Guidance for commissioning and managing rapid evidence assessments

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Top 10 tips for commissioners

Tip 1: Invest time in getting the review question right

Getting the review question right is the most important part of a successful rapid evidence assessment. The right question is the one that users most need the answer to. Answering this question has the greatest potential to influence the way users think and act. Some requesting reviews will know the right question. Others may need some support. Commissioners can support users by helping to develop and scrutinise theories of change, sharing examples of reviews asking similar types of question to those being considered, and inviting and providing space for researchers to challenge initial questions.

Tip 2: Carefully consider whether a rapid evidence assessment is the right tool

Rapid evidence assessments sit in a sweet spot – being fairly fast for a piece of research and offering a sufficiently comprehensive and robust product to inform big decisions. They won't always be the right way to answer users' questions, however. Where timelines are very short, or the literature on a topic is nascent, a traditional literature review or a chat with an expert might be the better approach. Where comprehensive review is warranted, and there are no time and resource impediments to answering the questions as well as possible, a full systematic review might be best.

Tip 3: Offer different types of review

Rapid evidence assessments about the effects of interventions, i.e., "what works" reviews, are perhaps the most commonly commissioned type. Users will have other important questions and reviews can answer different types. Let users know that rapid evidence assessment can also help better understand the context in which they work, when and how different interventions might make sense and what we know about their cost as well as their effects.

Tip 4: Manage expectations around simple answers

It's pretty rare that a rapid evidence assessment provides the kind of unambiguous answer that (some) users are hoping for – i.e., "do this; don't do that". Rapid evidence assessments answer big questions and often bring together a huge amount of literature from different contexts. The outputs will be detailed, and the findings nuanced. High-quality evidence may be scarce. Commissioners should make this clear from the start. Ultimately, if the users are not ready to deal with the complexity of the answers they're likely to receive, a rapid evidence assessment might not be the best fit.

Tip 5: Commission review teams that users will find credible

Commissioning the right review team is another important part of a successful rapid evidence assessment. Unfortunately, we don't know enough about optimum review team composition. We do know, however, that users are more likely to use the review when they consider the source credible. Commissioners can foster the credibility of a rapid evidence assessment by giving primary users a role in selecting the team. They can also reinforce the messages of the review team – where warranted – when there are doubts about their work.

Tip 6: Know who produces rapid evidence assessments and warm up the market

To give yourself the best chance of commissioning a competent, credible review team, it's helpful to know who produces high-quality reviews. Commissioners can do this by searching for published REAs and identifying their authors. It's also worth reaching out to other commissioning organisations, such as some of the What Works Centres in the UK, who can provide advice. If you've identified groups you'd like to work with, it's worth letting them know you are planning an REA – while limiting the amount of detail you provide to comply with public procurement rules where these apply.

Tip 7: Know enough about review methods to challenge and support review teams

While reading guidance is important, commissioners can benefit from additional investment in their knowledge. This can include taking courses on review methods, reading published reviews and even contributing to reviews themselves. Deepening your knowledge of reviews will help you identify and challenge inappropriate approaches to REAs and enable you to support less experienced review teams with advice.

Tip 8: Help to mitigate the factors that can slow down a review

Many things can slow down a review and commissioners play a key role in preventing and mitigating these factors. This can include helping to narrow or reduce the number of research questions; keeping track of deadlines and pushing review teams to meet them; and promoting quick feedback by flagging well ahead of time when outputs are coming so colleagues can set aside time. Perhaps the most impactful way commissioners can foster speed is by considering their commissioning approach and architecture. Running competitions, reading proposals, conducting due diligence, completing contracting and agreeing a start date can be lengthy processes taking many months. Commissioners should consider how they can speed up – or eliminate, e.g., by contracting an organisation to produce multiple reviews – these time-consuming steps.

Tip 9: Find a combination of outputs different users will be happy with

Reviews necessarily produce long, detailed reports – and not all users will have the time or the motivation to read through them. It's important to gauge from potential users what kind of outputs they'd like in addition to the long report. This can include plain language summaries or policy briefs, blog post and infographics, and different forms of in-person or remote presentation from the review team.

Tip 10: Foster discussion and debate

Research suggests that lots of evidence use happens during discussion and debate. Researcher involvement in discussions with decision-makers allows them to share knowledge beyond the review that users might find helpful. Commissioners can foster debate by reserving time for and facilitating discussion after presentations, for example. They can also help create separate opportunities, for example, by asking the research team to sit in on subsequent programme design conversations. If commissioners wish to create this kind of opportunity, they should clearly flag this in requests for proposals so that researchers can budget the necessary time.

