

Review of the DFID Systematic Review Programme

Phil Rose and Mike Battcock

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Headlines

- Systematic reviews are a valuable addition to DFID's evidence products
- The DFID Systematic Review programme has generally achieved its objectives but can and should be strengthened.
- More effort, especially by DFID staff, should be devoted to identifying and developing suitable systematic review questions before any call for proposals.
- The time and effort required to produce high quality systematic reviews has been underestimated. More realistic budgets and timetables are required.
- All stakeholders should strive to improve staff continuity and commitment.
- A two SR stage process, splitting scoping and analysis, will reduce attrition, drive up quality and improve value for money.
- Not running such large “lumpy” rounds would ease capacity constraints in the UK and international research communities and in parts of DFID.
- A coherent communications strategy for both individual systematic reviews and the overall programme and dedicated contract objectives and budgets for communication and dissemination are essential.
- DFID should collate and, if necessary, commission more work on systematic review methodology, notably on how to synthesise qualitative evidence.
- Potential end users of the findings should be identified and involved from the outset.
- There is a need for more promotion of systematic review evidence with other international development agencies.
- This review strongly supports Systematic Review findings remaining fully independent of existing DFID policy, to allow orthodoxy to be challenged..
- Use of Systematic Review evidence, notably in Business Cases and policy submissions, should be systematically monitored.
- Doing fewer systematic reviews with better focused questions and a greater budget is likely to achieve greater value for money and impact.
- More senior DFID promotion of the Systematic Review programme and findings will enhance its impact.

Executive summary

1. Mike Battcock and Phil Rose conducted a review of the DFID Systematic Review (SR) programme in 2012. See **Annex 1** for the terms of reference. The review mainly comprised reading key documents, around 25 interviews covering all the main stakeholder groups and assessing feedback in over 30 completed questionnaires. The main conclusions and recommendations are mostly focused on strengthening the SR programme for the future.

Overview

2. The SR programme has been largely successful in that SRs represent a valuable addition to DFID's evidence toolbox. A number of changes in the detail of the programme designed to strengthen the programme and enhance the quality and impact of the SRs are recommended.

Process

3. The **call for questions** was very open, but many questions submitted were unsuitable for the SR approach. *Clearer guidance on SRs should be given to those submitting questions and a question template should be developed.*

4. Once questions were shortlisted, in some cases insufficient effort was invested by DFID staff up front in **developing and modifying the question** in consultation with DFID leads to ensure suitability for SR treatment, causing problems for Review Teams and others later. *A larger investment of time, including by DFID leads, should be made in getting the questions right before a call for proposals is made.*

5. There was a wide range of views on the **sufficiency of the guidance** and tools provided to develop the question, and RED have already made improvements, but some stakeholders were not clear what guidance they needed. *DFID should issue clearer information about what tools and guidance are available and how to access them.*

6. The **call for proposals** was generally considered robust. Joint calls added significantly to transaction costs due to the need to synchronise different donors' systems and timetables and the benefits so far appear limited. *Separate calls with co-ordination to avoid duplication might be considered.*

7. Feedback on the **Support Groups** was generally very positive. *The Support Groups' role should be maintained and their capacity expanded if required.*

8. **Roles and responsibilities** of the various stakeholders were mostly clear (but see 10). However, the amount of time required by each and duration of the process was under-estimated and frequent staff changes were a problem. *Based on experience with the SRs to date, RED should provide*

realistic estimates to other stakeholders of the commitment and time investment required and expected duration.

9. The effectiveness of the DFID **Systematic Review lead** function has been hampered by frequent staff changes and - at times – lack of research experience, but is now working better. *Staff with appropriate experience should be posted to this function and kept in post for a whole SR cycle if possible.*

10. In some cases, review teams may have had **unrealistic expectations** of direct support by the DFID SR lead. *The relative roles of SR lead and support groups should be more clearly explained to Review Teams*

11. Generally, **the quality control** of the SRs was considered effective and the work of the Support Groups was appreciated, although DFID quality control often caused delays. *DFID leads need to commit more time to SRs if their question is selected and retain continuity of staff if possible.*

12. Views varied quite widely on the **appropriateness of the SR methodology**. There was general agreement that quantitative data fitted the SR approach better, but that this would sometimes limit the scope. SRs will not work for all questions; effectiveness/impact questions are especially difficult. *DFID should review external work on methodology, commissioning additional work if necessary, and prepare further guidance, which should particularly be directed at the stage of question selection.*

13. The **main bottlenecks** in timely production of SRs reported were unsuitable questions, under-estimation of the time and effort required to conduct the SR (with consequent under-budgeting), excessive staff changes in all stakeholder groups and lack of capacity in UK and international research communities to handle so many SRs at once. *Unsuitable questions, staff changes and under-estimation of time are addressed above. Lack of capacity could be ameliorated by staggering the SR contracting and not running such large calls. In DFID, SR work should be included in 10% cadre time for all Cadres and in generalists' objectives where relevant, and reflected in Performance Management Form (PMFs)*

14. On the overall process, many stakeholders felt that a single contract for **a whole SR in one phase** risked wasting time and money in cases where the evidence was not extensive or strong enough to answer the question. *A two stage process should be considered along the lines: 1 Scoping the availability of relevant literature and 2 Detailed analysis and synthesis. There should be a break point in the contract after Phase 1.*

Outputs

15. Most stakeholders were fairly to very happy with the **quality** of the final SRs and had published or expected to do so. The attrition rates for DFID were fairly low - out of a total of 68 SRs commissioned, three (4%) SRs were dropped and two (3%) were reclassified as something other than an SR. But

attrition rates were considerably higher for AusAid. *Tighter filters should be applied to question selection and to assessing the capacity of review teams*

16. Communication and dissemination of SRs has been mainly left to Review Teams and DFID leads. The main media have been inclusion on websites, publication and circulation via professional networks. A focused approach to the communication of findings, identifying relevant audiences and channels, is needed. This should build on the emerging communication strategy. *Communication and dissemination should be more strongly built into the review team contracts and senior DFID staff should be deployed in to promote the SRs widely.*

17. Most people felt **access to SRs** by key contacts was reasonable, with the DFID R4D site being particularly useful, but some recommended rationalisation of the various web portals. *As the SR programme develops and more international partners become interested, measures to increase mutual access by international partners to increase the impact of the SR effort should be considered by building on the 3ie database.*

18. Data on **actual use of SRs** are so far limited, but mainly apply to existing networks/communities of practice. A couple of SRs have been picked up more widely (e.g. in the media) as they dealt with topical or controversial issues. Some may be of limited use because the question was not the question that needed to be answered. *Use should be monitored in a structured way, notably use in business cases and policy submissions.*

19. Prospects for likely eventual use of SRs to inform policy and operations are generally good. But these could be improved further, by ensuring DFID leads and other likely users are involved from the start and stay involved so that there is continuity. *For each SR, the DFID leads and SR programme lead should reach an explicit agreement about the policy leads' involvement. To the extent possible, the same individuals should be involved throughout.*

20. There was a near universal view that SR findings should be **independent of DFID policy** and should not be altered even if (maybe especially if) they challenge existing DFID policy. The practice of asking Review Teams to produce policy briefs did not work well. This appears mainly to be that Review Teams lack a detailed understanding of what policy makers need. *No general system of risk management is recommended; handling strategies should be decided case by case. If policy briefs are required, DFID policy teams should prepare them. But Review Teams should produce a concise Executive Summary.*

21. Most stakeholders feel that SRs represent a good addition to the evidence toolkit and **Value for Money** providing they are properly focused and managed, though (unsurprisingly) people in the research nexus were distinctly more convinced than others. A number of DFID staff felt that sometimes SRs had been used when other evidence products would have been better. *Value for money will be improved by using SRs only for suitable questions and by doing fewer of them and investing more per review.*

22. A general issue reported to the review by many people, though going much wider than the SR programme, is the **research-policy disconnect**. It is hard to pin down exactly what the problem is, but barriers of understanding and communication between the two communities are clearly perceived to impact negatively on the effectiveness and use of the SR and other similar research and evidence products. *This is beyond the scope of this review, but the Research and Policy Directors may wish to reflect further.*

1. Introduction

1.1 DFID's Research and Evidence Division commissioned a review of its Systematic Review (SR) Programme in early 2012. After a call for volunteers to conduct the review on DFID's Evaluation Specialist network, Mike Battcock (Governance Adviser in Civil Society Department) and Phil Rose (UK Seconded National Expert in the European External Action Service, previously Education Team Leader in Policy Division until end 2011) were selected. Whilst both Mike and Phil were aware of the SR programme after its launch, neither had played a substantive role in it. Mike and Phil undertook the review in the period March to July 2012 in the margins of their "day jobs".

2. Background

2.1 Research and Evidence Division (RED) has developed a Programme to produce systematic reviews on a number of questions relevant to RED, Policy Division and country offices. The reviews are also likely to be useful to external audiences in donor and partner countries and so are made publicly accessible. Systematic reviewing describes an approach to methodically mapping out all the available evidence, critically appraising it and synthesising the results. Systematic reviews are explicitly different from literature reviews or expert commentaries in that they are transparent, rigorous and replicable. They have traditionally been used in health and education disciplines; DFID's Systematic Review Programme has sought to test application of the methodology in other international development disciplines, particularly those traditionally reliant on qualitative studies.

2.2 RED has so far commissioned 68 systematic reviews, the bulk of these commissioned during a round 1 call in early 2010 (45) and a round 2 joint call with AusAID and 3ie (DFID 15) in early 2011. Others were commissioned on an ad hoc basis. For Round 1, International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie), Collaboration for Environmental Evidence (CEE) and Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Coordinating Centre (EPPI-Centre) were contracted as Support Groups to provide methodological support to the review teams and quality assure the reports. Further Support Groups are involved in Round 2 (Meta-Analysis of Economics Research Network, and Campbell Collaboration).

Status of DFID SRs (March 2012)

Status of DFID SRs	
Published	23
Signed off, not yet published	9
Not signed off as SR	1
Different evidence product used	3
At draft stage	16
In progress	10
At protocol stage	6

3. Purpose of Review

3.1 Lesson learning has taken place internally throughout the programme (such as through wash-ups with RED teams, a RED audit group meeting and discussion among programme staff), and improvements were made in round 2. The purpose of this review is to bring all learning into one place, ensuring that the views and experiences of DFID staff and external stakeholders, such as review teams and supporting groups, are methodically captured in addition to the ad hoc internal learning thus far. This will enable the Systematic Review Lead to consider lessons learned in future planning, such as commissioning further systematic reviews.

4. Objectives of Review

4.1 Through addressing key questions (see **Annex 2**) and verifying existing learning outputs, the main objectives of this review are to:

- assess the process of commissioning, carrying out, supporting and reviewing the systematic reviews, including whether the methodology needs adapting for the social sciences.
- assess the quality, access and use of the outputs.

4.2 It is too early to expect there to be much evidence of the use of systematic reviews and subsequent impact on decision-making (29 have been published to date). However, indications of likely impact are noted and the potential for enhancing future impact covered.

5. Scope

5.1 This review focuses on the DFID-funded reviews in order to inform DFID's Systematic Review Programme. However, the review findings will be of direct interest to AusAID and 3ie who were involved in the joint call (round 2). AusAID and 3ie were invited to comment on these terms of reference and apply the questions in their own context to add to the learning base. The findings will be shared with AusAID, 3ie and donors that are interested in commissioning systematic reviews (e.g. CIDA, USAID, NORAD).

6. Key Questions and Stakeholders

6.1 The TOR for the review contained the following initial questions and stakeholders. These were further refined in discussion with RED and lists of questions for different types of stakeholder (with a common spine of universal questions) were developed. The 4 main questionnaires are attached at **Annex 2**:

6.2 On process:

- *Submission of questions:* To what extent was the call for questions within DFID inclusive and clear?
- *Relevance of questions:* In cases where the questions were not still appropriate at the end of the process in relation to DFID needs and conclusiveness of findings, how could this have been addressed earlier in the process?
- *Development of questions:* To what extent was guidance provided to DFID leads in setting the questions sufficient?
- *Call for proposals:* To what extent was the process for the call and selection of review teams clear and rigorous (including DFID, 3ie and AusAID roles)? What were the benefits and drawbacks of a joint call?
- *Development of reviews:* How appropriate was the guidance given to review teams, supporting groups and DFID leads? To what extent were these stakeholders clear about their roles and processes involved? What is the capacity of commissioning organisations to provide coordination and support groups to provide on-going support to growing numbers of review teams?
- *Co-ordination:* In what ways was the role of the commissioning organisation's Systematic Review Lead important? How could the process have been made more efficient?
- *Appropriateness of systematic review methodology:* What are the challenges in applying the methodology to disciplines where studies tend to be qualitative? Does the methodology need adapting for these disciplines and, if so, how?
- *Timeliness:* Where were the bottlenecks in producing the reviews to time and how could these be overcome?
- *Expectations:* In what ways did stakeholder involvement meet or not meet their expectations?

