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SHORT PAPER

Provision for young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour

MARCH 2013

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Over the past few decades, children and young people who have sexually harmed others have attracted increasing attention from researchers and policy makers. Although it is known that they form a small, but significant group, there are difficulties in gaining a clear indication of incidence since much of the existing research has involved small and heterogeneous samples, many of which were not UK-based and lack of control groups for comparison. Furthermore, many incidents of sexual abuse are likely to go unreported. The nature, extent and significant negative consequences of harmful sexual behaviour for the victims and perpetrators, make this an important issue for policy development and research investigation. Overall, research and knowledge in this important area are still accumulating and much remains to be confirmed. Although recent decades have seen a movement towards greater understanding of the issue of harmful sex behaviour, a gap remains.

KEY POINTS

- Research in relation to young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour is still accumulating and much remains to be confirmed.
- This project sought to understand the nature of contemporary service provision for young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour in a UK context.
- Despite some variations across countries, a reasonably consistent profile of service provision across the surveyed local authorities was found.
- Most children who come into contact with services are subject to an assessment based on a standardised framework and training and supervision are available for staff to support their work in the area of harmful sexual behaviour.
- Several principles underpin good practice relating to service provision for young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour, that operate at organisational and individual levels.
- Valuing the strength of the child and family is largely absent from discourses contained within many procedures and guidelines in this area. A framework for good practice is proposed that is based on a number of principles, including that of valuing the strength of the child and family.

PROJECT AIMS

The purpose of the project was to help address the identified gap in knowledge. The aim was to gain an understanding of contemporary service provision for young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour in a UK context. The specific objectives were to:

- Build a profile of the scope and nature of current service provision in the UK for young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour, focusing on:
 1. profile of service users and changes over time;
 2. referral sources, assessment, intervention, case management;
 3. staff training and support.
- Investigate the part that local and national guidance and procedures play in supporting service provision for young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour in relation to assessment, intervention, case management and staff training/support.
- Identify the key principles that underpin good practice in relation to service provision for young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour.
- Make recommendations for practice, policy and service provision in relation to young people displaying sexually harmful behaviour.

STUDY DESIGN

A project was designed that comprised two interlinked phases: Phase 1: a small-scale survey of a sample of UK local authorities to identify the scope and nature of service provision (addressing objective 1); Phase 2: analysis of local and national guidance and procedures in the four nations of the UK (addressing objectives 2&3). A primary focus for both phases was on similarities and differences between the constituent nations of the UK, particularly differential developments in policy between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (N.B. we have sequenced these countries alphabetically in our report). Findings from these discrete, yet complementary phases of the project were subsequently synthesised and articulated in the form of recommendations for practice, policy and service provision (addressing objective 4). The project took place between October 2011 and December 2012.

Phase 1

The aim of the first phase was to build a profile of the scope and nature of current service provision in the UK for young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour, focusing on profile of service users and changes over time; referral sources, assessment, intervention, case management; and staff training and support. Data collection for Phase 1 took place February-September 2012. An on-line survey was conducted with a sample of 20% of local authorities. The survey was hosted on the SNAP server and respondents were sent a link to the questionnaire for completion. The link was sent via email to Directors of Children's Services in England and Wales, Youth Justice co-ordinators in local authorities in Scotland and Directors of Social Care and Children's Services in the Northern Ireland NHS Trusts. Data were imported into SPSS and analysed by country. Frequency rates were produced for each question.

Findings showed that despite some variations across countries, there was a reasonably consistent profile of service provision across the local authorities included in the survey. Most children who come into contact with such services were reported to be subject to an assessment and this tended to be based on a standardised framework. Risk management and child protection measures were important elements across most of the surveyed local authorities, along with multiagency procedures. All the local authorities reported that training was available for staff to support their work in the area of harmful sexual behaviour.

Many of the local authorities canvassed had developed their own assessment tools. None of the national or local

guidance proposed particular intervention models, although these were discussed in youth justice documents. The absence of robustly evaluated interventions may be one reason. However this places the onus on services and individuals to decide upon intervention approaches. Additionally, there continues to be absence of guidance for interventions for young people with a learning disability and other sub-groups.

Phase 2

The aim of this phase was to investigate the part that local and national guidance and procedures play in supporting service provision for young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour and to identify the key principles that underpin good practice in this area. Analysis of existing documents was deemed an appropriate method to augment the survey data collected in phase 1. Data collection for phase 2 took place October 2011-June 2012. Initial research identified the primary government documents with sections on, or specifically relevant to, harmful sexual behaviour. These were the national inter-agency child protection/safeguarding guidance and in youth justice practice guidance. The local procedures comprised a sample of Local Safeguarding Children's Boards Procedures (LSCB) in England; Scottish Child Protection Committee (CPC) procedures and local authority Risk Management Protocols; the All Wales Child Protection Procedures and Northern Ireland Regional Child Protection Policy & Procedures. For England a sample of Local Safeguarding Children's Boards (LSCB) procedures were chosen for analysis. This included 11 of the 53 (20%) single LSCB procedures and 6 out of 18 (33%) within LSCB consortia guidance. For Scotland there were 10 Child Protection Committee guidelines available and of these 5 (50%) were chosen for analysis. A further 4 out of 19 (20%) of the Risk Management Protocols were analysed. The single Northern Ireland Regional Child Protection Policy and Procedures and All Wales Child Protection Procedures were included.