Introduction

The purpose of this guidance is to support commissioners through the challenges they may face in commissioning and managing rapid evidence assessments (REAs).

Some guidance already exists for commissioners, and much more has been published targeting researchers. This document summarises and signposts existing guidance where it exists and provides additional tips – largely based on experience of commissioning REAs – where it doesn't. The guidance focuses on areas where REA users and research teams commonly struggle, and where input from intermediaries can make the most difference. Points are illustrated using reviews commissioned by the UK's Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) where possible.

As FCDO's model for commissioning REAs is demand-led, we focus advice on commissioning and managing reviews that directly address the objectives – or research questions – of a concrete group of policy users that has requested a review. We expect it will still be useful for those commissioning rapid reviews intended to meet a broader need. It may also be helpful for those commissioning other forms of review, e.g., full systematic reviews or evidence and gap maps.

This guidance starts with an introduction to rapid evidence assessments, followed by advice for managing the three main phases of work commissioners will be involved in – setting up the review, supporting delivery and supporting use.

What is a rapid evidence assessment?

A rapid evidence assessment is a synthesis of existing literature that follows the principles of systematic review.

Systematic reviews treat the literature review process with "equivalent standards of rigour to primary research" (UCL, 2023). They use systematic and transparent methods to identify and synthesise literature and are a piece of research in their own right.

REAs "attempt to streamline and accelerate" systematic review to provide decision-makers with robust evidence in the often narrow windows of opportunity for informing decision-making in government (Breckon et al., 2023). To do this, they apply methodological shortcuts designed to save time while maintaining strong methodological standards.

This doesn't necessarily mean that REAs are genuinely rapid. They *can* take many months, and few users would describe the process as fast. It means, other things being equal, they require less resource than systematic reviews. They have the potential to be done quickly, but this is largely determined by commissioning arrangements (more on this below).

REAs occupy the middle ground between systematic reviews and less robust forms of evidence, such as quick, non-systematic literature reviews. We recommend them where there is a strong case for robust evidence, such as in the development of large programmes, but where time or resources prohibit a full systematic review. FCDO offers a number of services for staff who need very quick turnaround evidence, including a service providing traditional literature reviews in a matter of weeks (IDS, n.d.).

REAs sometimes go by other names, particularly "rapid reviews".

1. Setting up the review

Commissioners' inputs in setting up a review have the most bearing on review outcomes. Reviews that get the research questions right – i.e., the questions that users really need to answer to improve work on priority topics – and engage the right team for the review give the best chance of success.

What kinds of research question can rapid evidence assessments answer?

REAs can answer any research question where there's existing literature to draw from.

REAs perhaps most commonly answer questions about the effectiveness of interventions – i.e., "what works" questions. FCDO has commissioned many REAs answering this kind of question. For example, Lwamba and colleagues' (2023) REA on the effects of interventions in the area of democratic governance, and White and colleagues' (2018) review of what works to improve social inclusion and empowerment for people with disabilities.

"What works" reviews are far from the only type of review commissioned. FCDO has commissioned REAs looking at other aspects of interventions, including their cost-effectiveness (e.g., Malhotra et al., 2024) and the circumstances in which they work (e.g., Norrington-Davies et al., 2025).

REAs don't have to focus on interventions. They can, for example, seek to understand the effects of exposure to something, such as, Selby and Daoust's (2021) REA on the effects of climate change on migration.

REAs also don't have to aggregate, e.g., identify average effects, but can also configure, i.e., interpret and arrange data from primary research (Breckon et al., 2023). FCDO has commissioned a number of more "configurative" REAs, including Cao and colleagues' (2023) review of barriers to addressing climate change-related losses and damages in low- and middle-income countries, and Wagner and colleagues (2024) review of the challenges faced by children born of conflict-related sexual violence.

In fact, we've found that despite perceptions that more configurative reviews are less likely to be used in decision-making, and are, therefore, worse value for money, this is not necessarily the case. Demand for configurative REAs, e.g., reviews seeking to understand a problem or the root cause of a problem, is high, and we know of many instances of their use.

Gough, Thomas and Oliver (2012) provides a more detailed discussion of the distinction between aggregative and configurative reviews and the kinds of questions they answer. And Gough, Oliver and Thomas (2017) provides even more detail – noting how all review questions and types sit somewhere on the spectrum between aggregative and configurative. Mansilla and colleagues (2024) set out a helpful taxonomy of research questions, which commissioners can use to identify and classify questions.

