

Research and evaluation priorities

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Introduction and background

This report summarises the process followed and the findings of the research and evaluation prioritisation exercise undertaken by the Centre of expertise on child sexual abuse (“the Centre”), between February and April 2017. The paper explains the background to decisions on priorities for the Evaluation Fund launched in June 2017 and also the wider research work of the Centre, including that carried out through partner universities.

The Centre has four core aims:

- Local areas across England and Wales have a confident and effective multi-agency response to CSA, based on access to evidence and information on what works
- National policy on CSA is informed by the latest research and evidence produced by the Centre.
- Increased understanding and awareness of the scale and nature of CSA.
- A clear assessment of how recent changes and improvements to policy and practice have impacted on the scale and nature of abuse.

We have established the Centre with an underpinning ethos of listening to people working in the field, not just being stuck on ‘broadcast’ mode. In line with that – and as a new organisation wanting to add maximum value – we decided to carry out a consultation exercise. The purpose of the exercise was twofold: to inform people about the aims of the Centre and work to date and, more importantly, gather views about priorities for research and evaluation to be provided, commissioned or funded by the Centre. It is the Centre’s policy to involve as wide a constituency of people and organisations as possible, including: education, health, social work, police, community safety, independent sector, policy and academics.

The process

We started by gathering and analysing a range of information collated in the early stages of the Centre's establishment:

- Input from stakeholder breakout sessions at 6 regional engagement events¹ in February 2017. These were attended by key stakeholders from across professions including health, local authority, youth offending, police and voluntary sector. Structured sessions at the events enabled us to collect and subsequently analyse delegates' views on the gaps in evidence.
- [Analysis carried out by London Metropolitan University.](#) In reviewing the literature to produce the series of eight '[key messages from research](#)' documents, aimed at front-line staff and commissioners of key services, we also asked the researchers to identify the important research gaps.
- User needs analysis from website development activity. We wanted to understand people's needs so that we could develop our website accordingly, rather than make assumptions about what we should provide. This involved dozens of telephone interviews with a wide range of interested parties and an online survey with several hundred participants.

We synthesised the findings from the stage above to create a long-list of potential themes. An online survey, promoted through our networks and social media, was completed by 563 respondents. This asked for:

- Level of priority allocated by the range of respondents.
- Any gaps/needs that may have been missed.
- Duplication with existing or planned activity.

[The Centre's Advisory Board](#) and Home Office-convened Steering Group agreed a set of criteria, for both individual themes and the overall programme.

¹ London, Manchester, Birmingham, Bristol, Llandudno and Cardiff

Criteria

We applied the criteria to determine recommendations for research and evaluation priorities, which have been agreed through the Centre's governance structures.

Existing commitments/Centre role

- Fit with core outcomes/deliverables.
- Fit with commitments in the UK Government's *Tackling CSE Progress Report* (February 2017).
- Fit with Year 1 work underway.
- Is the Centre the most appropriate organisation to do it?

Stakeholder consultation

- Level of prioritisation through consultation.
- Fit with findings of user research for website.

Feasibility

- Is it an issue/problem that research can actually address?
- Are the priorities sufficiently limited so that meaningful activity can take place in light of resources?

Other

- Is there a balance between 'prevention' and 'intervention'?
- Is there a balance of CSE and other forms of CSA?
- Fit with the evidence gaps identified through 'Key Messages' exercise; other reviews of literature.
- Does it satisfy the geographical remit of the Centre (England and Wales)?

Summary:

Research and evaluation priorities

There was a clear message that the Centre should prioritise effectiveness research. Both consultation respondents and evidence from our analysis of gaps in the evidence base identified a dearth of information on what works to prevent, protect and support children and young people recover from child sexual abuse. A cross-cutting theme – and one of the core aims of the Centre – was to increase understanding and awareness of the scale and nature CSA, including improving understandings of the motivations of people who sexually exploit children.

The Centre will prioritise the following areas:

1. Improving understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse

Improving understanding of the scale and nature of child sexual abuse is one of the four core aims of the Centre. As such, it was automatically a priority and not included in the online consultation. Although knowledge and understanding has improved, significant gaps and weaknesses remain; better and comparative data are essential to improving the response to CSA.

