Virtual and Digital approaches

1. **What do we mean by virtual and digital approaches?**

   Virtual and Digital (V&D) approaches (which cover projects, programmes, interventions and practices) are ones that can be delivered remotely, using technology, with little or no traditional, physical face-to-face interaction between providers and children and young people. This broadly incorporates six delivery models, alongside other formats and methods:

   1. Remote delivery conducted on a one-to-one basis.
   2. Remote delivery conducted in groups.
   3. Digital delivery of guided self-help content.
   4. Digital delivery of unguided self-help content.
   5. Digital delivery of interactive content.
   6. Brief text-based messaging approaches.

   As V&D is a delivery mechanism, approaches delivered this way can have a wide range of underlying theories and designs. Many V&D approaches will be principally therapeutic in design, and seek to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors for youth offending and violence (e.g. decrease behavioural problems, improvement in mental health and wellbeing, reduction in substance misuse), which in the long term will help reduce violent crime.

2. **What do we know about the effectiveness of V&D approaches aimed at preventing youth violence and offending?**

   We know that V&D approaches can be effective in improving outcomes for young people in areas such as mental health, substance misuse and upstream indicators of crime and violence (i.e. behavioural problems) but there is a lack of research looking at V&D approaches affecting crime and anti-social behaviour, especially violent crime.

   We know that parenting-focused V&D approaches can affect crime-related behavioural outcomes and there is preliminary evidence to support the use of V&D approaches focused on bullying prevention as well. In contrast, available evidence

suggests V&D approaches tackling sexual or intimate partner violence have little or no effect.

3. **What do we believe are the key components of effective V&D approaches relevant to the Youth Endowment Fund?**

   Available evidence suggests that V&D approaches are most effective when they involve:

   o **Practitioner support:** V&D approaches seem to be more successful when supplemented with additional, remote practitioner support.

   o **Engaging:** V&D approaches that do not have practitioner-participant contact are most effective when they are engaging. For example, when approaches have multimedia content, are interactive and/or provide activities and quizzes.

   o **Tailored:** V&D approaches are more engaging when the content is tailored towards participants and personalised feedback is provided.

4. **What do we think are some of the key challenges, risks and barriers associated with delivering V&D approaches?**

   V&D approaches can be hampered by a range of factors, especially where they try to target vulnerable young people. We would particularly highlight:

   o **Adaptation:** It should not be assumed that approaches will work equally well when delivered through virtual methods and there are clear risks that adapting even well evidenced approaches to V&D delivery will be less effective.

   o **Relationships:** Developing a trusted relationship between a practitioner and a young person (often referred to as the 'therapeutic alliance') is a key component of effectiveness and is especially important in young people who have experienced adversity. This can be compromised in V&D delivery as there is no physical face-to-face interaction.

   o **Engagement:** Engaging vulnerable groups is always a challenge and V&D approaches requires greater proactiveness from participants to engage, which may be absent in some vulnerable young people.

   o **Recruitment and attrition:** With schools shut, recruitment will probably be difficult and even for those who join, high drop-out rates are a consistent risk with V&D

delivery. Young people who drop out are more likely to be those facing multiple disadvantages.

- o **Appropriateness:** V&D approaches appear to be less well suited to individuals with more severe problems or those experiencing an immediate crisis. Content and language will also need to be adapted to the needs and abilities of the participants.
- o **Access:** Although most households with young people have some access to the internet, there is likely to be challenges around access and quality of connections in the poorest communities.
- o **Privacy:** Many vulnerable young people may not have a quiet and safe space in which to engage with V&D approaches.
- o **Adapting safeguarding procedures:** Assessing wellbeing remotely may be more difficult for practitioners than it is face-to-face.

5. **Given the available evidence, what are we particularly looking for in applications received in this area?**

We are particularly interested in proposals that:
- o Target relevant outcomes including mental health and wellbeing (including social and emotional outcomes), as well as behavioural outcomes associated with crime and violence.
- o Feature practitioner support, have plans for engaging content (e.g. to offer multimedia or interactive content), and/or offer tailored content and feedback. We are much less likely to support approaches based on unguided self-help content or brief text-based messaging approaches.
- o Have clear plans in place for recruiting relevant vulnerable young people, and for monitoring and managing attrition rates.
- o Have appropriate plans for the level of need they plan to target using V&D approaches, particularly as these methods may be less well-suited to young people with more severe forms of mental illness or those experiencing immediate crises.
- o Have clear plans in place to foster positive relationships (for approaches that have practitioner support).

o Provide a credible explanation for why any V&D adaptations being made to existing delivery are likely to be effective.

o Have practical plans in place for rapid improvement and adaptation of the provision (for approaches that are adapted from existing face-to-face delivery).

Key sources

EIF (2020) 'Covid-19 and early intervention: Evidence, challenges and risks relating to virtual and digital delivery.' Available [here](#).

EIF and Cordis Bright Consulting (2015) 'Preventing gang and youth violence: a review of risk and protective factors.' Available [here](#).