

Direct Commissioning & Novel Psychoactive Substances

14/153/01 (Higgins): Variation and determinants of Novel Psychoactive Substance (NPS) Use: potential implications for policy and practice (£292,859, 18 months)

14/153/02 (McCambridge): The Novel Psychoactive Substances in the UK Project (NPS-UK) (£234,748, 16 months)

1.0 Background:

In August 2013, the PHR programme advertised a commissioning brief on Novel Psychoactive Substances in the UK, specifically what are the patterns of use of novel psychoactive substances in the UK and the associated harms? Using this information, what public health interventions might be effective and cost effective to prevent uptake, reduce use, and reduce harm from use in UK communities?

This research question was prioritised by PAB members in May 2013. The topic came from a request by the Home Office to commission research into novel psychoactive substances (NPS), as part of the international response to the UN resolution to tackle new psychoactive substances by improving monitoring, research, analysis and forensic capability. The need for research into novel psychoactive substances was also highlighted by the report of the Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs on Consideration of the Novel Psychoactive Substances ('legal highs') in 2011, and reflected in the Action Plan of the Government's 2012 Annual Review of the Drug Strategy. The cross-government Drug Strategy Research Group were aware of this commissioning brief and colleagues in both the MRC and the DH were engaged throughout the process.

A total of six outline applications were considered by the Research Funding Board in October 2013 (including a proposal from McCambridge 13/92/02) with only one application invited to submit a full application for consideration at the February 2014 funding board (Higgins 13/92/15). This application was rejected. However, given the importance of the topic area the PHR Programme is keen to commission research in this area.

2.0 Next Steps:

Despite failing to commission in this area, the RFB agreed that there were specific components contained within the following two proposals submitted under this call that may have merit and warrant further consideration.

13/92/02 (McCambridge) The NPS-SAPPHIRE (Novel Psychoactive Substances - Strategic Action for Prevention, Public Health Intervention Research & Epidemiology) Initiative.

Members of the RFB noted that the systematic review component of this proposal (which is an update of an existing review) may be valuable. It was agreed that the option of pursuing this element of the proposal would be explored further by the PHR programme after consideration of the shortlisted proposal 13/92/15 at the February 2014 RFB.

13/92/15 (Higgins) Novel Psychoactive Substance (NPS) use in the United Kingdom

(UK): A mixed methods study on patterns of use, associated harms and the effectiveness of existing interventions

Members of the RFB agreed that Strand two - the Belfast Youth Development Study- was the strongest component and that the programme would like to discuss the potential to commission this part of the study.

3.0 Proposed Decision Making Process:

Following discussion and agreement by the Programme Director, Professor Catherine Law and the DH, it was agreed that the HTA customer priority research model would be implemented to commission these two pieces of research. Briefly, given that both applications have previously been considered by the RFB (one at outline stage and one at full application stage) the process will involve:

1. The Principal Investigators for both proposals are contacted to advise them that we wish to commission this research with the offer of a teleconference (with NETSCC staff) to flesh out the specification.
2. The applicants submit an updated application form for the discrete pieces of work.
3. Both applications are considered by the Programme Director and three designated board members via a teleconference. If necessary, proposals will undergo light touch peer review to supplement any peer review already carried out.
4. Funding recommendations sent to DH for approval

4.0 New Proposal

Following teleconferences in June/July 2014 both applicants indicated that they would be interested in submitting new proposals to the PHR programme for smaller, discrete pieces of work; Higgins focused on Strand 2 - Secondary analysis of patterns and outcomes of NPS use from the Belfast Youth Development Study (BYDS) and McCambridge focused on an updated systematic review. It was also suggested that for Higgins it may be helpful to also include elements of strand 5 in the new proposal as this builds on strand 2. However, both applicants were advised that it would be important to include a clear justification in the new proposal if any additional components above and beyond those requested by the RFB are included.

5.0 Summary: Discussion of Higgins (14/153/01) at the RFB on 14 October 2014

Considered by Eileen Kaner & Steve Morris. Martin White Chaired.

Members agreed that this was an important area but they raised concerns about the size and scope of the proposal given that whilst the scope of the work had been significantly reduced, the cost of the application had only decreased by £51K. Insufficient details were provided about the proposed methodology, in particular the BYDS study and population which made it difficult to judge value for money for such a discrete piece of work. Importantly, concerns were raised about the public health utility of the data given that the survey only

included 55 individuals who reported NPS use and this would not support the multinomial logistic regression and multilevel modelling described.

However, they agreed that the proposed qualitative work had merit and would be useful in understanding accounts of the patterns, meanings and contexts of use but the feasibility of undertaking this work was questioned.

Given the significance of the concerns raised, it was agreed that comments from a third DBM should be sort before recommending a funding decision.

Post meeting note: Chris Bonell has also provided comments on this application