Rationale for inclusion:

- One of the Centre's four core aims.
- A crucial underpinning/cross-cutting piece of work.
- Keeping track of emerging trends was rated as high priority through user needs analysis for the website.
- UK Government commitments in the *Tackling CSE Progress Report* (February 2017) to the Centre developing data-led approaches.
- Scoping work in year 1 has established need for additional work in future years.

2. Tackling offending and re-offending (perpetrators, peer-on-peer abuse and harmful sexual behaviour)

There is a dearth of information on the characteristics and motivations of individuals who sexually abuse and exploit children and young people. This lack of information undermines attempts to identify, disrupt and treat such individuals. Work in the first six months shows much potential for new learning.

Rationale for inclusion:

- Essential to improving prevention of child sexual exploitation through reducing reoffending.
- Strong prioritisation in sector consultation.²
- A number of UK Government commitments made in the *Tackling CSE Progress Report* (February 2017).
- The Centre is uniquely positioned to address this subject, given the degree of independence from Government or service provision
- Relevant expertise and knowledge of the Centre's academic partners.

² Respondents rating high priority or some priority: Effective services for young people who display harmful sexual behaviour – 95%
Peer-on-peer abuse – motivations and prevention strategies – 91% Effective interventions for contact offenders- 87%

3. Effectiveness of programmes in educational establishments (e.g. work in schools, colleges, pupil referral units)

Children are never to blame for the abuse they experience; however, raising awareness of child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation in schools is increasingly viewed as a critical feature of holistic sex and relationships education (SRE). Such conversations aim to support children and young people to understand healthy relationships and navigate issues such as consent and online safety. Where prevention programmes exist, few – if any – have been formally evaluated, meaning schools are ill-equipped to choose and adapt programmes to meet the needs of their unique student populations.

Rationale for inclusion:

- Opportunity to improve prevention of child sexual abuse.
- Strong prioritisation in sector consultation.³
- Understanding ‘what works and in what circumstances’ was rated as high priority through user needs analysis for the website.
- UK Government commitment to the Centre evaluating approaches in Tackling CSE Progress Report (February 2017).
- Opportunity to inform policy implementation, with introduction of compulsory relationships and sex education in England and forthcoming changes to the curriculum in Wales.

4. Effectiveness of interventions with children and young people at risk of, or experiencing, all forms of sexual abuse

With a particular interest in interventions for (but not limited to):

- Children in or leaving care
- Children and young people with learning difficulties or disabilities

Commissioning and providing effective services is essential to prevention, early intervention and recovery for children and young people at risk or affected by abuse. Yet what works for children and young people in terms of effective approaches remains a gap in the knowledge base. Research has identified that children in or on the edge of care and those leaving care as well as children and young people with learning difficulties or disabilities are particularly vulnerable to sexual exploitation. We have a particular interest in understanding what works in terms of interventions for these groups.

Rationale for inclusion:

- A core purpose of the Centre is to understand ‘what works’ for children and young people.
- Effectiveness of responses to children and young people at risk of or experiencing CSE and intra-familial abuse were both a high priority in the sector consultation
- Effectiveness of services to enable recovery were also a high priority in the sector consultation.
- Understanding ‘what works and in what circumstances’ was rated as high priority through user needs analysis for the website.
- The UK Government’s commitments in Tackling CSE Progress Report (February 2017) to the Centre building an evidence base on what works to tackle child sexual exploitation and abuse and what best helps support victims and survivors to recover.

³ Respondents rating high priority or some priority: Effective preventative education – secondary school- 96% Effective preventative education – primary school – 92%

Next steps:

How we will deliver the priorities

We will continue to work with our academic partners to deliver priorities 1 and 2. The universities have highly relevant knowledge and expertise and have worked on related projects in our first six months.

1. Scale and nature

We will publish a scoping report this summer, setting out analysis of current prevalence studies and administrative data. We will also outline the next steps for the Centre's work on this theme at that stage.

2. Tackling offending and re-offending

A number of initial scoping studies are currently underway. The findings – to be published in the autumn – will guide the future focus of this strand.

We have established an Evaluation Fund *Supporting services to build their evaluation capacity: evaluation grants for the child sexual abuse and exploitation sector* to support organisations delivering educational programmes (priority 3) and interventions for children and young people (priority 4). In this financial year (2017/18) the Fund will build capacity and capability for evaluation, by enabling organisations to have robust approaches to understanding and measuring the results achieved by their services. This will also lay the foundations for more substantial effectiveness studies in future years.

Centre of expertise

on child sexual abuse

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