6.3 On outputs:

- *Quality:* To what extent is the quality assurance process working and accepted?
- *Communication:* To what extent are methods used to communicate the systematic reviews efficient and effective?
- *Access and use:* Who accesses the reviews, how, and what are the barriers to access and use?
- *Monitoring:* How could processes in place to monitor usage and impact of systematic reviews be improved?
- *Independence and risk-management:* How could processes used to minimise the risks around publishing reviews that challenge DFID policy be improved?
- *Value for money:* To what extent do systematic reviews represent value for money? Are there any cases in which a different evidence product would have been more appropriate?

6.4 Stakeholders:

- Systematic review programme staff (past and present)
- DFID leads
- Potential DFID users of the systematic reviews, including Quality Assurance Unit
- Review teams
- Support groups (3ie, EPPI-Centre, CEE, MAER-Net, Campbell International Development Coordinating Group)
- AusAID (funder in the joint call)
- 3ie as a funder in the joint call and coordinator of the call process.

7. Review Methodology

7.1 The reviewers have followed an evaluative-type approach to the review. The methodology was partly driven by the fact that the reviewers were undertaking the review in the margins of busy jobs and that there was no earmarked budget. That said, neither reviewer considered that these constraints materially affected the robustness of the findings. The main modalities have been:

- reading key documents as advised by RED and a sample of finished SRs
- interviewing a cross section of different stakeholder groups
- analysing results from returned questionnaires sent to all main stakeholders who were not selected for interview
- a general invitation on the DFID intranet for anyone else who wished to feed back to do so

7.2 The main written information sources were;

Completed (and quality assessed) protocols and review reports from the R4D website: <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/r4d/SystematicReviewNew.asp>. Some of the DFID-funded reviews (full reports and summaries) were also on 3ie's database of international development systematic reviews. The following documents were accessed from the systematic review teamsite:

- Systematic Review Pilot Project Initiation Document
- Lessons learned paper, written by programme staff (lessons confirmed at audit meeting)
- Note of RED audit group meeting
- Notes of wash-ups with RED growth and social protection teams.

7.3 Both interviewees and those filling in questionnaires were guaranteed anonymity, so findings in this report are aggregated and specific details which might identify the respondents are not cited.

7.4 Four main stakeholder groups were identified and interviews and questionnaires adapted for each of them, with the interviews structured along the same lines as the questionnaires to ensure consistency. The groups were:

- RED programme staff
- DFID leads and other interested DFID staff, notably review/policy leads
- external Review Teams
- External agencies which included both Support Groups and other commissioning bodies. 3ie uniquely had both functions

7.5 For DFID, certain “stakeholders who had played a central role in the SR programme were specifically targeted for interview. Otherwise, interviewees were selected in fairly random way, but ensuring a degree of balance between types of role, sectors and how far the review had progressed. Where possible, the Review Team and DFID Lead for the same SRs were interviewed to allow triangulation. Most people selected for interview agreed to be interviewed and were interviewed, though in 2 cases it proved impossible to find a time slot. With Mike being based in East Kilbride and Phil in Brussels, interviews were nearly all conducted by phone. Most interviews were 1 on 1, with results shared between Mike and Phil afterwards. Structured notes were kept of all interviews.

7.6 At the end of the interview phase, data from interview notes and completed questionnaires were collated and significant trends were identified and have informed the findings. Data on interviews and questionnaires are shown in the table below. There were a total of 54 respondents:

	RED programme Staff	DFID Leads	Review Teams¹	External Agencies
Invited for Interview	5	9	8	4
Interviewed	4	8	8	4
Issued questionnaire	n/a	57	57	2
Returned questionnaire	n/a	9	20	1
Responses to Intranet Invitation	0	0	0	0
Total respondents	4	17	28	5

7.7 Factual accuracy of the report has been checked by RED SR programme staff. Anonymised and collated results of the feedback broken down by stakeholder group will be provided separately to the RED SR programme lead.

8. Findings

8.1 The findings of the review are structured to address the key questions posed by RED in the terms of reference. The focus of the findings is on learning lessons from the SR programme experience to date and improving and strengthening DFID’s approach to SRs in future.

¹Includes 6 SRs undertaken by DFID Senior Research Fellows rather external Review Teams

8.2 The DFID SR programme has proved generally successful and clearly fills a gap in the evidence product range between literature reviews and longer term research. Most stakeholders were positive about the potential value of SRs, though (unsurprisingly) people in research functions were noticeably more positive than others, who tended to be more nuanced. A clear general trend in feedback was that SRs work best for certain types of question, that they are not suitable for every question and that more rigorous filtering of questions up front would ensure the programme is well focused and avoid attrition later.

Process

Call for questions

8.3 The call for questions was very open, with most DFID respondents reporting that they were aware of the call and able to table a question if they wanted, though some would have preferred more consultation with DFID staff before the call for questions. There was some initial confusion about what SRs were for. A number of DFID respondents felt that DFID country offices were not encouraged to participate in the process. Some questions from country offices were too country-specific to be taken forward, but a number of DFID respondents felt country offices' ideas should have been discussed further to see if a systematic review question could have been developed from the ideas submitted. Regional workshops for several country offices to develop questions jointly were suggested. The number of questions selected seriously stretched RED and others' capacity to process them. This caused problems later in the programme, notably that some questions submitted were unsuitable for the SR approach. This experience was replicated in AusAID.

8.4 Some recipients felt that the process for shortlisting questions should be made more transparent and in some cases, there was frustration that questions perceived to be important were dropped or unrecognisably rewritten. A number of people with wider SR experience suggested developing a structured template which would help both draft questions coherently and weed out unsuitable questions. AusAid has already introduced one.

Recommendation #1: Clearer guidance on SRs should be given to those submitting questions and a question template should be developed.

Developing the question

8.5 Once questions were shortlisted, in some cases insufficient effort was invested up front in developing and modifying the question in consultation with DFID leads to ensure suitability for SR treatment. This caused problems for DFID Leads and Review Teams later at the protocol stage and even afterwards, with efforts being made to "rescue" the question. A related problem was lack of ownership/commitment by DFID leads after the questions were shortlisted. Factors at work here included; lack of understanding of investment of time required by DFID leads; urgent new priorities arising; staff

turnover with new staff not owning the question; and redrafting of the question at the shortlisting stage.

Recommendation #2: *A larger commitment and investment of time, notably by DFID leads, should be made in developing and modifying questions to get them right before a call for proposals is made.*

Guidance

8.6 There was a wide range of views from DFID staff on the sufficiency of the guidance and tools provided to develop the question. Much of this depended on how familiar respondents were with SRs at the start. Some wanted more hands-on guidance, others little or none. Most of the Review Teams who had received guidance from the Support Groups were positive about it. Most who had attended the one day training were also positive. There were mixed views on the usefulness of the EPPI software.

8.7 Some had (probably unrealistic) expectations of how much support and direct guidance they would receive from DFID. But a general trend was that for those who wanted guidance, a number were not clear what guidance was available, who from and how to access it. Some Review Teams were also unsure if seeking Support Group guidance was free, or would be a charge against their budget.

8.8 RED has already learned from the experience in the earlier stages of the review and strengthened the guidance and support provided in the programme. But further efforts are needed and need to continue as the programme develops e.g. as experience of joint calls is gained.

Recommendation #3: *DFID should issue clearer information to the Review Teams about what tools and guidance on producing Systematic Reviews are available and how to access them.*

Support Groups

8.9 Feedback on the Support Groups was generally very positive. Some Review Teams reported problems due to staff turnover and one or two were clearly irritated by the way the quality assurance role was implemented and a very small minority felt that a company with vested interests had captured the DFID SR programme and was using it to push its own approach. But overall, most respondents found the Support Groups' role clear and valuable and welcomed their help. It was also important to Review Teams with high SR capacity and experience that there was no obligation to seek guidance from Support Groups.

8.10 The process for allocation of reviews between Support Groups was not entirely clear. One Support Group reported being asked by DFID to take on additional reviews not covered by their initial contract. They also reported direct approaches from Review Teams for peer review also not covered by their contract. Some Review Teams were unclear about whether Support Group involvement would have implications for their (already stretched) budget and this may have been a deterrent to seeking support.

Recommendation #4: *The system of allocating reviews to Support Groups and paying for this should be made clearer.*

Roles and responsibilities

8.11 Roles and responsibilities of the various stakeholders were mostly clear after some initial confusion when the programme was launched. Within DFID, RED staff were clearer about their roles than other DFID leads, though the latter varied widely depending on previous exposure to SRs. Review Teams had varied and in some cases unrealistic expectations of the SR Lead (see below).

8.12 A general problem was that the amount of time required by each stakeholder and the duration of the process was under-estimated; this was especially true for DFID leads who, in some cases, put forward a question but were then unable to commit sufficient time to see it through the various stages. Frequent staff changes were a problem across all stakeholder groups, causing delays, lack of continuity and inefficiency as new staff sometimes had to go back to first principles. One issue specific to 3ie was that they were both commissioning agency and Support Group and others did not always understand this.

Recommendation #5: *Based on experience with the SRs to date, RED should provide realistic estimates to other stakeholders of the time investment required and expected duration.*

Systematic Review Lead

8.13 The effectiveness of the DFID Systematic Review Lead function has, especially in the earlier period of the programme, been hampered by staff changes leading to a lack of continuity and shifting priorities. Some respondents felt that it was important always to have someone with a research background and ideally SR experience in this role. Others felt this was not necessary providing the Lead was backed up by other RED staff with such experience.

8.14 One Support Group argued that the role was that of knowledge broker and should focus on bridging the gap between SR experts and subject specialists who often don't understand each other. Having both knowledge broker and research expertise involved in the SR Lead function would be ideal, though this may require more than one person. There was strong trend of opinion that in the later stages of the programme, the effectiveness of the SR Lead had significantly improved and nearly all were happier with how it is now working.

8.15 Some stakeholders, notably Review Teams, seemed to have unrealistic expectations about the level of direct engagement by the DFID SR Lead in individual reviews, where involvement by the Support Group would be more appropriate.

Recommendations #6 and #7:

- *Suitably qualified staff, ideally combining research and knowledge broker skills, should be posted to this function and kept in post for a whole SR cycle if possible.*
- *The relative roles of SR lead and support groups should be more clearly explained to Review Teams; in particular, Research Teams' expectations of direct support by the DFID SR lead need to be managed.*

Quality control

8.16 The external quality control of the SRs was considered to be effective and the work of the Support Groups was appreciated. In a small number of cases, there were disagreements between the Review Teams and the Support Groups on the feedback. One or two respondents highlighted a potential conflict of interest with one of the Support Groups promoting an approach that could have benefited that institution in the long term. Rigorous review (internal and external) takes time and this has sometimes caused delays for the Review Teams and resulted in staff being redeployed to other work.

8.17 Feedback on DFID quality control was more mixed. The levels of advisory expertise and familiarity with SRs available from the DFID leads were variable and generally, DFID leads took longer than hoped to provide feedback, often causing delays – sometimes serious delays. This had knock-on consequences for Review Teams. However, to an extent, though, such delays are a fact of life and need to be factored into SR critical paths.

Recommendations #8 and #9:

- *DFID leads need to commit more time to SRs if their question is selected and retain continuity of staff if possible*
- *Some unforeseen delays should be allowed for in critical paths.*

SR methodology

8.18 A rich variety of views, often strongly held, were expressed on SR methodology issues. It is clear that the DFID SR programme has generated a considerable amount of debate and learning on this and given DFID a voice in it, which is a very positive outcome. At least two papers on the subject have been published on the back of the DFID programme, one by ODI and one by 3ie. It is beyond the scope of this review to attempt to summarise all the issues here.

8.19 But a few common strands emerged;

- Some questions, however important, are not suitable for the SR approach. Impact/effectiveness and "how" questions are more likely to be difficult to answer than others such "what" questions
- SRs work most effectively where there is good quantitative data
- But all too often, the lack of quantitative data seriously limits the scope of the SR and prevents really important questions being addressed

- SR methodology has been much better developed in some areas such as health than others
- A majority feel that SRs can and should be adapted more to reflect useful qualitative data, but that this will take time and effort.
- Global experience in using SRs for international development is still limited
- A minority feel that significant methodological adaptation risks weakening the robustness of SRs and thus damaging the brand
- Following from the first bullet, some felt that SRs should not be considered more robust or better than other evidence products – just different

Recommendation #10: *DFID should review external work on methodology, commissioning additional work if necessary, and prepare further guidance, which should particularly be directed at the stage of question selection.*

Main bottlenecks

8.20 The main bottlenecks in timely production of SRs reported were unsuitable questions; under-estimation of the time and effort required to conduct the SR (with consequent under-budgeting); excessive staff changes in all stakeholder groups; and lack of capacity in the UK (and international) research community to handle so many SRs at once. These factors are inter-related and each may exacerbate one or more of the others.

8.21 The issue of unsuitable questions has already been dealt with at some length above. Factors contributing include insufficient clarity at the call for questions stage, the shortlisting process not being robust enough in rejecting inappropriate questions, not enough time and effort going into developing and modifying questions, lack of experience in Review Teams and not having a break point in the SR if problems persist.

8.22 All stakeholders under-estimated the time and effort required to produce good and useful SRs which resulted in studies being under-budgeted. The starting assumption on timescale was 6 months was evidently unrealistic. The timescale was later changed to 12 months. There is also further flexibility with the possibility of no-cost extensions. Delays and unexpected problems, particularly with identifying and reviewing evidence, should be expected and factored in from the start. 12-18 months is realistic in most cases taking into account the flexibility of no-cost extensions.

8.23 Staff changes are a fact of life in public bodies, but more efforts should be made to ensure continuity amongst all stakeholder groups. In DFID, it might be considered whether the DFID lead function should be a personal rather than functional responsibility, so the lead Adviser sees it through even if they move jobs. Some cadres have already decided that SR work can in principle be scored against Advisers' 10% cadre time and reflected in PMFs. There is no reason why the same arrangements should not apply to generalists.

Recommendation #11: *SR work should be included in the 10% cadre time or generalists' objectives and reflected in PMFs.*

8.24 The SR programme started as a pilot programme and originally envisaged some 20 SRs. For a variety of reasons, more than triple this number have been undertaken. This has severely stretched the UK and international development research capacity. This stretch has been worsened by running large rounds of questions in two big, lumpy blocks, though there are obvious efficiency gains to DFID in this approach.

Recommendation #12: *Unsuitable questions, staff changes and under-estimation of time are addressed above. Lack of capacity could be ameliorated by staggering the SR contracting and not running such large calls.*

8.25 On the overall SR process, many stakeholders felt that a single contract for a whole SR in one phase risked wasting time and money, notably in cases where the evidence was not strong enough to answer the question. Splitting the contract into two phases would allow DFID and others commissioning SRs to reallocate scarce funds if a review is not progressing as hoped. The two stage process needs to be established so that it does not deter potential review teams from bidding; there need to be specific and objectively verifiable reasons for termination at the end of the first phase.

Recommendation #13: *A two stage process should be considered along the lines:*

- 1 *Scoping the availability of relevant literature and*
- 2 *Detailed analysis and synthesis.*

There should be a break point in the contract after Phase 1.

Outputs

Quality

8.26 Most stakeholders were fairly to very happy with the quality of the final SRs and had published material derived from the SR or expected to do so. Out of a total of 68 SR commissioned, three SRs (4%) were dropped and two (3%) were reclassified as something other than an SR. As SRs in international development are still in their infancy, a degree of attrition is to be expected and there were differing views on whether this was a problem with the rate of attrition. AusAID seemed to experience an unusually high rate of delays and attrition compared to the SRs commissioned by DFID alone, which they put down to unsuitable questions, limited AusAID capacity and in some cases, and an inflexible approach by Support Groups.

Recommendation #14: *Tighter filters should be applied to question selection and to assessing the capacity and capability of review teams (see also 8.25 above on a two stage process).*

Communication and dissemination

8.27 Communication and dissemination of SRs has been mainly left to the Review Teams and DFID leads. All Review Team contracts include activities to communicate and disseminate the research findings within their budget. Many Review Teams found they the time required for the review significantly

exceeded the available budget, so communication and dissemination, being at the end of the process, was likely to be squeezed.

8.28 The main media have been inclusion on websites, publication and circulation via professional networks. These are all important channels, but other higher profile channels (international conferences, UK media, Parliamentary Committees) have led to widespread publicity for findings in some cases and might be considered more widely. Respondents felt that senior DFID staff could also play a bigger role in communicating the findings and promoting the SR programme. A focused approach to the communication of findings, identifying relevant audiences and channels, is needed. This should build on or be part of the emerging communication strategy.

8.29 Whilst generally, communications within DFID are easier, there is some evidence from feedback that greater efforts are required to ensure DFID staff are on top of the emerging evidence. Again this can build on the emerging communication strategy. Generic barriers to DFID staff keeping up to date with the evidence have also been reported as in many previous similar reviews; work pressures, insufficient time allowed for reading etc.

Recommendation #15: *Communication and dissemination should be more strongly built into the Review Team contracts. Senior DFID staff should be deployed in the promotion of the SRs.*

Access to SRs

8.30 Most people felt access to SRs by key external contacts was reasonable, with the DFID R4D site being particularly useful, but there are indications that R4D is better known to DFID staff than those outside. Other web portals including those of 3ie and EPPI-Centre also have links to SRs. R4D links to the 3ie database and DFID will post the 3ie and AusAID SRs on the R4D SR page. There is little consistency or mutual cross-referencing. If this is the case for a DFID funded programme, it is likely to be the more so if and when other commissioning agencies complete significant numbers of reviews. Some respondents recommended rationalisation of the various external web portals. Promotion of the 3ie database may well meet this need. 3ie are planning to maintain this at no additional cost to DFID.

Recommendation #16: *DFID should promote development of the 3ie database and better co-ordination with other portals.*

8.31 Whilst sharing of SR findings with other international development agencies has not so far been a high priority for the DFID SR programme, it should increasingly become so as a number of new players are attracted to the field by the results of the DFID programme. The potential advantages in terms of impact and international policy coherence of sharing evidence are fairly obvious, as are the risks – duplication of effort, waste of scarce funds, lack of policy coherence – of not doing so. In the case of some large agencies (e.g. the World Bank) DFID would gain from sharing and there are

precedents; e.g. DFID is already engaged in a joint impact evaluation programme with the Bank².

