

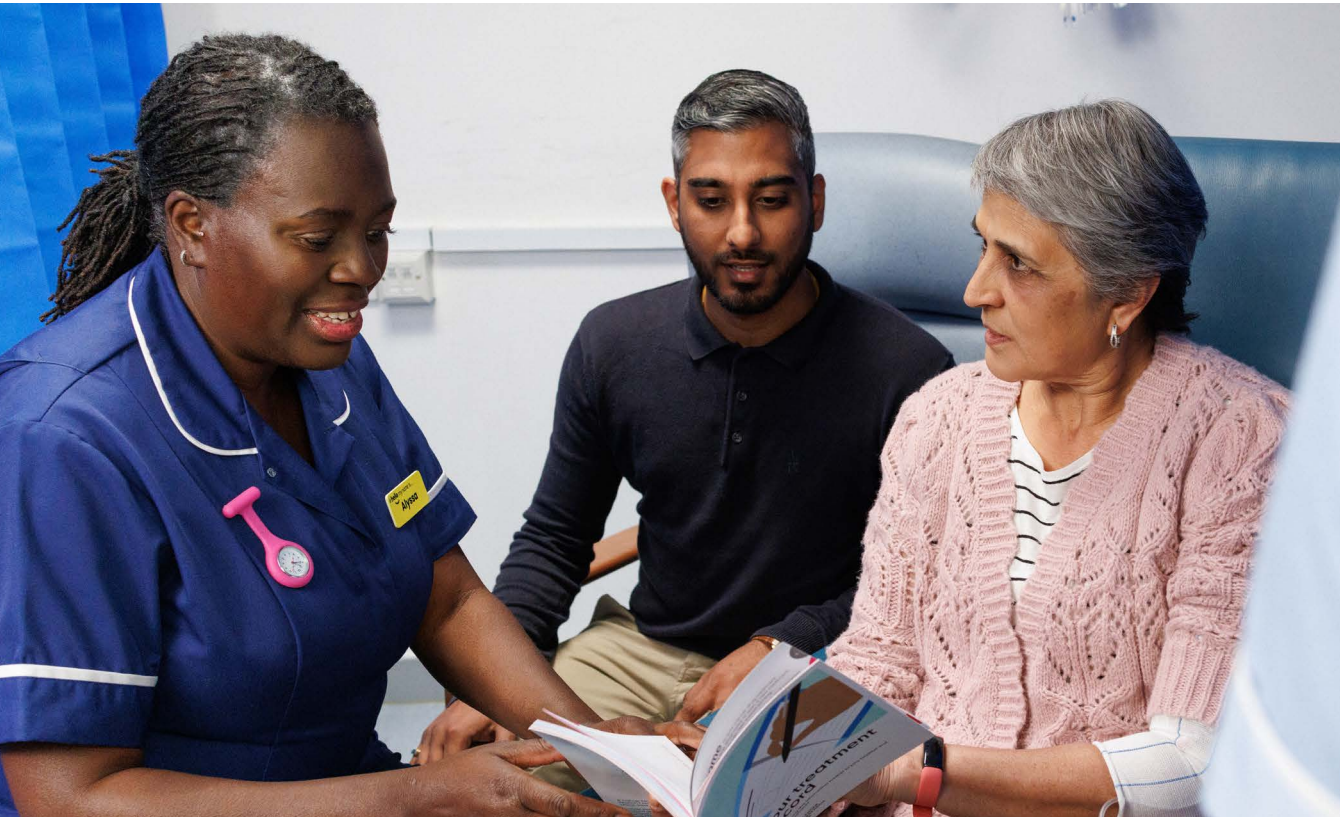
Key initiatives

Stimulate research to understand how biology interacts with other factors driving cancer inequalities

- Encourage high-quality research that addresses cancer inequalities across our portfolio of funding mechanisms – from discovery, prevention and early detection through to clinical research
- Target funding to specific areas identified as opportunities to improve outcomes – the first of which will be a ‘Spotlight Call’ on Inequalities in Early Detection and Diagnosis of Cancer
- Develop capabilities, tools, data and sample sets to support research into cancer inequalities

Build an interdisciplinary research community

- Foster collaboration at the intersection of biology and other areas – for example, through idea-generating workshops and consulting with patients and relevant communities



Progress indicators

Understanding our portfolio

Successful development of a consistent approach to identify, report on and monitor the progress of inequalities research across our funding portfolio

