Author's response to reviews

Title: Developing a checklist for research proposals to help describe health service interventions in UK research programme: a mixed methods study

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Dear Reviewers,

The authors would like to thank you once again for your time and useful comments. The manuscript has been updated and the changes have been tracked in the word document. We believe the paper has improved and ready for publication. Please see how we have addressed each of the comments below:

**Reviewer 1**

**Minor Essential Revisions**

Final sentence at the bottom of p.3
This does not make much sense as it stands. Are the authors trying to say that the blurring between context and intervention can mean that important elements of the research that is being proposed may be overlooked or undervalued, and that the aim of the checklist is to help applicants to identify these elements, and to explain as explicitly as possible how they will be explored in the research proposal?
**Response:** Some wording has been added in this paragraph. We do not want to discuss the checklist too much as this point as the next paragraph leads into this.

**Discretionary revisions**

1. **In the Results section, p. 9**
   Could the eight initial constructs be listed under the description of Stage 1 rather than having to find them in Figure 1 at the back of the paper?
   **Response:** The eight initial constructs have been listed.

2. **In Fig 1 the constructs are presented from right to left in one order; in Table 2 and in the text of the Results section they appear in another order. Could the two be reconciled? This would make things clearer for the reader.**
   **Response:** This has been rearranged as suggested.

3. **As described in the paper, the history of the final constructs differs. Using the ordering in the Results section, the first three and the fifth construct were identified as separate constructs from the start and remained so throughout, though the name of the fifth was changed. The fourth "Workforce and Staffing" is an amalgamation of two constructs that at the start were separate. The sixth, similarly, is an amalgamation, and an extension, of constructs that were identified at the start.**
   Given this, it might help to start the discussion of each construct with a brief statement of where it started from and then explain where it ended up (as is done in the case of the first, ‘Organisation’, and is also done for the fourth, though here the description jumps around a bit). This should only require a little tweaking of the existing text.
   **Response:** A few brief statements have been added to each section, where appropriate.

4. **P. 14 First sentence in the Discussion section. Could Simon Bishop's words (which I found helpful) be used here, and the study described as a "small action-orientated mixed methods study"?**
   **Response:** This suggestion has been added.

5. **Some stylistic suggestions**
   P. 4 The grammar in the final sentence is a bit odd. Might it be better if it said: "Taking these points into consideration, it was felt that the development of a checklist would be a useful tool that could enable less experienced applicants to address more successfully the complex set of requirements involved in writing research proposals to the NIHR HS&DR Programme."

Response: This has been changed as suggested.

P. 9, 5th sentence from the bottom also reads rather oddly. Might it be better if it said: "The researchers appreciated having a tool to aid them in writing their research proposals and commented that it made them think about factors that they would not have considered previously."?
Response: This has been changed as suggested.

P.11 Last sentence. Do you need to say "it was difficult to distinguish the difference between the two". Isn't "distinguish between the two" sufficient?
Response: This has been changed as suggested.

P.12 1st sentence in paragraph headed 'Other Important Contextual Information' seems to miss a word. Should it read: "In the earlier phases of developing the checklist, a number of constructs were difficult to justify and it was not thought appropriate to represent them in a separate single construct, however they were of high importance."?
Response: This has been changed as suggested.

P.14 Last sentence in first paragraph. There is a comma missing after "as the feedback confirms".
Response: This has been changed as suggested.

Reviewer 2

Thanks to the authors for addressing all comments and suggestions from myself and the other reviewer. I feel that the changes made have improved the paper and it can now be published.

Given the variety and complexity as well as theoretical differences between different applications to the HS&DR programme, no checklist will provide a complete tool for judging applications or replace the role expert reviewers. However, as I understand it, the check-list will not be used dogmatically to judge the quality of applications in itself, but is intended as a guide to help applicants structure their proposals and consider including particular information. As the paper clearly states "This is not expected to solely answer the problem, but begin to improve the situation.". If used in this way I feel the checklist can indeed be a helpful guide to potential applicants to the programme and I look forward to seeing it published.
Response: Thank you for these comments, we are glad that the message of the paper has been reflected in your comments and that it can now be published.

Kind Regards,
Hannah Dorling