Recommendation #17: Measures to increase mutual access by international partners to SR findings should be considered building on the 3ie database.

Use of SRs

8.32 Data on actual use of SRs are so far limited, but mainly apply to existing networks/communities of practice. A couple of SRs have been picked up more widely (e.g. in the media) as they dealt with topical or controversial issues. Some may not be used at all because the question was not the question that needed to be answered or the policy context has changed. There is little systematic data in DFID on the use of SRs in Business Cases and policy submissions. Collecting such data will help improve the impact and use of SRs already done, but also learn lessons for future SRs. This could probably be done via feedback from Chiefs/Heads of Profession, policy leads for SRs or the Quality Assurance Unit for Business Cases.

Recommendation #18: Use of SRs should be monitored in a structured way, notably their use in Business Cases and policy submissions

8.33 SRs were primarily commissioned to inform DFID policy and operations with robust and objective evidence. Prospects for likely eventual use of SRs in these respects are generally good. But these could be improved further, by ensuring DFID leads and other likely users are involved from the start and stay involved so that there is continuity and they fully own the SR.

Recommendation #19: For each SR, the SR Lead and the DFID lead should reach an explicit agreement about the policy lead's involvement. To the extent possible, the same individual should be involved throughout.

8.35 There was a near universal view, as strong from within DFID as outside it, that SR findings should be independent of DFID policy and should not be altered even if (maybe especially if) they challenge existing DFID policy. One of the main purposes of SRs is to improve policy. The review only came across one case where the inaccurate interpretation of the findings of an SR (on micro-finance) undermined aspects of a DFID policy. It was a case of important nuances being lost and the press then exaggerating the difference of view. The reviewers do not consider a risk management system is required; case by case handling strategies for sensitive reviews will be required just as for publication of other sensitive material. But even if SRs cause short term discomfort, in the long run, DFID is likely to gain credibility overall by demonstrating it is a learning and evidence-driven organisation unafraid to publish evidence which runs counter to existing policy.

Recommendation #20: No general system of risk management is recommended; handling strategies should be decided case by case.

² The Strategic Impact Evaluation Fund (SIEF)

8.36 Early in the programme, DFID asked Review Teams to prepare policy briefs based on their SR. This approach did not prove successful as Review Teams lacked the grasp of policy required to write such briefs effectively and in some cases, DFID policy leads had to rewrite them. This practice has now rightly been dropped and the usual approach is that policy teams should write policy briefs as appropriate. But it remains essential that all Review Teams should produce clear and concise executive summaries.

Recommendation #21: *If policy briefs are required, DFID policy teams should normally prepare them. Review Teams should always produce Executive Summaries.*

Value for Money

8.37 Most stakeholders feel that overall, SRs represent a good addition to the evidence toolkit and Value for Money providing they are properly focused and managed, though (unsurprisingly) people in the research nexus were distinctly more convinced than others. Most felt that with hindsight, DFID had commissioned too many SRs and not invested sufficiently per review. Sometimes, SRs had been used when other evidence products would have been better. Some DFID policy leads are exploring alternative products such as rigorous literature reviews. Given that the ability to undertake SRs does vary by sector, with the availability of the right kind of evidence being a key determinant, this enterprise should be welcomed. At the same time, RED are rightly concerned to protect the SR brand, so alternative evidence products should be clearly labelled to avoid confusion with SRs per se.

Recommendation #22: *Value for money will be improved by using SRs only for suitable questions and by doing fewer of them and investing more per review.*

8.38 A general issue reported to the review by many people, though going much wider than the SR programme, is the research-policy disconnect. It is hard to pin down exactly what the problem is, but barriers of understanding and communication between the two communities are clearly perceived to impact negatively on the effectiveness and use of the SR and other similar research and evidence products. SRs can come across to policy staff as a bit supply-driven and not adapted to policy needs. But equally, policy people do not always appreciate the structural constraints in terms of time, type of questions and evidence required, imposed by SRs. But the issue may warrant further consideration at the top levels of RED and PD.

Recommendation #23: *This is mainly beyond the scope of this review but the Research and Policy Directors may wish to reflect further.*

Annex 1

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Title:	Review of DFID systematic review programme
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1. Background

Research and Evidence Division (RED) has developed a Programme to produce systematic reviews on a number of questions relevant to RED, Policy Division and country offices. The reviews are also likely to be useful to external audiences in donor and partner countries and so are made publically accessible. Systematic reviewing describes an approach to methodically mapping out all the available evidence, critically appraising it and synthesising the results. Systematic reviews are explicitly different from literature reviews or expert commentaries in that they are transparent, rigorous and replicable. They have traditionally been used in health and education disciplines; DFID's Systematic Review Programme has sought to test application of the methodology in other international development disciplines, particularly those traditionally reliant on qualitative studies.

RED has so far commissioned 64 systematic reviews, the bulk of these commissioned during a round 1 call in early 2010 (n=45) and a round 2 joint call with AusAID and 3ie (DFID n=15) in early 2011. Others were commissioned on an ad hoc basis. For Round 1, 3ie³, CEE⁴ and EPPI-Centre⁵ were contracted as 'supporting groups' to provide methodological support to the review teams and quality assure the reports. Further supporting groups are involved in Round 2 (MAER-Net⁶, Campbell Collaboration and Cochrane Collaboration).

2. Purpose, Objectives and Scope

Purpose

Lesson learning has taken place internally throughout the programme (such as through wash-ups with RED teams, a RED audit group meeting and discussion among programme staff), and improvements were made in round 2. The purpose of this review is to bring all learning into one place, ensuring that the views and experiences of DFID staff and external stakeholders, such as review teams and supporting groups, are methodically captured in addition to the ad hoc internal learning thus far. This will enable the Systematic Review Lead to consider lessons learned in future planning, such as commissioning further systematic reviews.

Objectives

Through addressing the key questions overleaf and verifying existing learning outputs, the main objectives of this review are to:

³ International Initiative for Impact Evaluation

⁴ Collaboration for Environmental Evidence

⁵ Evidence for Policy and Practice Information and Co-ordinating Centre

⁶ Meta-Analysis of Economics Research Network

- assess the process of commissioning, carrying out, supporting and reviewing the systematic reviews, including whether the methodology needs adapting for the social sciences.
- assess the quality, access and use of the outputs.