Portfolio growth

An increase in the amount of high-quality research we’re supporting into cancer inequalities

Interdisciplinary collaboration

Teams with diverse expertise conducting novel research into the biological basis of cancer inequalities and health disparities, including how they intersect with other factors

Tools and data

A greater range of tools, data and sample sets relevant for research into cancer inequalities

Engagement

Increased content and engagement on cancer inequalities from our research community across our communication channels



## Focus area 2:

### Enhancing the design and delivery of inclusive research

#### Our journey so far

To understand barriers to participation in research from underserved groups, we’ve:

- engaged with a range of stakeholders
- set expectations and guidance for inclusive research design
- introduced requirements in our grant applications for male and female sexes to be used in the design of experiments that involve animals, or human and animal tissues or cells
- worked towards standardisation of data collection in our clinical trials, as set out in our **Clinical Research Statement of Intent**, to improve our understanding of people who participate

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Clinical trials are crucial for translating science into treatments and offer patients access to new therapies and expert care. But the need for additional tests and appointments can come with financial and time costs, limiting participation.



To help address this, we’ve updated our cost guidance to allow for up to £200 in travel expenses per participant as part of our grant application.

To ensure fair access, we must continue to eliminate non-clinical barriers and recruit patients from diverse backgrounds, helping researchers gain a complete understanding of how interventions work across populations. ”

Anne Croudass, Cancer Research UK Lead Research Nurse

#### Looking ahead

We aim to do the following:

- **Address barriers** by improving our understanding of research participation and using our influence to enhance it
- **Enable inclusive research** by ensuring, where relevant, more diverse patient populations, samples and data in research
- **Promote inclusive research design** across our infrastructure, as well as collaboration and learning opportunities

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#### Key initiatives

##### Deepen engagement

- Work with patient representatives and expert organisations, particularly for underserved groups, to build trust in cancer research

##### Foster partnerships

- Collaborate with other funders and relevant organisations to develop tools, resources, standards, guidance, training and communities of practice for inclusive research

##### Strengthen expectations

- Embed inclusive research design across our funding processes and policies, working closely with our network of institutes, centres, Experimental Cancer Medicine Centres and clinical trial units to make sure this is proportionate and effective – for example, by using existing mechanisms such as the Study Within A Trial element of our clinical funding scheme

##### Review and adapt

- Monitor and evaluate the uptake of inclusive research design approaches across our portfolio and share learnings about what works



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#### Progress indicators

##### Framework development

Improvements in defining, measuring and monitoring inclusive design and delivery in our funded research portfolio

##### Widening participation

Increased participation from underserved communities in research through clinical research recruitment and other patient and public involvement and engagement actions, ensuring diversity data is collected and recruitment is representative

##### Standardised approaches

Consistent approaches for more rigorous and better-quality recording and reporting of diversity data in clinical research

##### Engagement

Enhanced researcher engagement with our communications, events and online resources guiding or championing inclusive research design



Building trust in cancer research across diverse communities

Kelly Gleason, a Cancer Research UK research nurse at Imperial College London, has become a trusted and valued connection for the Asian Women Cancer Group, which provides support to Asian women affected by cancer.

When a team of researchers from Imperial College London were looking to create a patient involvement group that represented all women affected by lymphoedema, a side effect of breast cancer treatment, Kelly approached the group.

One of their members joined the research team to offer an Asian woman’s perspective and the diverse involvement group helped the research team secure funding, as well as a more thorough patient and public involvement plan.

Over the past five years, Kelly’s helped build a strong partnership that benefits both the community and researchers at the university, actively supporting projects and helping to forge new local connections.

“Trust is built by listening attentively, doing what you say you’re going to do and being consistent. When your intentions are good and clear, building a strong relationship is possible and that helps researchers deliver excellence in research for everyone.”

Kelly Gleason, Cancer Research UK Research Nurse, Imperial College London





■ Priority 2:

Be a fair funder, investing in high-quality research and developing an inclusive and diverse research community

Cancer Research UK invests in world-class research. We aim to fund and support a diverse community of excellent researchers whose success is determined by the quality of their science, not their background or characteristics.

The UK biosciences research sector lacks diversity compared to the wider population. For example, data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency indicates that only 1.9% of all biosciences researchers are Black and 4% identify as disabled [5] – lower than the 4.4% [11] and 22% [12] reported, respectively, for people of working age in the UK.

