

## **Psychosocial intervention to address the mental health needs of parents/carers of children newly diagnosed with autism**

### **Introduction**

The aim of the HTA Programme is to ensure that high quality research information on the effectiveness, costs and broader impact of health technology is produced in the most efficient way for those who use, manage, provide care in or develop policy for the NHS. Topics for research are identified and prioritised to meet the needs of the NHS. Health technology assessment forms a substantial portfolio of work within the National Institute for Health Research and each year about fifty new studies are commissioned to help answer questions of direct importance to the NHS. The studies include both primary research and evidence synthesis.

### **Research Question:**

***What is the clinical and cost-effectiveness of a brief psychosocial intervention to address the mental health needs of parents/carers of children newly diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder?***

- 1. Intervention:** Brief psychosocial intervention to address the mental health needs of parents/carers of children newly diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), plus usual post-diagnostic care. The intervention should be defined and justified by applicants, including its format and who would deliver it, but should be initiated soon after diagnosis and be deliverable within the NHS.
- 2. Target group:** Parents/carers of children that have 'recently' received a diagnosis of ASD - exact criteria to be defined and justified by applicants but the expectation is that all parents/carers of a child newly diagnosed with ASD would be eligible.
- 3. Setting:** To be defined and justified by applicants.
- 4. Control:** Usual post-diagnostic care (this may include signposting to local and national support organisations) - to be defined by applicants.
- 5. Study design:** A randomised controlled trial preceded by (i) a feasibility phase to specify and improve the intervention assessing acceptability and uptake by all users, and (ii) an internal pilot phase to test recruitment. There should be clear stop/go progression criteria between each of the feasibility phase, the internal pilot phase and the full trial.
- 6. Important outcomes:** Measures of parental/carer mental health e.g. parenting stress, psychological distress, depressive symptoms.  
**Other parent outcomes:** Healthcare utilisation; measures of parenting behaviour; family functioning; self-efficacy; resilience; sleep; health related quality of life; later uptake of parenting programmes to help support their child.  
**Child outcomes:** Such as challenging behaviour, daily functioning, sleep; also cost-effectiveness.
- 7. Minimum duration of follow-up:** At least one year - to be defined and justified by applicant.

**NHS decision problem to be addressed by this research:**

*Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) refers to a range of lifelong neurodevelopmental conditions that can have a profound and uncertain effect on the life of the individual and their family. ASD describes qualitative differences and impairments in reciprocal social interaction and social communication, combined with restricted interests and rigid and repetitive behaviours. Receiving a diagnosis of ASD for a child can have significant emotional impact on parents/carers: feelings such as grief, disbelief, helplessness and anger can lead to high levels of stress and other mental health issues that in turn may affect family functioning and can lead to poorer outcomes for the child. Parents of children with ASD have been consistently shown to experience high levels of parenting stress, psychological distress, and depressive symptoms compared to parents of typically developing children and compared to parents of children with other neurodisabilities. Given this, it is perhaps surprising that current clinical practice offers little psychosocial support to parents/carers around the time of an ASD diagnosis to support their mental health and to empower them to begin to accept and cope with their child's lifetime diagnosis.*

*There is limited but promising evidence in the field of ASD and other chronic childhood illnesses that providing psychosocial support to parents around the time of diagnosis can reduce parenting stress and improve other measures of parental mental health. The intervention with the most evidence to date appears to be that based on problem solving, although it will be up to future applicants to define and justify an appropriate intervention for use in the NHS to address the mental health needs of parents/carers around the time their child is diagnosed with ASD. The importance of getting early support is clear, since high levels of parental stress are associated with poorer outcomes for the child and family functioning. A high quality trial to test the clinical and cost-effectiveness of an appropriate intervention is needed.*

**Notes to Applicants**

The NIHR Health Technology Assessment Programme is funded by the NIHR, with contributions from the CSO in Scotland, Health and Care Research Wales, and the Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland.

For many of the research questions posed by the HTA Programme, a randomised controlled trial is the most appropriate method of providing an answer. Suggestions for how a randomised controlled trial could be designed and constructed most efficiently are encouraged. Where the study design has been left open for applicants to specify, please note that the HTA Programme welcomes any study design which is well justified as the most appropriate approach to answer the research question.

Applicants are asked to:

1. Follow the Medical Research Council's (MRC) Good Clinical Practice guidelines (<http://www.mrc.ac.uk/documents/pdf/good-clinical-practice-in-clinical-trials/>) when planning how studies, particularly RCTs, will be supervised. Further advice specific to each topic will be given by the HTA Programme at full proposal and contract stages.
2. Note that trials involving medicinal products must comply with "The Medicines for Human Use (Clinical Trials) Regulations 2004". In the case of such trials, the DH expects the employing institution of the chief investigator to be nominated as the sponsor. Other institutions may wish to take on this responsibility or agree co-sponsorship with the employing institution. The DH is prepared to accept the nomination of multiple sponsors. Applicants who are asked to submit a full proposal will need to obtain confirmation of a sponsor(s) to complete their application. The DH reserve the right to withdraw from funding the project if they are not satisfied with the arrangements put in place to conduct the trial.

The MHRA ([info@mhra.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:info@mhra.gsi.gov.uk), <http://www.mhra.gov.uk>) can provide guidance as to whether your trial would be covered by the regulations. The NIHR website (<http://www.ct-toolkit.ac.uk/>) also contains the latest information about Clinical Trials regulations and a helpful FAQ page.

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/#>

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 a stage as possible to allow sufficient time for discussion and a considered response.

The NIHR Research Design Service (<http://www.rds.nihr.ac.uk/>) can advise on appropriate NIHR Programme choice, and developing and designing high quality research grant applications.

### Clinical Trials Toolkit

Researchers designing or undertaking clinical trials are encouraged to consult the Clinical Trials Toolkit ([www.ct-toolkit.ac.uk](http://www.ct-toolkit.ac.uk)). This NIHR resource is a website designed to help researchers navigate through the complex landscape of setting up and managing clinical trials in line with regulatory requirements. Although primarily aimed at those involved in publicly funded Clinical Trials of Investigational Medicinal Products (CTIMPs), the Toolkit will also benefit researchers and R&D staff working on trials in other areas, who will find useful information and guidance of relevance to the wider trials environment.

### Research networks

The HTA Programme expects, where appropriate, that applicants will work with the relevant research network.

### Making an application

If you wish to submit a stage one application against this topic, complete the on-line application form at [www.nihr.ac.uk/funding-and-support/current-funding-opportunities/](http://www.nihr.ac.uk/funding-and-support/current-funding-opportunities/) the HTA Programme can be selected using the filters and submit it on line by **30 November**. Applications will be considered by the HTA Funding Board at its meeting in **January 2018**.

**IMPORTANT:** For stage one applications, if shortlisted, investigators will be given a minimum of **eight weeks to submit a full proposal**. The full proposal will be considered at the Funding Board in **May 2018**.

***Applications received electronically after 1300 hours on the due date will not be considered.***

***Please see GUIDANCE ON APPLICATIONS overleaf.***

***Should you have any queries please contact: [htacommissioning@nihr.ac.uk](mailto:htacommissioning@nihr.ac.uk)  
Telephone: [Commissioning Board 02380 595510](tel:02380595510)***

## Guidance on applications

### Required expertise

HTA is a multidisciplinary enterprise. It needs to draw on the expertise and knowledge of clinicians and of those trained in health service research methodologies such as health economics, medical statistics, study design, behavioural science and qualitative approaches. The HTA Programme expects teams proposing randomised controlled trials to include input from an accredited clinical trials unit, or one with equivalent experience. Applicants are also expected to engage a qualified Trial Manager for appropriate projects. A commitment to team working must be shown and applicants may wish to consider a collaborative approach between several institutions.

### Public involvement in research

The HTA Programme recognises the benefit of increasing active involvement of members of the public in research and would like to support research projects appropriately. The HTA Programme encourages applicants to consider *how* the scientific quality, feasibility or practicality of their proposal *could* be improved by involving members of the public. Examples of how this has been done for health technology assessment projects can be found at [www.nets.nihr.ac.uk/ppj](http://www.nets.nihr.ac.uk/ppj). Research teams wishing to involve members of the public should include in their application: the aims of active involvement in this project; a description of the members of the public (to be) involved; a description of the methods of involvement; and an appropriate budget. Applications that involve members of the public will not, for that reason alone, be favoured over proposals that do not but it is hoped that the involvement of members of the public will improve the quality of the application.

