QUALITY STANDARDS FOR REALIST SYNTHESIS (for funders/commissioners of research)

1.   The research problem

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Is the research topic is appropriate for a realist approach?	Research topic: • Is not appropriate for secondary research; and/or • Does not require understanding of how and why outcomes are generated.	Research topic: • is appropriate for secondary research. • Requires understanding of how and why outcomes are generated and why they vary across contexts.	Adequate plus: Framing of the research topic reflects a thorough understanding of a realist philosophy of science.	Good plus: There is a coherent argument as to why a realist approach is more appropriate for the topic than other approaches.
Is the research question is constructed in such a way as to be suitable for a realist synthesis?	The research question is not structured to reflect the elements of realist explanation.	The research question includes a focus on how and why the intervention, or programme generates its outcomes, and contains at least some of the additional elements, "for whom, in what contexts, in what respects, to what extent and over what durations".	Adequate plus: • The rationale for excluding any elements of 'the realist question' from the research question is explicit. • The question has a narrow enough focus to be managed within a realist review.	Good plus: The research question is a model of clarity and as simple as possible.

2.   Understanding and applying the underpinning principles of realist reviews

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Does the review team demonstrate understanding and application of realist philosophy and realist logic which underpins a realist analysis?	Significant misunderstandings of realist philosophy and/or logic of analysis are evident.	Some misunderstandings of realist philosophy and/or logic of analysis exist, but the overall approach is consistent enough that a recognisably realist analysis results from the process.	• The review's assumptions and analytic approach are consistent with a realist philosophy at all stages of the review. • Where necessary a realist programme theory is developed and tested.	Good plus: Proposed review methods, strategies or innovations planned to address problems or difficulties within the review are consistent with a realist philosophy of science.

3.   Focussing the review

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Is, or will, the review question be sufficiently and appropriately focussed?	• The review question is too broad to be answerable within the time and resources allocated. • There is no evidence that progressive focussing will occur as the review progresses.	Process proposed enables the review team to progressively focus the review topic in a way that takes account of the priorities of the review and the realities of time and resource constraints.	Adequate plus: • The focussing process is iterative. • Commissioners of the review are involved in decision-making about focussing.	Good plus: The review team draws on external stakeholder expertise to drive the focussing process in order to achieve maximal end-user relevance.

4. Constructing and refining a realist programme theory

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Does the review team plan to identify, develop and refine their initial realist programme theory?	There are no plans to identify, develop and refine a realist programme theory.	There are plans to identify, develop and refine a realist programme theory.	Adequate plus: The initial realist programme theory is set out at the outset and will be refined iteratively as the review team's understanding of the topic grows.	Good plus – there are plans to: • Identify and explain the relationship between the programme theory and relevant substantive theory. • Draw on, where necessary, external expertise to develop their programme theory.

5. Developing a search strategy

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Is the proposed search process such that it would identify data to enable the review team to develop, refine and test programme theory or theories?	The search is incapable of supporting a rigorous realist review.	The proposed searches will: • Be driven by the objectives and focus of the review. • Be piloted and refined. • Seek out documents from wide range of sources likely to contain relevant data. • Not be restricted by study or documentation type.	Adequate plus: Further searches will be undertaken in light of greater understanding of the topic area.	Good plus The searching will deliberately seeks out data from situations where it can be reasonably inferred that the same mechanisms(s) might be in operation.

6. Selection and appraisal of documents

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Will the selection and appraisal process ensure that documents of **relevance** to the review containing material of sufficient **rigour** to be included are identified?	The proposed selection and appraisal process does not support a rigorous and complete realist review	Selection of a document for inclusion will be based on: • Relevance – i.e. what it can contribute to the process of theory development, refinement and/or testing. • Rigour – judgements will be made based on the plausibility and coherence of the method used to generate data.	Adequate plus: During the appraisal process limitations of the method used to generate data will be identified and taken into consideration during analysis and synthesis.	As for 'Good'

7. Data extraction

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Will the data extraction process capture the necessary data to enable a realist review?	• The data extraction process does not capture the necessary data to enable a realist review. • No piloting of the data extraction process is planned.	Data extraction processes will: • Focus on identification and elucidation of context-mechanism outcome configurations and refinement of program theory. • Be piloted and refined where appropriate. • Include quality control processes to ensure uniformity of processes and standards.	Adequate plus: Data extraction processes will: • Support later processes of analysis (e.g. by organising data into sets relevant for later analysis). • Be comprehensive enough to identify main CMO patterns.	Good plus: There are plans to continually refine the data extraction process as the review progresses, so as to capture relevant data as the review question is focussed and/or program theory is refined.

8. Reporting

Criterion	Inadequate	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Will the review team use the items listed in the RAMESES Reporting standard for realist syntheses when reporting their realist synthesis?	No information provided	RAMESES Reporting standard for realist syntheses will be used for reporting.	Adequate plus: Firm commitment made to adhere to all items within the RAMESES Reporting standard for realist syntheses.	As for 'Good'

For details on how these quality standards were developed, please see:

Wong G, Greenhalgh T, Westhorp G, Pawson R..Development of methodological guidance, publication standards and training materials for realist and meta-narrative reviews: the RAMESES (Realist And Meta-narrative Evidence Syntheses - Evolving Standards) project. Health Serv Deliv Res 2014;2(30)