Author’s response to reviews

Title: Designing and implementing two facilitation interventions within the 'Facilitating Implementation of Research Evidence (FIRE)' study: A qualitative analysis from an external facilitators’ perspective

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Editorial Comments

Reviewer 2 helpfully suggests that additional detail about the trial and process evaluation could be provided to enable the paper to standalone for readers and to make clear the distinct contribution of this paper. We would also like you to consider how the review comments (by Ivers in particular) on the main trial findings impact on the analysis presented here.

Authors’ response

Without going into too much detail, we have attempted to clarify the outcome and process evaluation findings in the introduction.

We have also amended Table 3 to give a clearer sense of the differences between Type A and B facilitation.
In the discussion/conclusions, we reflect on the appropriateness of facilitation as an implementation strategy and implications for future research.

Reviewer 1’s Comments:

1. This is a well-written post-hoc analysis of the FIRE cluster randomized trial, utilizing a predominantly qualitative approach to explore the relative difficulties in deploying two types of blended internal-external implementation facilitation, one focused predominantly on process improvement (Type A facilitation) and one focused predominantly on the development if individual and context characteristics that would be conducive to guideline concordance (Type B facilitation). The major focus of the trial was on enhancing continence guideline concordance in long-term care facilities. There is much information in this report that will provide valuable lessons to those planning blended internal-external implementation facilitation. The authors align their analyses to the logic model for the study which is sensible, but may make the lessons learned somewhat less easily transportable to other studies. Nonetheless, the lessons learned are readily extractable from the text.

Authors' response

Thank you for this encouraging feedback and for your helpful, insightful comments on how to improve the paper.

We have addressed these, as detailed below.

2. "Residential" programmes are on-site / face-to-face?

p.9: We have added the following descriptor: “This was delivered face-to-face in a central Netherlands location.”

3. In the data collection section the research fellows' interviews with internal facilitators (IFs) could be better described: Structured? Semi-structured? How long?

p.10: We have added a sentence to clarify that the Research Fellows conducted semi-structured interviews.
4. In the data analysis section there is a quite succinct description of how themes were identified to address the issue of "how closely facilitation in practice at each site aligned with the logic pathway." However, there is a much more extensive set of data reported focusing not on this yes/no question but rather on the reasons behind the success or failure. More methodological detail as to how these themes emerged is needed.

p.11: We have added the following to clarify the processes of data analysis: “In conducting the data analysis, the purpose was two-fold: firstly to determine how closely facilitation in practice at each site aligned with the logic pathway; and secondly to develop an explanatory account of why or why not the logic pathway was maintained. A series of teleconference meetings between the independent researcher and the four EFs took place during the data analysis process to discuss and interpret the findings.”

5. That said, there is much more that could be said about the "Why?" of the results. For instance, why was Type B facilitation apparently so much less tolerable (line 287)? Why was building an implementation team achieved at less than half the sites (line 354) and why did IFs "report explaining to, but not involving nurses in implementation" (line 363)? What was the source of the "resistance or a lack of support" (line 370)?

As suggested by reviewer 2, we have included details of our reflections as EFs within the findings section. Within this, we have explored some of the issues you highlight about why Type B facilitation was more difficult for some IFs, why some IFs worked mostly alone etc. (p.16)

We have also added more clarification where needed e.g. examples of resistance or lack of support (p.20).

6. Overall, the paper describes how the interventions did not work, which is valuable in and of itself, but do not greatly help us to understand the reasons behind this. It seems a good bit more complex than finding "the right person" (line 402) or "fit and alignment" (line 403) of IF and other aspects of the context or facilitation.

As highlighted above, by including more of our reflections as EFs, we have hopefully provided more explanatory insights into why the problems arose.

7. The recommendations in the discussion and Figure 4 are in large part along the lines of "do more"—e.g., being more exacting in the choice of IF, more face-to-face contact, more engagement with local leaders, more co-facilitation (presumably meaning more involvement of the external facilitator). This is all fine, I suppose, but you already have a very detailed
and complex "Mercedes" of an implementation strategy. Most studies, I would guess, could not afford even this complex and expensive an implementation strategy. Are there lessons for those of us on a "Kia" budget?

We agree with your analysis that we appear to be saying add more to what is already a resource-intensive intervention. We have attempted to address this more clearly in the discussion section by suggesting that it is not necessarily about doing more, but rather doing things differently – particularly in terms of tailoring and adapting interventions more sensitively (p.24).

8. Finally, I would strongly advocate for disguising the IFs more thoroughly for their protection as human subjects. If, for instance, one knew about the specifics of the study one could readily narrow down, say, the "Ireland 2B" IF to one of two individuals. If a supervisor at one of the two Ireland 2B sites were highly invested in the implementation going well, and it did not, the IF could be vulnerable to retribution. This is a remote possibility, of course, but generally employees are considered human subjects "vulnerable populations" for exactly these reasons.

Thank you for this observation. We have followed your advice and de-identified individual IFs, other than stating whether they were a Type A or B facilitator.

Reviewer 2’s Comments

1. This is a valuable paper, which explores in detail the challenges to implementation of a facilitation intervention in an RCT. The specific findings regarding pragmatic and professional challenges to facilitation will be of interest to those in improvement science and implementation research. More broadly, the paper acknowledges and explores the tension between fidelity and adaptation in implementation trials, which is increasingly recognised as a key challenge. The authors provide useful insights, for example regarding fidelity in terms of mechanisms of action rather than in terms of descriptive content (the latter of which may need to be altered to achieve the former). However, I think the discussion regarding this tension could be more explicitly addressed in the results, particularly through directly including and reflecting on the experiences and perceptions of the External Facilitators who were also trial leads.

Thank you for your positive feedback and for your helpful comments on how to improve the paper.
Other than in Ireland, the EFs were not trial leads. We have made this explicit in the description of the intervention delivery (p.9-10). However, we have taken your advice of trying to illustrate the tensions we experienced in the results section, by including some of our reflections as EFs.

2. By more directly including the views of the EFs, the paper would:
   
a. Methodologically, more explicitly and transparently address interaction between the independent analyst and the EFs (as they are study co-authors and so presumably involved in agreeing interpretation and reporting?) - for example, were there consensus meetings to discuss issues arising from the data, did the EFs provide retrospective accounts or reflections, and were these captured from existing data or emerged through the co-analysis process?

   b. Conceptually, enable more explicit data to be provided regarding the perceived tension between fidelity and adaptation. Currently, this is focused in the discussion, and bringing in the perspectives of the EFs as part of the data and analysis would enable this to be considered throughout, and more directly make the fidelity/adaptation issue part of the results. The data could for example elaborate on how particular adaptations were considered which would have enabled the team to overcome some of the problems encountered, but what was perceived as a barrier to this in terms of fidelity (eg. would it have threatened distinction between type A and type B with reference to Table 1, or was the problem how to explain and report diversions from the original protocol)? This would also address more clearly which problems the authors think that adaptations could have addressed and how, compared to contextual problems indicating a more fundamental mismatch between the study aims/design and the reality (eg. Would lack of availability of IFs meeting recruitment criteria be the latter, or would the EFs have been able to attempt to revise the role descriptions, or provide more specific training to address gaps?)

Thank you for this observation – we have taken on board your suggestion and attempted to weave our EF reflections (which emerged and were documented through our analysis meetings) throughout the results section.

3. Addressing these tensions of fidelity and adaptation and how they were dealt with would also mean the paper would be relevant to implementation trials more generally, beyond specific lessons relevant to provision of facilitation. I hope the authors find these comments helpful.

Very helpful feedback thank you.
4. I have some further minor suggestions to be addressed at the authors' discretion:

- Introduction - more (brief) detail about the previous process evaluation could be provided to enable the paper to standalone for readers and to make clear the distinct contribution of this paper.

The process evaluation paper has also been submitted to Implementation Science and we are hoping the papers will be published close together in time. However, we have expanded the sentence that summarises the process evaluation findings (p.4).

- Line 74-77 page 4 - unclear if this missing an "and" or if this lists 3 rather than 2 issues.

This has been amended to make it clearer (p.4).

- Paragraph 2 starting line 79 - the authors could specify if was always intended to conduct this analysis or was emergent from original process evaluation.

A sentence has been added to show that a decision to undertake the analysis was taken retrospectively (p.4).

- Discussion subheadings could signpost/distinguish 'implications for faciliation/delivery of improvements' and 'implications for research design'

Sub-headings have been inserted as suggested.