How do I identify and shape good review questions?

The nature of REAs means that topics for review are identified or informed by the needs of users. Different commissioning teams across FCDO may take different approaches to surfacing demand for reviews among colleagues, including initial scoping conversations with teams working on priority issues, direct calls for fully

formed requests and engagement with internal communities of practice, e.g., those led by FCDO's Heads of Profession.

FCDO's Evidence Fund – our largest platform for commissioning REAs – currently holds bi-annual "bidding windows" during which colleagues interested in requesting a review are encouraged to discuss their ideas with an evidence broker before submitting a structured request.

Different commissioners may also have different conceptions of what makes for a "good" review topic or question. The Evidence Fund applies a number of criteria to determine funding allocation, including:

- The importance of the topic to the organisation
- The clarity of the research objective
- Existence of a convincing pathway to uptake in decision-making
- Feasibility, i.e. the review question(s) can be answered via a single REA using existing literature

Questions submitted by users are often only a starting point. Our experience – and some literature, e.g., Moore and colleagues' (2017) pre-post study – suggests that commissioners can play an important role in improving the quality of questions. Some of the ways this is done in FCDO include:

- Providing structured templates for colleagues to share their initial ideas
- Conversations to discuss review objectives and test alignment between initial questions and need
- Conducting literature searches to determine where questions might have already been answered, and where sufficient evidence might lie to answer a question
- Sharing examples of published REAs answering similar *types* of question
- Facilitating early (where possible) engagement with researchers, and providing space for researchers to challenge or shape research questions in the initial phase of projects

Other innovative approaches to shaping good questions have taken place outside FCDO, including creating mock abstracts to test appetites for certain types of results (Hawe et al., 2021).

How much do REAs cost and how long do they take?

Unfortunately, the answer on both counts is – it depends.

In our experience, rapid reviews require anywhere between 50 to 200 person-days and take 3-12 months. This aligns with findings of the research literature suggesting that synthesis timelines vary widely (Nussbaumer-Streit et al., 2021).

While the above are broad – and possibly unhelpful – ranges, we do have a good idea of what affects cost and speed. Factors include:

- The breadth of the topic
- The number of questions asked
- The volume of literature and its discoverability
- The knowledge and skills of the review team

- The availability of the review team
- Timelines to select and, where required, contract with the review team
- Clarity of the objective of the review and/or the research questions
- The amount of, and turnaround time for, feedback

FCDO's pilot rapid review service, which is delivered by experienced reviewers through an ongoing drawdown contact with FCDO, delivers REAs on relatively narrow topics within approximately four months. REAs procured outside this arrangement take considerably longer. Other organisations with standing resource to deliver reviews have been able to produce REAs within even shorter timeframes (see, for example, Neil-Sztramko et al., 2021). The closer the review team works to full-time on a review, the faster it will produce. Some types of organisation, such as non-academic research organisations, may be more able to work on reviews in this way.

PredicTER, designed by Neal Haddaway and Martin Westgate, is a useful tool for predicting time requirements for evidence review based on the pair's study of time requirements for various review stages (Haddaway & Westgate, 2018). Commissioners can use this tool, and the research informing it, to get an indication of requirements based on the expected scope of the review.

The scope of the review may change, however, during the development of the protocol, and the number of studies can be very difficult to predict ex-ante. FCDO commonly facilitates contract uplifts where review teams find unexpectedly large volumes of literature during the search stage, or where the scope expands during protocol agreement. Uplift in budget may need to be accompanied by timeline extension in these cases.

Commissioners may want to consider gathering data on the costs of REAs previously commissioned by their organisations – or similar organisations – aligning budgets with previous reviews with a similar scope, e.g., similar question type, similar number of interventions included, and allow room for adjustments to budgets during the review.

Who conducts rapid reviews and what should I look for in a review team?

REAs are conducted by a range of groups, perhaps most commonly academics and researchers based in think tanks. Consultants with research backgrounds may also be part of review teams, and practitioners in the field, as well as review users, are occasionally included.

Not enough is currently known about the ideal composition of an REA team. Guidance, where it comments on this topic, often provides only limited steer. For example, current Cochrane guidance for rapid reviews of effectiveness says nothing more than that it's "advisable that rapid reviews are led only by experienced systematic reviewers" (Garritty et al., 2024).

In our experience, inclusion of skilled systematic reviewers in REA teams is important. These are people who have worked on multiple systematic or rapid reviews. Experienced reviewers foster efficiency – as noted in Nussbaumer-Streit and colleagues' (2021) study – via knowledge of evidence sources, search strategies, review software etc. They are also likely to reduce the risk

of poor quality through knowledge and skilful application of the right analytical methods. It should be noted that reviewers with expertise in one type of review may not have expertise in others and their skills may not necessarily be transferable.

The extent to which subject matter experts should be involved in reviews is contested. Opinions range from subject matter experts bringing limited value – and being a potential source of bias – to subject matter expertise being essential. Our experience suggests that subject matter experts can add value, particularly in the early and final stages of a review. Subject matter experts may be better able to challenge the value of the questions proposed by users and to support users to digest and apply the findings in their work. Advisory groups are one way to bring greater subject matter expertise into a review, but it can be difficult to coordinate input from these groups in the shorter timeframes provided by REAs. There is also some skill needed in selecting and managing advisory groups to get the most from their expertise in areas which are useful to the review.

Project management skills are important for delivery in short timeframes. Teams delivering REAs through FCDO's rapid review service always include a dedicated project management. This not only helps foster timely delivery but provide pathways to greater responsibility for more junior team members. Soft skills and mindsets also matter. Communication skills, particularly the ability to present in plain language to policy audiences, are important. Review teams also need to buy into the principle that the user determines the question and work in ways that enable policymaker engagement in the review.

One method for which there is relatively detailed guidance on the composition of the team is rapid realist review. Realist reviews develop a transferable theory of how, and in what circumstances, interventions are likely to work – for example, Eddy-Spicer and colleagues' (2016) review of the conditions under which school inspection, monitoring and assessment work. Saul and colleagues (2013), suggest that all team members should be "well-versed in realist philosophy" and the research lead "must have participated in at least one realist review", among other strong recommendations.

Bear in mind that much research says that the credibility of a source of evidence significantly influences its use (Verboom, 2021). Experts known to, and respected by, users may be sensible inclusions in review teams. Users of REAs should therefore play a key, perhaps determining role, in selecting who produces their review. There are several ways to do this, including soliciting input on key personnel requirements in terms of reference and including users on team selection panels.

Teams conducting rapid evidence assessments are often based in high-income countries. There are, however, a number of strong organisations producing reviews based in low- and middle-income countries. These organisations, particularly those in Africa and Asia, may have limited access to subscription publications and databases. Partnership between organisations or reviewers based in high-income countries and those based in low- and middle-income countries can be fruitful. For example, FCDO's rapid review service is led by a UK-based company whose network of researchers is predominantly from Africa and Asia.

2. Supporting delivery

Commissioners play two main roles during delivery of an REA – a management role and a content role. The management role involves ensuring the review is produced on time and on budget with the right level of input from stakeholders. The content role involves making sure the review team answers the right questions using appropriate methods.

2.1 Managing the review process

How and how often should commissioners engage with the research team?

It's useful to have regular check-in meetings with the research team, as this can keep the team on track with the timeline and allow discussion of questions which may have arisen regarding scope, eligible studies and so on.

The frequency of these meetings depends on the topic and the appetite of the commissioner. Some commissioners like to be very involved and so meet once every week or two. But it is also necessary to "let the team get on with it", so monthly meetings may suffice. And in no case should the commissioner try to micro-manage the work itself. In the case of a programme of reviews, the overall programme managers from the commissioning and research teams should meet regularly, say every two weeks.

Email exchanges can, to an extent, stand in for more frequent meetings, particularly where teams are in different time zones and may find it difficult to meet regularly. Emails shouldn't completely replace regular calls, however, and the opportunities these afford for rich discussion.

How can commissioners encourage effective user engagement?

All things being equal, we find that more user engagement in a review means more relevant, useful and used outputs.

There are a number of ways commissioners can encourage engagement from requesters and potential users of REAs, including:

- Encouraging engagement at the start of a review – including more time refining questions, inputting into terms of reference, selecting the review team and participating in introductory meetings – by making clear to users that feedback in the early stages of a review makes the most difference, and that less time will be needed from them after this stage
- Creating time and space for users and producers to interact during delivery of a review, e.g., via regular calls
- Provide opportunities for users to discuss the review with you without the research team present – as some may find it difficult to question or challenge experts and/or be afraid to ask "silly questions"

How should I handle requests for timeline extensions and/or budget uplifts?

