Author's response to reviews

Title: 1. Evaluation of a virtual approach to commissioning health research. 2. Social richness, socio-technical tension and the work of virtual groups.

Authors:

Christine C McCourt (chris.mccourt@tvu.ac.uk)
Philip PA Morgan (phil.morgan@tvu.ac.uk)
Penny P Youll (p.youll@tavinstitute.org)

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Evaluation of a ‘virtual’ approach to commissioning health research.
Paper review 18.10.05

General comments – this paper is very relevant to the mission of Health Research Policy and Systems which is stated to publish studies of the use of electronic information and telecommunications technologies to support long distance clinical health care, patient and professional health-related education, public health and health administration. It can provide some extremely useful insight into the use of CMC with disparate groups of people in relation to a Chaired process of commissioning which is very relevant to national and international teams. As currently presented it is confusing to read because it does not isolate the pertinent study from the context of the larger study, of which it formed a part, and assumes an understanding of commissioning processes and terminology which all readers will not share. The paper needs re-writing to give a more explicit, focussed and coherent account of the processes of using and evaluating CMC in this context. Clear definitions of the evaluation of this study need to be given at the beginning of the paper to distinguish this study from the Programme (p.11). This would help to then clarify the purpose of the literature review and give a rationale for a summary of the review in relation to the study. The evaluation process should be described and illustrated systematically to show the various stages of analysis. The findings need to be clearly identified and presented before the discussion. The re-written paper needs proof reading for English grammar and clarity.

The beginning of the article has been re-structured with an introduction prior to the background, which gives an overview of the study and explains its relationship to the programme, its main aims and design. We hope this makes the points raised here clearer. Further amendments have been made throughout the article accordingly.

We do not, however, agree with the argument that findings should be presented separately from the discussion. It is usual practice to combine findings and discussion in qualitative studies, particularly those with complex elements and methodologies. We feel that attempting to separate them would reduce the clarity of the argument.

We have checked the paper for grammar and clarity.

Specific comments
Abstract
Needs clarity
P.3 Paragraph 2: ‘involving members’ is not clear
P.3 last para. ‘The reduction of social cues’ - ? word omitted.
P.4 ‘both modes’ has not been explained.
P.4 Conclusions: Wording is not clear.

The abstract has been edited, removing some details and improving the clarity, including the specific points cited.

Background
P.5 last paragraph: Is it ‘the entire process from identifying priorities through to commissioning projects’?
Has been amended.
delete ‘rather than just involving ……… perusing research findings’ – is this relevant? – not well explained.
Deleted.
P. 6 bottom: is this relevant here? – rather confusing. Deleted.
Relevant literature
P.7 bottom line: it is not made clear how extensive the review has been. It would be helpful to give some idea of how the literature was collated, the years searched and the criteria used, followed by an overview of how the literature review will be presented in order to link the sub-sections.
P.8 middle para.: Omit the word ‘available’ it is confusing semantics. These may be markers of ‘members’ identity? Lines 6 and 7 – what does ‘this’ and ‘it’ refer to?
P. 9: it is important to refer to the current study with consistent terms throughout? Use of ‘this study’ is confused with the literature and it is not made clear =how the current study is distinguished from the programme.(p.11)
P.10: – what does ‘two-way’ mean – synchronous, asynchronous or another from of asynchronous? However, this paragraph (p10-11) is a general comment on CMC and does not appear to be relevant to this study.
These points have all been responded to. A clear account of the nature and extent of the review has been added at the beginning.

