Reviewer's report

Title: A case study evaluation of implementation of a care pathway to support normal birth in one English birth centre: anticipated benefits and unintended consequences

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Reviewer: Edwin van Teijlingen

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This interesting case study is part of a wider study and this is sometimes confusing in the article. There is occasionally too much information about the wider study and not enough about the case study.

The 'background' section of the Abstract is three sentences about the wider study and one about the case study. The authors should bear in mind that the readers of this particular article will not be too interested in the wider study and if they are they'll have to find it elsewhere anyway.

Setting (page 7) is confusing. Whilst the section above 'Design' speaks of “For the purpose of this study a ‘case’ was defines as the clinical setting (the Birth Centre) and …”, in Setting, the reader is told “Sites, including the Birth Centre, were purposively samples …..” Reading the rest of the paper it becomes clear that there is only one case and hence one setting. I think this confusion comes from the authors trying to incorporate too much unnecessary information about the wider study. I advise to cut the last two sentences of page 7 and the first on page 8. Rewrite the setting clearly focusing on the case study.

Methods section is poorly referenced, having all these references to Realistic Evaluation, there are no references to 'non-participant observation' or 'interviewing'.

The sentence (page 10) “A decision was taken … to be included.” On what basis was this decision made/evidence that this is 'correct' decision?

The last sentence of data analysis should tell the reader about identifiers in quotes. What does SO2 mean or MO4?

Ethics section is too detailed. BMC Pregnancy & Childbirth is an electronic journal so word length is not too important, but we need to keep articles interesting for the average reader. Cut out all the text staring from “Once a woman had agreed …..” Until the end of the paragraph. Interesting stuff for an application to the MREC, but not here.

Results:

I don’t like authors presenting a point and then listing three quotes. I have had arguments with fellow qualitative researchers on this matter and don’t always win the argument, but as a rule the quotes illustrate the point made by the author. If
the quotes are highlighting (slightly) different points the authors should tell the reader this. Hence I expect at least a few words if not a sentence introducing each quote. If two quotes are making the same point remove one of them!

I'm a little worried that many quotes are from SO3, I used a highlight pen on a paper copy to show how many words came from one interviewee. This is not a problem, but needs to be mentioned in the discussion (E.g. was this a particularly insightful interviewee? Or just talkative?)

References
In the text don’t mix Harvard and Vancouver style. E.g. Hunter (2007) [23] is very ugly, why is ‘(2007)’ needed in this style of referencing?
Note et al. not et al.
Ref. 9 on page 34 needs a place of publication.
Competing interests: did none of the authors work in the Birth Centre?
Minor comments
The authors are fond of the word ‘including’ where one could use, for example. Leave a space before the reference [1], not[3].
Second line page 4 should read “.. on the provision of a ....”
Authors could be more consistent in their use of hyphens, e.g. page 8 has “midwifery-led unit”, but the hyphen is missed out in the expressions “consultant led maternity unit” and “three part document”.
First sentence on page 28 (which starts on page 27) is too long / confusing.