alma economics

Preliminary Evaluation of the CornerstoneVR Pilot Programme - Executive Summary

Over the past five years, the number of children who are looked after by Local Authorities (LAs) and children who require child protection plans to be kept safe from 'significant harm' has increased. This suggests an increasing number of children who are at risk of trauma across England. Additionally, from March 2016 to March 2018, the number of Harder to Place (HTP) children with a placement order waiting to be placed increased by a third.[1]

While the demand for foster carers and adopters has increased, the number of approved adoptive families has decreased over the last 3 years. The number of approved foster carers is relatively stable, but a shortage of carers for specific cases has been identified, including those willing to care for children and young people with complex needs, challenging behaviour and on the edge of the criminal system (Narey and Owers, 2018). Consequently, the care system seems to suffer from supply and demand imbalances.

In response to the above challenges, the Cornerstone Partnership's Virtual Reality Programme (CVR) seeks to improve the life chances of children in care and children who have experienced attachment-related trauma. CVR uses virtual reality technology to change how professionals (including social workers, child and adolescent mental health workers, teachers, and judges), adopters and fosters carers understand and interact with vulnerable children.

The CVR pilot programme was implemented between March and December 2018, with participants being asked a number of questions on its likely impact both prior to and following the sessions. While our assessment is not based on measured, objective outcomes for children in care, and further work is needed to provide definitive evidence on impact and financial benefits, the preliminary results presented here paint a very promising picture of CVR's potential.

The ultimate goal of the CVR pilot programme is to get children on their best path as soon as possible. This is expected to be achieved through an improved understanding of trauma, children's emotions and potential triggers, which in turn can help lead to improvements in several intermediate outcomes, including decision-making, placement stability, the type of support offered to children and carers, and the recruitment of adopters and foster carers. **The results of this preliminary evaluation are consistent with positive impact being achieved across all the outcomes highlighted above.** More specifically:

Improved understanding of trauma, children's emotions, and potential triggers: Nine out of ten participants believed CVR can help change the perspective of carers and adopters – leading to improvements in recruitment and increasing placement stability, as well as enabling better communication between children and their carers. Furthermore, a majority of social workers felt CVR helped improve their own understanding of trauma and stated that they will do things differently as a result of the training.

Decision-making: Most participants felt that CVR provided them with skills and knowledge that will enable quicker decision-making, while 40% said that it helped them gain insights and develop skills that would lead to better decisions.

Placement stability: Close to half of all participants believed CVR can help prevent adoption breakdown, while over 90% expected CVR to have a positive impact on their case study.
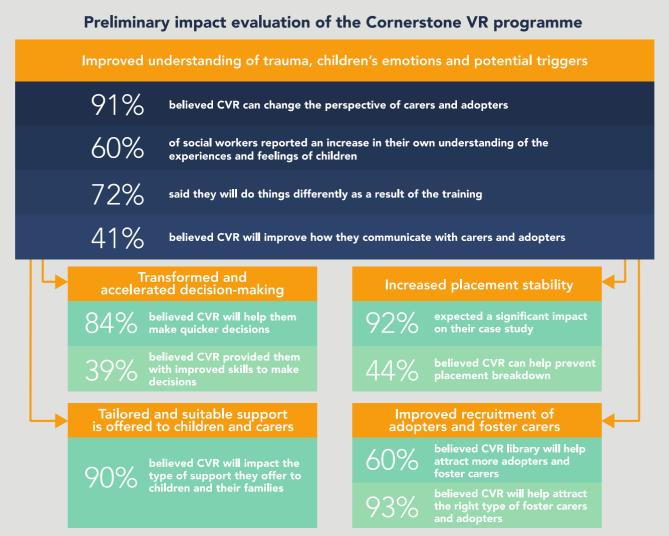
Support offered to children and carers: Nine out of ten participants said CVR will lead to changes to the type of support they offer to children and their carers.

Recruitment of adopters and foster carers: Six out of ten participants believed CVR will help attract more adopters and foster carers. Critically, over 90% of participants felt that CVR, by providing a window into trauma and children's emotions, can play a key role in attracting the right type of adopters and foster carers.

The above results are in line with the broader academic literature on VR's impact. There is emerging evidence that VR can increase individuals' levels of empathy with homeless people (Herrera et al., 2018) and people living with dementia (Wijma et al., 2017). Moreover, Krokos et al. (2018) showed that people remember information better when presented through virtual reality compared to standard desktop-based learning. Finally, recent research has provided promising findings on the long-term impact of VR.

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[1] HTP children are defined as children who are any of the following: 5 years old or older, of BME ethnic background, disabled, or part of a sibling group (Adoption Leadership Board Statistics, CVAA).

As CVR is a relatively new approach and the offering is still evolving, arriving at a definitive estimate of likely financial savings for LAs is not possible at this stage. Utilising fairly conservative assumptions, we estimate CVR can help generate savings in the tune of £70,000 - £190,000 on average for each LA solely through improvements in matching speed and improvements in preventing adoption breakdown.

Preliminary impact evaluation of the Cornerstone VR programme

Improved understanding of trauma, children's emotions and potential triggers

91% believed CVR can change the perspective of carers and adopters

60% of social workers reported an increase in their own understanding of the experiences and feelings of children

72% said they will do things differently as a result of the training

41% believed CVR will improve how they communicate with carers and adopters

Transformed and accelerated decision-making

84% believed CVR will help them make quicker decisions

39% believed CVR provided them with improved skills to make decisions

Increased placement stability

92% expected a significant impact on their case study

44% believed CVR can help prevent placement breakdown

Tailored and suitable support is offered to children and carers

90% believed CVR will impact the type of support they offer to children and their families

Improved recruitment of adopters and foster carers

60% believed CVR library will help attract more adopters and foster carers

93% believed CVR will help attract the right type of foster carers and adopters

Percentages refer to stated opinions of participants in a number of Cornerstone VR pilot sessions. Details on the number of participants and the questions asked can be found in the report.

Process elements

99% felt confident using the Cornerstone VR equipment

- Positive feedback on trainers: knowledgeable, professional and engaging
- 2-day format seen as ideal by many participants

Requested additions:

- A 'group play' feature synchronising playback to improve group sessions
- Summary guide on common issues, e.g. adjusting focus, battery life
- Issue participants with certificate of programme completion
- Expanded library: different scenarios, longer films

Financials

Potential savings generated by a typical LA
£70,000 - £190,000*

Improved placement stability:
£60,000 - £135,000

Quicker matching:
£10,000 - £55,000

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The available evidence does not allow us to quantify Cornerstone VR's impact directly, and there is also some uncertainty regarding the available cost estimates of different processes. Hence, these figures represent estimated savings under a range of plausible scenarios and should be seen as indicative. Figures are rounded to the nearest £5,000.