We currently collect and report on data from our applicants on their gender, age, ethnicity and disability. This data shows more men than women applying for funding overall and a progressive decrease in women applying at each career stage,

as well as a marked lack of applications from Black scientists, representing 1% of applicants. Fellowship applications from women fell from 40% in 2019–2021 to 36% in 2022–2023, and applications from researchers declaring a disability remain low at 2.9%.

Factors that create barriers for different groups in the research workforce include poor work-life balance, limited career support and a lack of reasonable adjustments [13]. We will continue to collect relevant information about our applicants, identifying barriers and evidence-based opportunities to support our aim of everyone being able to pursue a career in cancer research with an equal chance to thrive and progress on merit.

Increasing transparency around funding decisions

We want all our applicants to feel confident in putting forward their best research ideas. But applying for grants is competitive and often stressful, and not everyone has access to the knowledge and networks that support success.

To help demystify the process, we’ve introduced an observer scheme that gives early career researchers the opportunity to view our panel discussions and interviews.

While the scheme is open to everybody, we’re taking positive action by prioritising places for groups that have historically faced barriers to accessing this kind of insight. These include women researchers, researchers from ethnic minority backgrounds, non-binary researchers and researchers who are neurodivergent, disabled or have a long-term health condition.

So far, more than 220 researchers have had a peek behind the scenes of our funding process. We’re attracting a more diverse range of researchers than would usually apply to us for funding – 65% of observers have been women and 44% have been from ethnic minority backgrounds, considerably more than we find among our grant applicants.

In our feedback survey, 98% of researchers said it helped them gain a better understanding of a successful application and 97% said it helped them understand how our funding decisions are made. Also, 70% felt it had built their

confidence in applying, noting it removed the imagined distance between ‘them’ and ‘people who apply’.

Researchers who felt less confident said it had helped them realise that their ideas, preliminary data or skills needed further development before applying.

Two years on from the launch of our observer scheme, we’re glad to see that many researchers have used these insights to successfully apply for their own grants.

“By observing the discussion and scoring, I’ve been reassured that every submitted application will be carefully read by experts in the field and the committee members. I benefited greatly from hearing the constructive feedback shared by the committee members, and I now have a much better handle on the dos and don’ts of putting forward an application.”

Haiyan Zheng, Cancer Research UK Career Development Fellow, University of Bath





# Focus area 3: Supporting research in a fair and inclusive way

## Our journey so far

We’ve used our own data and evidence from the biosciences sector to design and pilot targeted initiatives to increase equality of opportunity and experience of our funding processes.

So far, we’ve:

- collected, reported on and benchmarked our diversity data to inform our actions
- achieved equal overall success rates for men and women applying for our funding and seen increased fellowship applications from people from ethnic minority backgrounds
- developed new funding policies to support flexible research careers and provide disability and accessibility support
- improved our competency framework to clarify expectations at each career stage and implemented the use of narrative CVs to recognise different career paths and contributions to research
- set and achieved targets for diversity in funding committee membership
- enhanced review guidance for panels and committees to strengthen decision-making and make sure research assessment is conducted fairly
- established a scheme for early career researchers to observe a funding panel or committee, increasing transparency of the funding review process and decision-making – over 200 researchers have taken up this opportunity

## Looking ahead

We aim to do the following:

- **Fund on merit** by making sure talented researchers aren’t disadvantaged due to their background or other characteristics
- **Understand barriers** by identifying issues faced by underrepresented groups in the grant funding process or their circumstances
- **Promote inclusive practices** by pinpointing areas where we can have the greatest impact and embed evidence-led actions to support talented researchers from all backgrounds

### ■ Key initiatives

#### Improve diversity data

- Review current diversity data collected for grant applications, award rates, committee members and our institutes to identify opportunities for improvement that align with the ambitions of our strategic approach

#### Take positive action

- Promote funding opportunities and provide pre-application support to underrepresented groups while retaining our quality threshold for research proposals

#### Facilitate fair decisions

- Strengthen guidance for decision-makers, reviewers and committee members to maintain fairness and inclusivity
- Maintain and report on diversity targets for our funding committees and panels



### ■ Progress indicators

#### Diversity of funded researchers

An increase in the diversity of our funded researchers from the 2021 baseline (37% of award holders were women and 17% were from an ethnic minority background)

#### Committee diversity targets

Continuing to meet our diversity targets for funding committee membership (at least 50% women on each committee and 20% from ethnic minority backgrounds across all committees)

#### Inclusive decision-making

Enhanced guidance and support on inclusive decision-making embedded across our funding committees and panels

#### Positive feedback

Researchers view our application and decision-making process as fair and inclusive



Focus area 4:  
Fostering inclusive and diverse research communities  
and environments, in partnership with others

Our journey so far

We’ve introduced several initiatives to improve the inclusivity and diversity of our research community, including partnering with others to tackle barriers to participation and access to research careers.

