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Title: Multi-site evaluation of a volunteer doula service in England: A reflection on using Realistic Evaluation

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Objective: To investigate the impacts and implications of a multi-site volunteer doula service for service users, volunteers doulas and NHS services.

Background:

There has been growing interest in the role of 'doulas'- trained lay women who support child-bearing women – with research reporting a range of positive outcomes. Doulas are typically paid-for in western settings; however, the Goodwin Volunteer Doula Project in Hull offers a free service to socially disadvantaged women, delivered by trained volunteers and covering the third trimester, birth and six weeks postpartum. The scheme is being replicated at sites across England.

Methods: A Realistic Evaluation perspective is being adopted, which involves identifying and testing possible 'CMO' configurations: Context, Mechanism and Outcome. These are derived both from reviewing the literature and from interviewing key informants.

Findings: Interviews and focus groups with 32 key informants at five sites has highlighted that, rather than aspiring to intervention fidelity (true replication), the intervention being delivered at each site varies in unanticipated ways, including: intervention content, the problems that the interventions target (at both service user and volunteer level), and the emphasis placed on the voluntary status of the doulas.

Conclusion: Every element of the CMO configurations varies across the sites, which has implications for subsequent testing of 'what works for whom in what context'. Our experience therefore highlights that defining the intervention should be an explicit aim of initial data collection to facilitate identification and structuring of implicit CMOs. This is likely to be particularly beneficial for multi-site or multi-agent evaluations.