Reviewer’s report

Title: Can programme theory be used as a 'translational tool' to optimise health service delivery in a national early years' initiative in Scotland: a case study.

Version: 1 Date: 12 March 2013

Reviewer: Emma Halliday

Reviewer’s report:

I found this a clearly written paper that provides a useful contribution to the literature on the use of evaluation in service improvements and delivery. Three key major revisions are suggested below (1) setting out known limitations/challenges of using programme theory in evaluation of complex interventions (2) more detail on nature of complex interventions and what key aspects of complexity is evident in the Childsmile 'intervention’ (3) clarifying lack of involvement of service users in evaluation/intervention. Some discretionary revisions are also offered.

Major revisions

(1) Background, 3rd paragraph:
The authors should draw attention to the key aspects of complexity that are often present in 'nature' of social interventions and implications of this for evaluation. As the authors describe later on in the paper, such complexity may arise from Childsmile being designed as a national programme, but implemented at the local level across multiple sites/systems (e.g. both horizontal and vertical complexity). In this respect, it may be useful to look at reading by Hawe and Shiell (who discuss nature of complex interventions and complex systems) as well as Patricia Rogers (2008) paper on using programme theory in Evaluation journal.

(2) Background, Paragraph 10:
Can the authors say abit more about the methods used for the literature search (e.g. search terms / databases searched?) given the American bias in search results

(3) Discussion, Paragraph 1-2
In recent years evaluators have also highlighted the limitations/challenges of using programme theory in evaluation of interventions with complex aspects. The limitations of TBE could be highlighted in the discussion. See for example, Rogers (referenced above)

(4) Discussion, paragraph 9
Can the authors clarify why service users weren't involved in the process evaluation more generally (given that there are growing expectations for their
involvement in health research).

(5) Discussion, paragraph 9
More specifically, in the context of understanding programme theory, involving service users may also have surfaced important learning from their knowledge and experience about how models of delivery were working in relation to accessibility and acceptability (e.g. for children and their families). Some of the findings suggest that aspects of the Childsmile model are shaped by the needs and voice of practitioners rather than the intended users, with service users expected to ‘fit’ with the existing system/services.

(6) Discussion, Paragraph 11

Discretionary revisions
Some sub headings would be helpful in the background section given its length.

(7) Background, 2nd paragraph:
It would be helpful to clarify why stakeholder involvement in developing logic models/explicating programme theory is important given involvement is an important aspect of the process in supporting learning from evaluation.

(8) Background, 2nd paragraph:
Suggest clarifying what a ‘logic model’ in case this is an unfamiliar term for some readers.

(9) Background, Final paragraph:
Can a link be included to direct the reader to the overall evaluation framework/plan?

(10) Methods, Paragraph 1
The paper would benefit from a figure setting out a simplified version of the key Childsmile LM/programme theory

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

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