It is a little early to expect there to be much evidence of the use of systematic reviews and subsequent impact on decision-making (20 have been published to date). For example, relatively few business cases have been submitted since the evidence requirement was introduced. However, any signs of impact that arise during discussions should be captured. Further, advice should be given on how impact could be measured and evaluated in the future.

Scope

This review will focus on the DFID-funded reviews in order to inform DFID's Systematic Review Programme. However, the review findings around the call for proposals will be of direct interest to AusAID and 3ie who were involved in the joint call (round 2). AusAID and 3ie were invited to comment on these terms of reference and apply the questions in their own context to add to the learning base. It is anticipated that the findings will be shared with AusAID, 3ie and donors that are interested in participating in a further round of systematic reviews.

3. Key questions and stakeholders

On process:

- *Submission of questions*: To what extent was the call for questions within DFID inclusive and clear?
- *Relevance of questions*: In cases where the questions were not still appropriate at the end of the process in relation to DFID needs and conclusiveness of findings, how could this have been addressed earlier in the process?
- *Development of questions*: To what extent was guidance provided to DFID leads in setting the questions sufficient?
- *Call for proposals*: To what extent was the process for the call and selection of review teams clear and rigorous (including DFID, 3ie and AusAID roles)? What were the benefits and drawbacks of a joint call?
- *Development of reviews*: How appropriate was the guidance given to review teams, supporting groups and DFID leads? To what extent were these stakeholders clear about their roles and processes involved? What is the capacity of commissioning organisations to provide coordination and support groups to provide on-going support to growing numbers of review teams?
- *Co-ordination*: In what ways was the role of the commissioning organisation's Systematic Review Lead important? How could the process have been made more efficient?
- *Appropriateness of systematic review methodology*: What are the challenges in applying the methodology to disciplines where studies tend to be qualitative? Does the methodology need adapting for these disciplines and, if so, how?

- *Timeliness*: Where were the bottlenecks in producing the reviews to time and how could these be overcome?
- *Expectations*: In what ways did stakeholder involvement meet or not meet their expectations?

On outputs:

- *Quality*: To what extent is the quality assurance process working and accepted?
- *Communication*: To what extent are methods used to communicate the systematic reviews efficient and effective?
- *Access and use*: Who accesses the reviews, how, and what are the barriers to access and use?
- *Monitoring*: How could processes in place to monitor usage and impact of systematic reviews be improved?
- *Independence and risk-management*: How could processes used to minimise the risks around publishing reviews that challenge DFID policy be improved?
- *Value for money*: To what extent do systematic reviews represent value for money? Are there any cases in which a different evidence product would have been more appropriate?

Stakeholders:

- Systematic review programme staff (past and present)
- DFID leads
- Potential DFID users of the systematic reviews, including Quality Assurance Unit
- Review teams
- Supporting groups (3ie, EPPI-Centre, CEE, MAER-Net, Campbell International Development Coordinating Group, Cochrane)
- AusAID (co-funded of the joint call)
- 3ie as a co-funder of the joint call and coordinator of the call process.

4. Existing information sources

Completed (and quality assessed) protocols and review reports are on the R4D website: <http://www.dfid.gov.uk/r4d/SystematicReviewNew.asp>. Some of the DFID-funded reviews (full reports and summaries) can also be found on 3ie's database of international development systematic reviews.

Rachel Blackman (Systematic Review Lead) can provide names and contact details for DFID leads, review teams and supporting groups involved in each of the systematic reviews.

The following documents can be found on the systematic review teamsite:

- Systematic Review Pilot Project Initiation Document
- Lessons learned paper, written by programme staff (lessons confirmed at audit meeting)
- Note of RED audit group meeting
- Notes of wash-ups with RED growth and social protection teams.

5. Methodology

The methodology will be identified by the reviewer/s in discussion with Rachel Blackman. Appropriate methods would be interviews, focus groups and surveys (sent by email or via the intranet).

6. Skills and qualifications

The reviewer/s who carries out this review should:

- be DFID staff, preferably not from RED
- have a basic understanding of systematic reviews
- not have been involved in developing any of the systematic reviews under this programme, to enable objectivity.

7. Logistics and procedures

Rachel Blackman will meet with the reviewer/s at inception to provide further background on the programme and discuss review methods. She will be available to answer queries throughout the review.

The programme will cover expenses incurred in carrying out the review, but these should be discussed with Rachel Blackman beforehand.

Rachel Blackman and Gail Marzetti will comment on the draft report within two weeks of submission.

8. Outputs

A review report of no more than 20 pages, including an executive summary of no more than 2 pages and a summary of key recommendations / lessons learned.

An annex outlining how impact could be measured and evaluated in the future.

9. Reporting and contracting arrangements

The draft review report should be submitted to Rachel Blackman

Rachel Blackman, Gail Marzetti and Chris Whitty will review the report.

The final report will be shared with DFID staff and external stakeholders involved in the review. The findings and recommendations will be used by Programme staff to shape a potential further round of systematic reviews.

ANNEX 2

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Review of DFID systematic review programme Questionnaire for DFID Leads

Background

Research and Evidence Division (RED) has developed a programme to produce systematic reviews on a number of questions relevant to DFID. Systematic reviewing describes an approach to methodically mapping out all the available evidence, critically appraising it and synthesising the results. Systematic reviews are explicitly different from literature reviews or expert commentaries in that they are transparent, rigorous and replicable.. RED has so far commissioned 64 systematic reviews, the bulk of these commissioned during a round 1 call in early 2010 and a round 2 joint call with AusAID and 3ie in early 2011.

Purpose of review

The purpose of this review is to bring all learning into one place, ensuring that the views and experiences of DFID staff and external stakeholders, such as review teams and supporting groups, are methodically captured in addition to the ad hoc internal learning thus far. This will enable the Systematic Review Lead to consider lessons learned in future planning, such as commissioning further systematic reviews.

Question
To what extent was the call for questions within DFID clear and open to all?
To what extent was guidance provided in setting the questions sufficient?
How relevant were the selected questions to DFID needs? Was there a sufficient balance between different subject areas?
How useful was the guidance provided throughout the process? Please specify the guidance you received.
Were the roles and responsibilities of the different people involved clear?
How effective was the role of the programme lead? How could they have been more effective?
To what extent is the quality assurance process effective?