These include the following:

Career development support

- Our **Women of Influence mentorship programme** for aspiring women scientific leaders is now in its eleventh year.
- Our **Bridge to Academic Leadership training programme** is for all postdoctoral cancer researchers aspiring to lead their own research. Complementing our wider range of career development support.

Widening access and participation

- Our **Black Leaders in Cancer PhD Scholarship Programme** provides targeted support for talented individuals identifying as Black to undertake a PhD.
- We work with In2Science and In2Research to support and inspire young people from more deprived backgrounds to consider pursuing a career in cancer research.
- We run tailored events for postdoctoral researchers, showcasing cancer research career options.

Promoting inclusivity through our events

- We’ve introduced a code of conduct to make our research events more inclusive.
- We’ve collaborated with Black in Cancer to support its inaugural conference for Black researchers.

Fostering an inclusive research culture

- We’ve introduced grant policies promoting healthy research environments, such as our bullying and harassment policy.

Looking ahead

We aim to do the following:

- **Attract and retain** talented researchers from underrepresented backgrounds
- **Promote inclusivity** by using our influence to incentivise inclusive cancer research environments
- **Collaborate with others** to monitor, measure and share learnings and good practice
- **Build the evidence base** for effective interventions that support our aims
- **Celebrate the achievements** of excellent cancer researchers from underrepresented groups

■ Key initiatives

Enhance evidence-led career development support

- Extend our Black Leaders in Cancer PhD Scholarship Programme across all our centres from 2025 to increase the number of PhD students
- Expand our Bridge to Academic Leadership training programme to support more postdoctoral researchers and target our support to underrepresented groups of researchers identified by our data and biosciences sector evidence
- Pilot interventions to identify and address specific gaps in research career support, working with others

Amplify good practice and collaborations

- Collaborate across our funded networks and with other partners to share knowledge on EDI

Understand barriers

- Deepen our understanding of challenges to inclusive research environments and culture, building evidence of what works



■ Progress indicators

Building evidence of inclusive research environments

Continued collaboration with our infrastructure network (institutes, centres and clinical trial units) to evidence their efforts to improve EDI through annual reports and funding reviews

Shared learnings on what works

Continued and coordinated efforts to share and drive best practice for achieving inclusive research environments

Framework development

A framework, developed in collaboration with partners, that supports the monitoring of inclusion across our research environments

Positive engagement and sense of inclusion

Cancer researchers from diverse backgrounds engaging positively with our research career and community-building events and communications



## Developing Black leaders in cancer

We know from listening to our own research community and other expert organisations that persistent racial inequalities have disadvantaged people from Black heritage backgrounds from accessing higher education, particularly postgraduate studies.

To address this, we introduced our Black Leaders in Cancer PhD Scholarship Programme in 2022. The programme aims to bring diverse talent to science, remove barriers along the career pathway and empower the next generation of Black leaders in cancer.

Aimed at students from Black heritage backgrounds, the programme provides successful applicants with a fully funded place on a doctoral training scheme at one of our funded centres. Students also benefit from comprehensive mentoring, career support, leadership training and networking, led by our partners the Windsor Fellowship and Black in Cancer. From 2025, we've been able to expand the programme to offer positions at all seven of our centres.

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Programmes like this are crucial in promoting diversity – and diversity fosters success and is essential for excellence. By creating a more inclusive academic environment, these programmes will help cultivate a sense of belonging that I believe will empower and inspire more Black students to aim higher and achieve their full potential.”



Abena Amponsah, one of our first Black Leaders in Cancer PhD Scholarship Programme students





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# Acknowledgements

We’re so grateful for the wealth of valuable insights, expertise, time and commitment given by members of the Cancer Research UK community, including our researchers, patient representatives, collaborators, partners and staff. Together, they’ve helped us shape and develop our first five-year strategic approach to EDI in research. Thank you.

**On behalf of the EDI in research Working Group (past and present members), Shewly Choudhury (Head of Research Careers and Culture) and Mat Tata (Research Programme Manager – EDI in Research Lead).**

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