Reviewer’s report

Title: A novel performance monitoring framework for health research systems: experiences of the National Institute for Health Research in England

Version: 1 Date: 18 October 2010

Reviewer: Ian Viney

Reviewer’s report:

The authors summarise the introduction of a performance monitoring framework for the newly established National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The paper sets out a clear and helpful approach for large organisations to track the progress of programmes of work, taking the reader through the stages of identifying suitable metrics and implementing a reporting process. The approach is a fusion of the logic model core to the Buxton and Hanney “payback” framework and Kaplan and Norton’s balanced scorecard.

The authors highlight that the development is modest, nevertheless it is important to readers to see that this approach has been successfully implemented in an organisation as important to UK health research as the NIHR. It is in-keeping with the mission of Health Research Policy and Systems that this learning is shared between organisations with a similar remit in the UK and internationally.

I found the paper very clear, and have one suggestion for revision and a number of comments on the detailed metrics which the authors may or may not feel appropriate to comment on in their paper.

Minor essential revision

1 The authors should explain Figure 3 fully in the text, or revise it. The selection of different indicators for performance management and strategic management is not explained clearly on page 8 (which refers to this figure), although I assume that the outputs framework on the right hand side of the figure is the public document referred to?

Discretionary revisions

1 I was really looking forward to seeing data, evidence, or just comment on how this approach had improved the operation of NIHR. How has this helped develop the next iterations of plans? Has the approach identified potential for cost saving? Is the monitoring timely enough to allow remedial action to be taken in programmes that are not performing as expected? It would strengthen the paper considerably if it is possible to include information about this.

2 What were the risks identified in implementing this approach? Most notably there is risk that indicators will provide perverse incentives within the organisation (as highlighted in the FABRIC criteria). For example, if it was perceived that
NIHR was looking for an increase in the number of research papers produced by
NIHR funded researchers, researchers could quickly increase the numbers of
papers produced through “salami slicing” their work without any gain in
productivity, and a likely decrease in overall quality.

3 I think it is important that indicators have a quality element to them. In figure 4
the short-list of indicators do not all include a quality element. There may of
course be further detail in the full definition of each indicator, but I would be
concerned about the effort of collecting data on the “number of parliamentary
questions relating to NIHR” for instance without including a caveat that the “tone”
of these questions should be captured. This is relevant to both indicators in the
“Attention” box where such attention should be categorised as “supportive”,
“neutral”, “negative” or similar.

4 Many of the indicators in Figure 4 are likely to be populated only annually, and I
would recommend that some information is given on the frequency with which
the short-listed indicators can be measured. The approach was aimed at
providing a dynamic and timely process which could report for example each
quarter.

5 In the case of the indicator for “timeliness”, if NIHR arranges a set timetable for
panels or committees to consider funding applications then 100% of funding
decisions should be made within an agreed time period. If so, then this indicator
will not be helpful to performance manage the process.

I hope that these comments are helpful.

**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:**

As the Head of Evaluation at the Medical Research Council I worked jointly with
Dr El Turabi on a MRC/NIHR report on progress to the Office of Strategic
Co-ordination for Health Research (OSCHR). So I know this work well, but I do
not believe I have any conflict of interest.