What are the challenges in the SR methodology in your area, especially if it is one where studies tend to be qualitative? Could the methodology be adapted for these areas and, if so, how?
Were there bottlenecks in producing the reviews on time? If so, what were they and how could they be overcome?
To what extent are you satisfied with the quality of the SR products?
To what extent are the methods used to communicate the completed systematic reviews effective?
What dissemination activities have you carried out?
How are the DFID-funded systematic reviews being used? Please share stories of use of impact.
What are the barriers to access and use?
To what extent do you consider SRs represent value for money?
Are there any cases in which a different evidence product would have been more appropriate?
Please use this space to comment on any issues not covered above

Review of DFID systematic review programme Questionnaire for RED staff

Background

Research and Evidence Division (RED) has developed a programme to produce systematic reviews on a number of questions relevant to DFID. Systematic reviewing describes an approach to methodically mapping out all the available evidence, critically appraising it and synthesising the results. Systematic reviews are explicitly different from literature reviews or expert commentaries in that they are transparent, rigorous and replicable.. RED has so far commissioned 64 systematic reviews, the bulk of these commissioned during a round 1 call in early 2010 and a round 2 joint call with AusAID and 3ie in early 2011.

Purpose of review

The purpose of this review is to bring all learning into one place, ensuring that the views and experiences of DFID staff and external stakeholders, such as review teams and supporting groups, are methodically captured in addition to the ad hoc internal learning thus far. This will enable the Systematic Review Lead to consider lessons learned in future planning, such as commissioning further systematic reviews.

Questions
To what extent was the call for questions within DFID clear and open to all?
To what extent was guidance provided in setting the questions sufficient?
How relevant were the selected questions to DFID needs? Was there a sufficient balance between different subject areas?
To what extent was the process for the call and selection of review teams robust?
What were the pros and cons of a joint call (Round 2)?
How useful was the guidance provided throughout the process? Please specify the guidance you received.
Were the roles and responsibilities of the different people involved clear?
How effective was the role of the programme lead? How could they have been more effective?

To what extent is the quality assurance process effective?
Overall: How satisfied were you with the development of the reviews?
Were there bottlenecks in producing the reviews on time? If so, what were they and how could they be overcome?
To what extent are you satisfied with the quality of the SR products?
To what extent are the methods used to communicate the completed systematic reviews effective?
What dissemination activities have you carried out?
How are the DFID-funded systematic reviews being used? Please share stories of use of impact.
What are the barriers to access and use?
How could processes to monitor usage and impact of systematic reviews be improved?
To what extent do you consider SRs represent value for money?
Are there any cases in which a different evidence product would have been more appropriate?
Please use this space to comment on any issues not covered above

Review of DFID systematic review programme Questionnaire for Review Teams

Background

Research and Evidence Division (RED) has developed a programme to produce systematic reviews on a number of questions relevant to DFID. Systematic reviewing describes an approach to methodically mapping out all the available evidence, critically appraising it and synthesising the results. Systematic reviews are explicitly different from literature reviews or expert commentaries in that they are transparent, rigorous and replicable.. RED has so far commissioned 64 systematic reviews, the bulk of these commissioned during a round 1 call in early 2010 and a round 2 joint call with AusAID and 3ie in early 2011.

Purpose of review

The purpose of this review is to bring all learning into one place, ensuring that the views and experiences of DFID staff and external stakeholders, such as review teams and supporting groups, are methodically captured in addition to the ad hoc internal learning thus far. This will enable the Systematic Review Lead to consider lessons learned in future planning, such as commissioning further systematic reviews.

Question

How useful was the guidance provided throughout the process? Please specify the guidance you received.

Were the roles and responsibilities of the different people involved clear?

How effective was the role of the programme lead? How could they have been more effective?

What are the challenges in the SR methodology in your area, especially if it is one where studies tend to be qualitative? Could the methodology be adapted for these areas and, if so, how?

Were there bottlenecks in producing the reviews on time? If so, what were they and how could they be overcome?

To what extent are you satisfied with the quality of the SR products?

What dissemination activities have you carried out?

What are the barriers to access and use?

To what extent do you consider SRs represent value for money?

Please use this space to comment on any issues not covered above

**Review of DFID systematic review programme
Questionnaire for Support Groups/External Agencies**

Background

Research and Evidence Division (RED) has developed a programme to produce systematic reviews on a number of questions relevant to DFID. Systematic reviewing describes an approach to methodically mapping out all the available evidence, critically appraising it and synthesising the results. Systematic reviews are explicitly different from literature reviews or expert commentaries in that they are transparent, rigorous and replicable.. RED has so far commissioned 64 systematic reviews, the bulk of these commissioned during a round 1 call in early 2010 and a round 2 joint call with AusAID and 3ie in early 2011.

Purpose of review

The purpose of this review is to bring all learning into one place, ensuring that the views and experiences of DFID staff and external stakeholders, such as review teams and supporting groups, are methodically captured in addition to the ad hoc internal learning thus far. This will enable the Systematic Review Lead to consider lessons learned in future planning, such as commissioning further systematic reviews.

Question
To what extent was guidance provided in setting the questions sufficient?
To what extent was the process for the call and selection of review teams robust?
What were the pros and cons of a joint call (Round 2)?
Were the roles and responsibilities of the different people involved clear?
How effective was the role of the programme lead?
To what extent is the quality assurance process effective?
What are the challenges in the SR methodology, especially if it is one where studies tend to be qualitative? Could the methodology be adapted for these areas and, if so, how?

Were there bottlenecks in producing the reviews on time? If so, what were they and how could they be overcome?
To what extent are you satisfied with the quality of the SR products?
To what extent are the methods used to communicate the completed systematic reviews effective?
What dissemination activities have you carried out?
What are the barriers to access and use?
To what extent do you consider SRs represent value for money?
Are there any cases in which a different evidence product would have been more appropriate?
Please use this space to comment on any issues not covered above

Annex 3

Key literature

- Systematic Review Pilot Project Initiation Document, Max Gasteen, 7/1/2010
- Project Memorandum: Systematic Review Pilot Project
- Meeting on Learning from Systematic Reviews on Growth, September 2011
- RED Lessons from the systematic review programme September 2011
- RED Audit Group Meeting - Systematic Reviews, 27 September
- Research Committee - Systematic Review Programme January 2012
- Status of systematic reviews (SRs), January 2012
- DFID Research Committee Meeting Minutes 16th January 2012

Annex 4

Systematic Review Status (20 March 2012)