The effectiveness of interactive digital interventions for sexual health promotion in young people

Research Question(s)

- What are the most effective* approaches using digital interventions aimed at improving the sexual health and wellbeing of young people across the UK?

- What are the most effective methods for the delivery of digital interventions to improve the sexual health and wellbeing of young people across the UK?

Sexual Health is defined holistically as physical, emotional, mental and social wellbeing in relation to sexuality (1). Relationships, sexuality and sex are important for health and wellbeing and it is acknowledged that adolescence is a critical time of learning and exploration, particularly in regard to sexual identity (1). The use of alcohol and/or illicit drugs may influence sexual behaviour and impact on the sexual health of young people.

To support good sexual health, young people need access to relevant information and, in some cases, support not only to prevent unintended pregnancies and STIs, such as Chlamydia and HIV, but also to increase overall sexual health and wellbeing.

Whilst it has been acknowledged that sex and relationship education (SRE), delivered within state schools impacts positively on sexual health outcomes, it is reported that in the majority of state schools only the biological aspects of SRE are consistently covered. Biology lessons delivered, according to national curriculum guidance, address human growth and reproduction, contraception and STIs. There are indications that the quality and delivery of the broader aspects of SRE, such as sexual identity, relationships and communication, and sexual abuse, if and when covered in personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) lessons, is variable.

Although SRE in the UK may be available within the community via sexual health clinics, availability and access to sexual health clinics varies regionally and may be absent in some remote areas. Alongside concerns about privacy and confidentiality or fears about staff being unfriendly or critical, young people may find it hard to visit community-based services. It has been suggested that provision of SRE within the UK may not currently meet the whole spectrum of young people’s needs and that information on a broad range of topics such as sexual relationships, decision making and parenthood would be of value to this population (1).

Children and young people in the UK increasingly use mobile phone apps and the internet to obtain information and frequently use the internet to search for health-related information. SRE-based digital interventions may therefore be a useful way of reaching large numbers of young people.

The NIHR Public Health Research Programme wishes to commission research on the effectiveness of digital interventions to prevent or reduce the incidence of unintended teenage pregnancy, STIs and to improve sexual health and wellbeing in young people up to age 25. Comparison with current practice is encouraged. Trans-disciplinary research including input from a partner/collaborator with digital expertise would be welcome. Studies may evaluate multi-component interventions, which may be delivered via a combination of schools, pupil referral units, community groups, mobile phone, online or via social media. In
considering interventions to be evaluated, interventions that could be delivered ‘at scale’ should be prioritised, given these are likely to result in greater impact, equity and cost-effectiveness. Relevant target groups may be studied, which may include groups defined by age, gender, social background, ethnicity or sexual orientation.

The following issues are of interest:

1. What are the best models and methods for the delivery of interactive digital interventions?
2. Which interventions are effective in changing behaviour?
3. What interventions are the most effective in reducing the number of unintended pregnancies and STIs and increasing sexual wellbeing in young people?

Studies may evaluate multi-component interventions. Researchers are asked to specify and justify study design and indicate how long-term impact will be assessed. Interventions to be evaluated must be outside the NHS and the primary outcome must be health-related. Researchers should identify underlying theory and should include a logic model to help explain underlying context, theory and mechanisms. Research should consider the impact of the intervention on health inequalities. Proposals should ensure adequate public involvement in the research.

Public health initiatives are complex and wide-reaching. Evaluation should acknowledge this by adopting a broad perspective, taking account of costs and benefits to all relevant sectors of society. A health economic evaluation to inform affordability and return on investment should be included where appropriate.

For all proposals, applicants should clearly state the public health utility of the outcomes and the mechanisms by which they will inform future public health policy and practice. Details about the potential impact and scalability of interventions, if shown to be effective, should be provided.

For the evaluation of time sensitive naturally occurring interventions applicants may wish to consider the fast-track work stream - www.nihr.ac.uk/phr

*‘Effectiveness’ in this context relates not only to the size of the effect, but it also takes into account any harmful or negative side effects, including inequitable outcomes.


Remit of Call:

All proposals submitted under this call must fall within the remit of the Public Health Research programme. Please go to www.nihr.ac.uk/phr for details.

General Notes:

The NIHR Public Health Research programme evaluates public health interventions, providing new knowledge on the benefits, costs, acceptability and wider impacts of non-NHS interventions intended to improve the health of the public and reduce inequalities in health.
The scope of the programme is multi-disciplinary and broad, covering a range of interventions that improve public health delivered in a non-NHS setting.

The NIHR Public Health Research programme is unable to fund intervention costs. The affordability of the intervention, and at least an indication of the public health stakeholder(s) willing to fund the intervention, should be referenced within the outline application. At the full application stage, statements of support confirming stakeholder commitments to funding will be required.

The NIHR Public Health Research programme is interested in and open to the joint funding of research projects with other organisations such as charities and the third sector. If you would like to explore the potential for joint funding, please contact us at phr@nihr.ac.uk with details of your proposal and the other funder prior to submission.

Notes to Applicants

The NIHR Public Health Research programme is funded by the NIHR, with contributions from the CSO in Scotland, NISCHR in Wales, and HSC R&D, Public Health Agency, Northern Ireland. Researchers in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are eligible to apply for funding under this programme.

Applicants are recommended to seek advice from suitable methodological support services, at an appropriate stage in the development of their research idea and application. It is advisable to make contact at an early stage as possible to allow sufficient time for discussion and a considered response.

The NIHR Research Design Service (http://www.nihr.ac.uk/research/Pages/ResearchDesignService.aspx) can advise on appropriate NIHR programme choice, and developing and designing high quality research grant applications.

Clinical Trials Units are regarded as an important component of many trial applications however, they are not essential for all types of studies to the PHR programme. The CTUs can advise and participate throughout the process from initial idea development through to project delivery and reporting. NIHR CTU Support Funding (http://www.netscoc.ac.uk/supporting_research/CTUs) provides information on units receiving funding from the NIHR to collaborate on research applications to NIHR programmes and funded projects. In addition, the UKCRC CTU Network (http://www.ukcrc-ctu.org.uk) provides a searchable information resource on all registered units in the UK, and lists key interest areas and contact information.

Transparency agenda

In line with the government’s transparency agenda, any contract resulting from this tender may be published in its entirety to the general public. Further information on the transparency agenda is at:

http://transparency.number10.gov.uk/

http://www.ogc.gov.uk/policy_and_standards_framework_transparency.asp
http://www.contractsfinder.businesslink.gov.uk/