Reviewer’s report

Title: Stakeholder involvement in systematic reviews: a protocol for a systematic review of methods, outcomes and effects

Version: 1 Date: 03 Feb 2017

Reviewer: Jim Elliott

Reviewer's report:

This is a clearly set out protocol for a study, which promises to produce useful information as part of a wider initiative for researchers conducting systematic reviews. Much of the language used, particularly in the long design section, is technical rather than Plain English, which will mean that it is unlikely to be very accessible to the patient and public readership of the journal but it is well laid out and can be followed by those with an understanding of the review methods described. My numbered comments below are all minor / discretionary:

1. At the end of the conclusions we are told the ways the results will be used but that isn't covered in either the Plain English Summary or abstract. It would be good if both said more than simply the results will "help researchers to improve, and evaluate, ways of involving stakeholders in systematic reviews".

2. 1st sentence of both Plain English Summary and Abstract - I note the change made prior to peer review and understand what is being said but the sentence does not seem to me to be grammatically correct and is not easy to read. It is not clear who is the subject of the subordinate clause, researchers or those who expect them to involve stakeholders or both. I think it would be better to phrase the sentence differently or split into two sentences.

3. The definition of systematic reviews (lines 109 and 110) doesn't actually explain what they are. The word 'synthesise' is jargon in this context and should perhaps be replaced with a description of what it actually means (preferably in Plain English). The purpose as set out in the second half of the sentence is clear but someone who doesn't already know what a systematic review is will be none the wiser after reading this sentence. The longer definition starting on line 216 is more informative but still does not define 'synthesise' in this context. Reference 26 does explain what a systematic review is more simply and in some detail and provides an explanation of what 'synthesise' means on another page (http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/Default.aspx?tabid=69), which could be included for those who don't know?
4. 'Synthesise' is also used in lines 125 and 130. As indicated above it would be helpful to define it for those who don't know what it means in this context (which will be most readers who are not researchers of whom there are a substantial number for this journal).

5. I am not sure what the 'synthesise' in line 130 actually means either because the evidence to which it is referring has already been 'synthesised'. Is aim 2B to 'describe' the evidence on the impact of stakeholder involvement or perhaps use it in some way to produce a guide or toolkit to "help researchers to improve, and evaluate, ways of involving stakeholders in systematic reviews"?

6. Line 156 - I too would expect to see a considerable increase in reports of involvement in systematic reviews over time in common with other areas of research but I doubt it would be 'exponential' even in other areas of research where involvement is more established.

7. Scoping review methods line 163, is the search really starting as recently as 2014? Or is that a typographical error? If it is right then why are you limiting it so much and not going back further into the history of systematic reviews? There are many examples of excellent practice in involvement going back a long time before 2014. Or is the search building on the one in reference 22 (which has now been published)?

8. Search methods - in addition to the list of established academic databases and other sources would it also be worth using Google / Google Scholar (and other internet search engines), especially for grey literature?

9. Should the search methods also include a call for input from the readership of this journal, which I assume is one of the reasons for publishing the protocol for the study before undertaking it?

10. Definition of stakeholder, lines 205 et. seq. This repeats what is in lines 101 et. seq. but then expands on it. Maybe say ;Further to the definition above…' or start the first sentence 'As stated above we define…. ' so that the reason for repeating it is clearer?

11. Definition of involvement in a systematic review. I think that this section needs more thought because adopting a wide definition of involvement may make it more difficult to meet aim 2B to identify "evidence relating to the effect of stakeholder involvement on the quality, relevance or impact of systematic reviews".

12. The problem may be that in including "reports relating to any role or contribution toward the development of a review protocol, completion of any of the stages of a systematic review, or dissemination of the findings of a review" the activities are likely to range from one-off
consultations that could be meaningful or just as easily be tokenistic right through to extensive collaborative involvement throughout the process that is much more likely to have a positive impact. Further, this will also be dependent on how extensively the involvement is described. It is widely known within the public involvement community that descriptions of involvement in published papers vary widely, if they are included at all, and that the detail is not necessarily proportionate to the nature and effectiveness of what was done. That can make it very difficult to tell what was done, how well and what effect it had on the research. For that reason it would be advisable to document as carefully as possible the nature of what is reported as involvement so that some attempt can be made to categorise it with a view to being able to associate the impact on the systematic reviews. This issue is likely to make achieving the both parts of the second aim of the study quite challenging and is made harder by the lack of any agreed 'standards' for involvement, although there is work in progress in a number of organisations that might help within the timescale of the planned work.

13. To an extent part of my concern may be mitigated by the categorisation of papers described in the section on data extraction, especially the first category of papers that focus on stakeholder involvement in systematic reviews. I would expect papers in that first category to be the most useful. It is the other categories, which are likely to be the most numerous, that are likely to be subject to the wide variations I have outlined.

14. The criteria in Table 1 go some way to recognising the variability in what is reported but do not take account of the variability in the involvement itself and its likely impact on research. The information listed under data extraction will expose the variability of the involvement. It will be interesting to see how many papers actually report the level of detail sought, especially peer-reviewed papers. The grey literature may be more informative.

15. Also reference 22 seems to indicate that the feasibility of the methods and success in finding enough papers has been established? Perhaps this link should be made explicit? And how much did the scoping review in reference 22 address what this study is aiming to do?

16. Line 294, note that in the UK and for research conducted in the NHS approval is not required for involvement per se from an NHS Research Ethics Committee (REC) because their remit is to protect participants in studies. Any ethical issues related to involvement may be addressed when a study that needs ethical review is submitted for review. Research conducted outside the NHS is not within the remit of NHS RECs but will be within the remit of other ethics committees such as in universities. That does not mean that there are no ethical issues to consider.

17. Abstract, line 80 - I don't think 'narratively' is a real word - couldn't find it in any dictionary I looked at. Perhaps replace with '..in narrative form' or '..as narrative'?
18. Line 103, redundant bracket after caregivers.

19. Beginning of line 147, is there a word missing after 'comprehensive' or should it be 'comprehensiveness'?

20. Line 149, missing 'of' between 'identification' and 'literature'

21. Types of evidence, line 201, remove the 's' from each of 'commissions, undertakes or supports….' because they relate to 'organisations' (plural). It is correct in line 204.

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