Reviewer's report

Title: 'Reaching the Hard to Reach' - Lessons learned from the VCS (Voluntary and Community Sector)

Version: 4 Date: 18 June 2009

Reviewer: Jane South

Reviewer's report:

The revised paper has addressed some of the essential and discretionary revisions and therefore the presentation of results is improved and overall a clearer picture of the findings emerges. There are, however, still weaknesses in relation to the discussion of results and the location of those results within a wider literature.

Points addressed satisfactorily from earlier review

The study aims are now clear and relate to the objectives.

Detail on the sampling strategy is now provided and that is helpful in terms of ensuring anonymity.

Changes to the reporting style mean that anonymity is protected now. There is reference to the table in the comments but this did not appear to be part of the manuscript? It is suggested that authors check quotes to ensure that no quotes can be attributed to individuals, for example, through identification of participating organisations.

There is evidence of a more thematic interpretation of results, although at times the presentation is still rather descriptive, listing individual comments. Reporting style is satisfactory.

Major Compulsory Revisions still required

The abstract still does not summarise the main results - only the facilitating factors. Results relating to the definitions of hard-to-reach and the barriers need to be summarised.

A very brief review of the literature on the VCS is provided, almost exclusively from policy documents. It is essential that greater depth is achieved in the discussion with relation to academic literature about the nature of the VCS, and issues such as independence and advocacy need to be explored. This links directly to the key question raised in the paper about how the VCS serve the hard-to-reach and how approaches might be transferred to the statutory sector.

The section on definitions of hard to reach is linked to literature although synthesis of themes is not really achieved. The other main sections (barriers and facilitating factors), which are the basis of the conclusion, are not discussed with
reference to wider literature. It is essential that there is some critical discussion of the themes raised. For example, there is literature on partnerships with the VCS and some of the challenges they face on terms of funding.

The conclusion makes the links to current policy but there are a number of assertions made. Where is the evidence that primary health care services “bear the hallmarks of VCS practice”? There is still a need to bring the results together and identify the main conclusions.

Discretionary Revisions

It is suggested that authors check quotes to ensure that no quotes can be attributed to individuals, for example, through identification of participating organisation.

Sub headings are not consistent and use both underline and italics.

Minor Essential Revisions

It needs to be clear where direct quotes are used from policy documents/research papers and page numbers should be given.

There are a number of typos:

p. 3 NHS Plan
p. 3 note date for IDeA reference
p. 6 , last para, line 1, of
p.9, line 12, s in sentence
p. 11, 1st para, 2nd line: ‘was’ repeated
p. 16, 2nd para, line 1 – sentence construction on clear and VCS services providers.
p.22 – Is homeless link online a reference?
p.23 line 5, ...

Overall this is a small study and while the results have some relevance, as a research paper it remains very descriptive and more work needs to be done to ensure that there is some critical discussion of the conclusions with reference to wider literature on the VCS.

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