Context, design and methods
P.11-12 needs greater clarity in description of ‘the programme’ in relation to London’s Health with reference to the literature.
This section has been amended to make this clearer.
P.12 middle para.: An important paragraph which is very confusing. It is not made clear whether this current study is the novel process or the pilot study which was carried out earlier. It is not clear how the project (which ?) was ‘rolled out’ to which groups these ‘members’ belong and to which themes.
This has been amended to clarify.
P12. bottom three lines: It is not clear who ‘They’ are nor if the ‘longer-term’ committees are the ‘higher level’ committees. Are the groups referred to, the theme groups? Deleted.
Table 1 (p.43) needs a title which more clearly links it to the work of these theme groups and the relation to the conventional processes. The title has been amended.
P.44 note under Table 3 – needs to be integrated into the text to explain the process and design of the study. This has been done.
P.47 Table 5 is not referred to in the paper. This was mistyped as table 6 and has now been corrected.
P.13 para. 2: the order of sentences is confusing – the Phases of the programme should be introduced first. Face-to-face meetings need to be clearly distinguished from virtual meetings and whether meetings included all the theme groups. This has been edited to help clarify.
P.14 para. 2 – is repetitive re randomisation which is mentioned earlier. We feel this one repetition is sensible for clarity.
? are the last three lines relevant to this study? These have been deleted.
P.15 para. 2: is an important paragraph to describe the design of the study. It does not give the numbers of participants involved and does not distinguish the current study from the earlier pilot (is there a reference?). It does not indicate what was achieved from the sampling. Five interviews? conducted. What number of others were carried out? How many Regional R&D Officers were interviewed? . Were these in relation to the CMC virtual commissioning process?
This has been amended and the reference cited to make clearer the difference between the pilot and this study. More information has been added to clarify the sampling. All numbers were given in the response section following this, but some changes have been made for clarity here.
P. 15 bottom two paragraphs: Confusing introduction to Programme managers with out explanation of their role. The use of data from previous work is not clearly integrated to show how it related to the commissioning process or a role of the principle investigators, which is not explained. This has been amended briefly.
A flow chart of the chronology of data collection is needed here to show how data was collected and from which groups and to give an indication of what data was brought into the
evaluation. We have not added a flowchart since we feel the other amendments made should make the evaluation process clearer. As much of the data collection was overlapping we do not feel a chart would be more helpful, but we are willing to do this if it still appears unclear.

Response
P.16 – 35 out of 66 members of which groups at which time? . Only two members declined – how does this relate to the 35 out of 66 figures? Which members of which groups attended the collaborative enquiry meetings? Which seven members – from which groups were unable to attend? These points have been responded to.
Bottom five lines – If the action research was not carried out it would be better to not mention it at all. It is not clear what the status of the data from the first pilot is here. Relevant sentence has been deleted. The status of data from the pilot should now be clearer.

Analysis
P.17 the process of analysis is difficult to follow – was there any analysis in the field before the CE groups? What is an example of ‘more structured’ data and what kind of ‘structured summaries’ were produced? what was the framework of criteria for? What exactly formed the basis of the discussion paper circulated to members? How many CE meetings were there? – it is not made clear in the design. This section has been amended and more details of the analysis added, in particular regarding the observation data.

Results and discussion
Much of this is unrelated to this study of CMC communication and rather relates to the general commissioning process. The discussion is confusing. It would be more conventional to articulate and present the findings of the evaluation before the discussion. This needs some explicit presentation of findings in relation to the framework of analysis.
P.19 para. 2: the sentence on literacy is unclear in this context.
P.19/20 should come later as recommendations for further research
P.20 para. 2: is not clearly related to the findings; Para. 3 confuses the two studies.
Para 4: needs to be supported with some factual data presented in a findings section.
P.21 is rather confused - these comments need to relate to a sections on findings.
P.22 top line – it is not made clear how this is not IT related.
P.22 para 2: appears to be a summary?
P.23 para. 1 refers to data e.g. transcript which has not been clearly identified in data collection – how was this gathered? Comments on phase two do not clearly identify which groups they refer to.
Pp 23-30: these pages are more centrally related to this study.
P.31 para 1: introduces confusing discussion of follow-up projects and a ‘virtual group at the pilot stage’. What was the criteria for judging?.

We have edited the entire section to respond as much as possible to these points. A few were not entirely clear to us as the page references do not tally with those in the transcript originally submitted – a common problem with word documents. In particular we have ensured that any reference to the pilot project is clearly differentiated from the main study, the mode members were involved in is noted, The section referring to findings from the survey of previously commissioned projects has been edited to clarify. We have not deleted the first part, since although we appreciate that it seems less central, the points on lack of initial work to form a sense of group and unstanding to the process help to illustrate why discussion in a virtual mode may have been less effective than is possible. Similarly, we felt it would be difficult to set out the findings and discussion regarding CMC without providing some detail of the process within which it was situated.

P.31 last paragraph: needs further explanation of inputs, processes and decision – also how a ‘voting screen’ was used – not discussed in the design section. Use of the voting screen has now been explained in the context section.
P.34 last paragraph – drifts from the focus of the study into the effectiveness of health research. Comments on the impact of health care are not made relevant to this study of CMC and do not satisfactorily pull together the main points regarding use of CMC.

Last paragraph – we have not deleted this since it was quite intentional rather than ‘drifting’, since undertaking this study pushed us to consider these issues and we feel they are important to raise here. Evaluation of a novel process is an interesting challenge when there has been little evaluation of the established one. On re-reading we do feel the relevance is clear.