Analysis was guided by the inductive framework analysis approach of Ritchie and Spencer (1994). The framework approach involves the process of sifting, charting and sorting data into key areas. The process of sifting involved scrutinising each of the documents for key words and phrases that appeared to have salience or relevance in relation to harmful sexual behaviour. We did this with reference to the aims of the project and the corresponding questions: 1) What part do these documents play in supporting service provision for young people displaying harmful sexual behaviour in relation to assessment,

intervention, case management and staff training/support?
2) What key principles are reflected in these documents that underpin good practice in relation to service provision for young people displaying sexually harmful behaviour? To enhance rigour, charting and sorting as part of the analysis process was undertaken by two team members. This process involved grouping the inductively derived key words and phrases into broad categories and respective sub-categories.

Findings from the documentary analysis show that the procedures and guidelines – and the principles contained within them – align with the service provision captured as a result of the survey. However, they do not always make explicit suggestions and recommendations. This was particularly evident in relation to types of assessment or intervention approaches. In many areas of England and Wales the procedures remained silent on the young people in the criminal justice process and the potential implications. Discrepancy between guidance in the level of detail in which processes were prescribed, suggest there may continue to be inconsistency in practice. The extent to which the needs of young people from certain groups were reflected in the documents was variable, particularly in relation to minority ethnic groups and learning disability.

The documentary analysis highlighted several principles that underpin good practice relating to service provision for young people who have displayed harmful sexual behaviour. These principles operate at organisational and individual levels. At an organisational level they are: need for systematic assessments and interventions; adopting multi-agency approaches; ensuring a well-trained workforce. At an individual level the principles are: engaging the family; acknowledging the importance of context; ensuring child-centred approaches; taking account of individual needs.

DEMONSTRATING IMPACT

Our findings have shown a reasonably consistent picture across the four UK countries regarding service provision for children and young people who exhibit harmful sexual behaviour. Most children who come into contact with such services are subject to an assessment using a standardised framework and processes for assessment, child protection measures, staff training and multiagency procedures are common place. However, our findings suggest that procedures and guidelines to support good practice do not always make explicit suggestions and recommendations, particularly regarding assessment or intervention

approaches. This is a particular issue in relation to minority ethnic groups and learning disability.

Staff training and support were found to be important issues in both phases of our project. The findings from the survey suggest that in practice staff have training in the core issues and most have regular supervision. However despite recognition for over a decade of the necessity of particular responses to specific groups of young people, there continues to be a gap in training on minority ethnic young people, younger children, females or learning disability.

In 2007, Hackett proposed that the strengths of the young person and their family/carers are important in securing effective outcomes. With this in mind, it is noteworthy that this principle was largely absent from the documents included in our analysis. We identified several principles, including risk and needs, but recognition of the strengths of the young person and their family were not overtly discussed in any documents. We suggest that this is an important omission. To counter this we have built on the findings of the analysis and have added the principle of valuing the strengths of the child and family to form a proposed framework for good practice. The proposed framework arising from this project may assist in bringing this important issue to the fore.

Category	Sub-Category
A. Organisational level principles	A.1 Need for systematic assessments and interventions
	A.2 Adopting multi-agency approaches
	A.3 Ensuring a well-trained workforce
B. Individual level principles	B.1 Engaging the family
	B.2 Acknowledging the importance of context
	B.3 Ensuring child-centred approaches
	B.4 Taking account of individual needs

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UK

Findings from the documentary analysis show that the procedures and guidelines – and the principles contained within them – align with the service provision captured as a result of the survey. However, as indicated, there is variation as to the breadth and depth and if there are explicit suggestions and recommendations. This was the case in terms of the specific processes and requirements in inter-agency agreements for cases. It was also particularly evident in relation to types of assessment or intervention approaches. The policy context in Scotland and Northern Ireland set out expectations to shift away young people who have offended from formal criminal justice systems where possible.

The extent to which the needs of young people from certain groups were reflected in the documents was variable, particularly in relation to minority ethnic groups and learning disability. This is a concern, given that most of the local authorities who took part in the survey reported that young people from these groups were represented in their case profile. Absence of clear guidelines may leave local authorities grappling with the practicalities of assessment and intervention. Additionally, lack of explicit guidance may increase the chances of inconsistency within and across local authorities. We therefore recommend that policy makers are cognisant of the need for clear, explicit guidance in this area. Our study revealed several principles that underpin good practice in service provision for young people who exhibit harmful sexual behaviour. We recommend this as a framework for good practice.

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Further information about this study can be obtained from Julie.Taylor@ed.ac.uk.

ABOUT THE CENTRE

The **Child Protection Research Centre** was set up in 2007 as a unique collaboration between The University of Edinburgh and the NSPCC. Our research is designed to generate a more integrated and deeper understanding of child protection in the UK and internationally, in order to strengthen policy and practice.

The Centre is committed to pursuing a programme of knowledge exchange that makes a positive impact, including fostering dialogue between policy makers, practitioners and academia.

The Centre was previously known as The University of Edinburgh/NSPCC Centre for UK-wide Learning in Child Protection (CLiCP). This name features in publications produced between 2007-2011.

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