Reviewer's report

Title: Influences on recruitment to randomised controlled trials in mental health settings in England: a national cross-sectional survey of clinical studies officers working for the Mental Health Research Network

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Reviewer: Sujit D Rathod

Reviewer's report:

The authors identify and describe key features which influence access to randomized controlled trials in the settings of mental health practices in the NHS. They conducted a cross-sectional study of clinical studies officers within Mental Health Research Network of the NHS, using a questionnaire comprised of both closed- and open-ended questions.

Given the increasing levels of mental health care provided through the NHS and limited evidence base for treating mental health conditions, research of this type is of particular importance.

Major compulsory revisions

1. The low response rate is concerning, especially given the topic of this paper. Is it not possible for the authors to compare their sample's characteristics against any data available on the overall MHRN population? For example, with regard to age, sex, years of practice and specialty?

2. Page 8: The results described in the sentence "Participants reported qualifications..." is not part of Table 2.

3. While the authors have carefully described the issues identified with recruitment into general RCTs, they provide little justification for there being unique issues with recruitment into mental health RCTs. Is there any empiric evidence for there being a particular problem with recruitment into mental health RCTs, and especially do in the UK? What is the evidence to say that "the conduct of trials needed to reduce the massive burden of disease is particularly challenging." ? Is there reason to believe the MHRN is not reaching its potential?

4. In the Discussion, as in the Background, the authors must take particular care to highlight any findings that appear to be unique to mental health RCTs. That no other reviews of research methodology are cited in the Discussion to put these findings into context is a concern.

Minor essential revisions

5. It will be very helpful for non-UK-based readers if the authors described the relationship between the gatekeepers and the CSOs within the NHS Trusts, and how these are meant to collaborate on research activity.

6. Define "gatekeeper" early in the manuscript.
7. Describe the "literature review" that informed the development of the survey instrument.

8. Who was in the convenience sample for the pilot?

9. In the Results, define "M" and "SD" upon first use. Also, provide a numerator and denominator when reporting n=XX.

10. In the Results, pair the qualitative findings with specific figures from the quantitative findings. It is preferable to report the percentage of respondents who affirmed a given item #, rather than just identifying the Item #. There are several points in the Results where the authors assert a point but do not support it with their data.

11. "...CSOs argued strongly that robust, 'real' feasibility studies were crucial..." Feasibility studies of what?

12. In the References, Item #13 lacks a publisher or city.

Discretionary revisions

13. The authors can consider reserving the term "participant" for those individuals who are enrolled in the randomized controlled trials. It is slightly confusing when "participant" refers to the CSOs in the present cross-sectional study.

14. Replace "URL" with "website", or define the acronym.

15. The sentence starting "Researchers have located barriers..." is confusing. Consider revising.

16. Page 10: "THE consensus amongst participants..."

17. Page 6: "This was informed by A literature review..."

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Acceptable

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests