Reviewer’s report

Title: Exploring the use of research evidence in health enhancing physical activity policies

Version: 1 Date: 8 January 2015

Reviewer: Nanette Mutrie

Reviewer’s report:

Overall summary:
The research question is interesting and the findings are potentially useful for the wider research community. However, the results section lacks detail. Revision of the methodology section is also recommended for clarity. The standard of writing could be improved.

1. Is the question posed by the authors new and well defined?

The research question is novel, interesting and could have implications for the development of future HEPA policies. It is set out in the abstract as ‘...to explore how and to what extent research evidence and other types of evidence were used in HEPA policies. It is phrased slightly differently in the introduction. A clear definition of the term ‘research evidence’ at an early stage in the manuscript would be beneficial.

2. Are the methods appropriate and well described, and are sufficient details provided to replicate the work?

The rationale for the methodology is well explained. Perhaps there is too much given to the rationale and too little to the detail of the actual documents reviewed and analysed and the background of the participants interviewed. The methods section would be improved by a) a clear step-by-step description of the process b) explanation of decisions made c) moving some of the background information to the introduction.

a) A clear step-by-step description of the process

It is hard to follow what decisions were taken prior to the initiation of the study and what was decided as the study developed.

E.g. ‘in this study it was found that most countries did not have routine reporting mechanisms for policy decisions...therefore the HEPA policy process was split into agenda settings and policy development phases’ (page 6)

E.g. ‘based on the literature review on the use of research evidence, the study was undertaken using qualitative descriptive approach...’ (page 6) – which literature review?

E.g. ‘it is not clear if the categories of evidence presented in Figure 1 were decided prior to content analysis or as a result of the analysis...’
b) Explanation of decisions made

Which are the six countries chosen? Why they were chosen and what are the implications for choosing these countries and missing others?

How were the 21 policies chosen? What time period did they cover?
Were they all current? Did they refer to subpopulations?

How were the interviewees selected or recruited? Which countries did they come from or which policies had they had been involved? What was their involvement with the policy?

How did the seven bullet points considered as evidence come about? Which of them are considered research evidence?

The paragraph ‘Finding patterns…evidence in HEPA policy’ (page 10) does not adequately explain how this the patterns were identified. Also, was the framework created based on any other previous research?

c) Moving some background information to the introduction

The first two paragraphs on pages 5 and 6 are predominantly background information and may be better suited to the introduction.

This kind of work is difficult to apply the ‘replicate’ criterion to. However, the methods section lacks the sort of detail that would be required for others to use this approach in other areas of the world.

3. Are the data sound and well controlled?

The results section provides some interesting findings but real links to the qualitative data are not presented to support them. For example there are no direct quotes from the interviewees.

It is not clear whether the interviewers were monitored across the countries for consistency apart from a generic interview guide.

There were many unanswered questions that could be addressed in the results section:

Results paragraph 1 (page 10)
- What was the most commonly used source of evidence?
- What sort of policies used what sort of evidence?
- Did it vary by country?

Results paragraph 2 (page 11)
- Were there exceptions to the statements made i.e. Were there any policies not based on previous strategies? Did lessons learnt from other projects ever get used?
Results paragraph 3 (page 11)
- How often was research evidence used? How many policies? How many times? How many different sources?
- Did this vary by country? By policy type?

Results paragraph 4 (page 11)
- How many interviewees mentioned these? Which interviewees (i.e. what role did they have)?

Results paragraph 5 (page 11)
- Where did the evidence come from for these claims – interviews? Which interviewees mentioned which parts? Was this applicable across all countries/policies?

Results paragraph 6 (page 12)
- Where did the theme of the internet and media come from? Who mentioned it? What specifically is the problem – the availability of unverified information? The difficulty to trace sources? Or the use of the internet/media by others after publication of a policy?

Results paragraph 7 (page 12)
- The division between the sections Evidence used in HEPA policies and Patterns of the use of research and other types of evidence in policymaking to was unclear.

Results paragraph 8 (page 12)
- Present the results to back up the statements

Results paragraph 9 (page 12-13)
- This is very interesting but again needs results to back up the statements

Results paragraph 10 (page 13)
- How was this investigated even if no conclusions could be drawn?

The section might benefit from being structured so that it answers the study aims in the order presented on page 5:
- Was research evidence used?
- When it was used?
- Where there any patterns in its use?
- What pathways it follows for making decisions?
- What other types of evidence were used?

(Other questions identified in the introduction that could also be addressed)
- Was the evidence used of good quality?
- Were the gaps identified in the introduction between research and policy identified as barriers?

4. Do the figures appear to be genuine, i.e. without evidence of manipulation?

There is no evidence of manipulation of the data.

Figure 1 is useful but the presentation should be adjusted to match the style of the journal.

5. Does the manuscript adhere to the relevant standards for reporting and data deposition?

This does not apply to qualitative data [yet?].

6. Are the discussion and conclusions well balanced and adequately supported by the data?

The discussion and conclusions of the study are an interesting extension to the results section. However it would be more appropriate if it followed a similar structure to the previous section by addressing the study aims in turn and expanding on the results found in that order.

It would be interesting to have some comment as to whether there were differences between countries, why that was and how that related to current physical activity levels in the country.

There was one finding that was not mentioned in the results: ‘It was found that most countries…policy making processes.’ (page 13). How many is most?

‘However, the use of research….related to a policy.’ (page 14): This is a very interesting point that could be expanded on further.

Elements of the second paragraph of the conclusion seemed to address issues that had not been mentioned previously in the manuscript.

7. Do the title and abstract accurately convey what has been found?

The title and abstract accurately describe the study carried out.

8. Is the writing acceptable?

The writing is not at a standard acceptable for publication. There are many minor grammatical and typographical errors but the overall flow of the manuscript could also be improved. There are several long and complex sentences that need to be shortened and simplified.

Please make your report as constructive and detailed as possible in your comments so that authors have the opportunity to overcome any serious deficiencies that you find and please also divide your comments into the following categories:

Major Compulsory Revisions (which the author must respond to before a
decision on publication can be reached)
- The results section needs to be supported by data
- The methodology section needs to be clearer
- The writing style needs to be improved to prevent ambiguity and confusion

Minor Essential Revisions (such as missing labels on figures, or the wrong use of a term, which the author can be trusted to correct)
- Reference(s) needed for sentence beginning “Previous international research on HEPA policies…” (page 4)
- Remove the sentence beginning ‘The results…[page 5] from this section.
- Include a definition ‘research evidence’ early on in the manuscript. Clarify whether it is the same as the definition of ‘citable research’ given on pages 9-10.
- Figure 1 should be redrawn to the style of the journal
- It is not clear whether the literature review referred to on page 6 is a published article or background work undertaken by the authors.

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

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.