### Outcomes

Wherever possible, the results of HTA should provide information about the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of care provided in its usual clinical setting and for the diverse subjects who would be eligible for the interventions under study. The endpoints of interest will in most cases include disease specific measures, health related quality of life and costs (directly and indirectly related to patient management). Wherever possible, these measurements should be made by individuals who are unaware of the treatment allocation of the subjects they are assessing. We encourage applicants to involve users of health care in the preparation of their proposal, for instance in selecting patient-oriented outcomes. Where established Core Outcomes exist they should be included amongst the list of outcomes unless there is good reason to do otherwise. Please see The COMET Initiative website at [www.comet-initiative.org](http://www.comet-initiative.org) to identify whether Core Outcomes have been established. A period of follow up should be undertaken which is sufficient to ensure that a wider range of effects are identified other than those which are evident immediately after treatment. Where relevant, researchers should explore the effect of the intervention in relation to health inequalities. These factors should guide applicants in their choice of subjects, settings and measurements made.

### Longer-term follow up

Researchers to consider building in provision, if appropriate, for a simple mechanism for long-term follow up using routine data bases/sets; including obtaining consent for this from participants at trial entry.

### Sample size

A formal estimate should be made of the number of subjects required to show important differences in the chosen primary outcome measure. Justification of this estimate will be expected in the application.

## **Communication**

Communication of the results of research to decision makers in the NHS is central to the HTA Programme. Successful applicants will be required to submit a single final report for publication by the HTA Programme. They are also required to seek peer-reviewed publication of their results elsewhere and may also be asked to support NETSCC, HTA in further efforts to ensure that results are readily available to all relevant parties in the NHS. Where findings demonstrate continuing uncertainty, these should be highlighted as areas for further research.

## **Timescale**

There are no fixed limits on the duration of projects or funding and proposals should be tailored to fully address the problem (including long-term follow-up if necessary). Applicants should consider however that there is a pressing need within the NHS for this research, and so the duration of the research needs to be timely.

## **Feasibility and Pilot studies**

We expect that when pilot or feasibility studies are proposed by applicants, or specified in commissioning briefs, a clear route to the substantive study will be described. This applies whether the brief or proposal describes just the preliminary study or both together. Whether preliminary and main studies are funded together or separately may be decided on practical grounds.

Feasibility Studies are pieces of research done before a main study. They are used to estimate important parameters that are needed to design the main study. Feasibility studies for randomised controlled trials may not themselves be randomised. Crucially, feasibility studies do not evaluate the outcome of interest; that is left to the main study. If a feasibility study is a small randomised controlled trial, it need not have a primary outcome and the usual sort of power calculation is not normally undertaken. Instead the sample size should be adequate to estimate the critical parameters (e.g. recruitment rate) to the necessary degree of precision.

Pilot studies are a version of the main study that is run in miniature to test whether the components of the main study can all work together. It is focused on the processes of the main study, for example to ensure recruitment, randomisation, treatment, and follow-up assessments all run smoothly. It will therefore resemble the main study in many respects. In some cases this will be the first phase of the substantive study and data from the pilot phase may contribute to the final analysis; this can be referred to as an internal pilot. Or at the end of the pilot study the data may be analysed and set aside, a so-called external pilot.

For a full definition of the terms 'feasibility study' and 'pilot study' visit the NETSCC website glossary page [www.nets.nihr.ac.uk/glossary](http://www.nets.nihr.ac.uk/glossary)

In preparing for a substantive evaluation attention should be paid to appropriate guidance on how to develop interventions (such as the MRC guidance on developing and evaluating complex interventions and the IDEAL framework: [www.ideal-collaboration.net/framework/](http://www.ideal-collaboration.net/framework/)).

## **Diagnostics and Imaging**

In evaluating diagnostic and imaging techniques, the emphasis of the HTA Programme is to assess the effect on patient management and outcomes (particularly where changes in management can be shown to have patient benefits). Improvements in diagnostic accuracy, whilst relevant, are not the primary interest of this commissioned research programme. Applicants should justify where they consider improvements in diagnostic accuracy to be relevant to these objectives. Where there is poor evidence

to link diagnostic improvements to patient benefits, part of the primary research may be to assess the effects of such changes on patient outcome.

An assessment should also be made of changes in other resources (particularly other subsequent therapies) used as a result of changes in diagnostic methods.