Author’s response to reviews

Title: Identifying research priorities for public health research to address health inequalities: use of Delphi-like survey methods

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Author’s response to reviews:

Reviewer 1

1. Overall, I think it is a well written paper on an interesting and important topic. However the authors do need to clarify testing of assumptions for use of ANOVA method which assumes a normal distribution, as there is a high chance that this purposively selected, relatively small sample is not normally distributed. I have attached further notes for the authors.

Response

Thank you – this is a very good point. We have revisited this, and the underlying assumption is not met.

We have therefore repeated the analysis using a non-parametric approach. Unsurprisingly the p values are slightly different, but the overall conclusion remains the same.

2. Ethics approval should be mentioned in the methods.

Response:

We have added text in the “Overview” section of the methods.
3. Would be useful to see overall table of results of survey Round 1, and 3, as was done for round 2 – this could be added as an attachment if survey one list would be very long.

Response:
We have added a row to tables 1 and 5 with these data.

4. The full survey for each round could also be added as attachments.

Response:
We have created Appendix 1. Please see attached.

5. In the statistical analysis comparing participant sources, it is not confirmed if the population distribution is normal or not. It is highly likely that this specifically selected sample population is not normally distributed meaning that non-parametric tests should be used, or log normalising, or otherwise would have to take place to allow for ANOVA analysis.

Can the authors please confirm testing of assumptions in selection of statistical analysis methods and the results of this testing.

Response:
Please see response to point 1.

Reviewer 2

1. The authors state at the beginning of the Background that for funding for health is essential to have research questions. The second part of the initial statement and the next phrase are correct as stated above. However, health funding has so many factors around it, that research questions
might be to be considered in special programs or interventions, but not for the overall funding of health services.

Response:

The text in the Background was intended to refer only to the funding of health research, not health services. We have added the word “research” for clarity.

2. In the Methods section, a short intro as to describe Phases and Delphi rounds would benefit the reader, as they are different and key to understand the paper.

Response:

We have added a section to the Methods entitled “Overview” which contains this information.

3. I wonder if you provided a definition of "inequalities in the UK" or was it left for interpretation? That definition could have brought different topics to the exercise. Might be useful if the authors could describe this.

Response:

We did not provide a definition of health inequalities, I have added the following text to the Methods section and 2 additional references “As participants were self-selected as having an interest in “health inequalities”, we did not provide a definition of the term but expected that the definitions used by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) [26] or the Department of Health [27] would be widely known”.
4. The authors do not present an overall response rate from initially contacted persons, which comes down to 26%, still in the limits of positive response for email surveys. Suggest to present (text and Table 1) as response rate by Delphi round and overall response rate. Same in phase 2.

Response:

We have added rows to tables 1 and 5 showing data for the overall response rates.

5. In the Discussion, authors question in the second paragraph "... should they have been involved from the beginning of Phase 1 as to be part of a more integrated exercise? Would that have had a different outcome?" and later on: "This highlights the potential disconnect which has been noted previously between practice and research." The method authors followed, that of separating public health professionals from researchers and ask them in two different stages, perpetuates the separation and conflicts the outcomes. If both groups were involved from the beginning, authors would have contributed to diminish that constant separation of researchers and practitioners. A strong recommendation could be incorporated as to use any available opportunity to do so.

Response:

We have added the following text to the Discussion “It would be helpful if a more effective dialogue and connection between these groups could be established”.