Extensions are something of a fact of life in research commissioning, particularly where research is demand led. As soon as you receive a request for a review intended to inform a particular process happening at a specific time, the clock starts ticking. Commissioners then have the incentive to make things happen as

quickly as possible, including delivery of outputs. As a result, timelines included in things like terms of reference often have little slack to accommodate things like illness in the research team, delayed feedback from users and larger than expected literatures.

This doesn't mean requests for extensions should be automatically accepted. It's important to understand the cause of the potential delay, the likely impact on opportunities for use and whether there are alternative ways to deal with the challenge. It's not uncommon that decision-making timelines have slipped, too – and extensions can be accommodated, however.

Identification of more studies than anticipated is a common cause of requests for budget uplifts (and extensions). Generally, these should be accommodated, but this does require the commissioners to have a sense of the likely volume of literature at the outset – something that can be scoped to an extent during development of terms of reference. One way to manage this is to issue a contract which varies the budget, and possibly timeline, by the number of included studies. This is particularly useful if a review is "empty", i.e., it identifies no relevant studies, but it's advisable to carry out initial scoping to avoid commissioning empty reviews.

How does peer review happen in REAs?

Contrary to popular belief, commissioned REAs often go through extensive review. There should be, of course, review of outputs by you, the commissioner, and users who requested the review. This is critical to ensure that outputs are both technically sound and provide what the user is looking for.

There are a number of ways you can ensure researchers or practitioners working in the field also review outputs, including:

- Requesting that the review team establish an advisory group, and inputting on the membership of that group
- Requesting that the review team includes a dedicated peer reviewer in their team – i.e., someone whose sole involvement in the REA is peer review – and ensuring this person's time is costed and included in financial proposals
- Establishing your own pool of peer reviewers for REAs and developing a mechanism to pay for their services outside individual review contracts (something FCDO's Evidence Fund has developed).

When using external peer reviewers, it is useful to clearly establish expectations as to turnaround times upfront, otherwise they may cause a delay in meeting planned completion timelines.

Similarly, feedback from users if delivered in on long timelines and in multiple rounds can delay completion significantly. Commissioners may wish to set some limits on user feedback, while being careful to provide sufficient opportunity to provide input.

2.2 Methods support

Although the appropriateness of different approaches to methodological streamlining remains a priority for research in the field of rapid reviews (Beecher et al., 2022), there is a range of methodological guidance – and some evidence – on the topic. Guidance includes:

- Cochrane guidance on rapid reviews of intervention effectiveness (Garritty et al., 2024)
- WHO guidance on rapid reviews in health (Tricco, Langlois & Straus, 2017)
- Guidance published by the UK Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Collins et al., 2015)
- Recent WHO guidance on "rapid response products" – although many of the products discussed do not aim to be as extensive as REAs (WHO, 2025).

Other guidance is signposted in Breckon and colleagues' (2023, p.44) guide for commissioners.

There's also a range of research evidence on methodological shortcuts vis-à-vis a full systematic review, including Haby and colleagues' (2023) recent review of the literature on rapid review methods. It should be noted, however, that there's no consensus on shortcuts.

This section does not attempt to summarise this guidance or evidence to any great extent but tries to signpost and fill in gaps on tricky topics with lessons from experience.

How should searching be adapted for REAs?

Extensive database searches are a common feature of systematic reviews. REA guidance, however, often recommends more limited database searching. The Cochrane guidance, for example, suggests searching at least two bibliographic databases (Garritty et al., 2024). Outside the health sector, however, – where evidence is often more dispersed – review teams may need to search more databases.

Some review teams commissioned by FCDO have had success omitting bibliographic database searches altogether. For example, Malhotra and colleagues' (2024) review of the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of ecosystems-based disaster risk reduction strategies identifies studies via recent mapping reviews, organisational websites, "snowballing" – i.e., analysing the reference lists of relevant studies – and machine learning approaches. Machine learning in this case involved creating a "training data set" of included studies sourced through other channels and using EPPI Reviewer – a systematic review software – to form a citation network.

Commissioners should encourage review teams to consider where studies are most likely to be found and adapt their search strategies accordingly. In the case above, the existence of a recent mapping study eliminated need for database searches. Topics where studies are predominantly found in the grey literature may also be amenable to this kind of approach. Some review purists may not agree with this, however.

Information specialists can significantly improve the quality and efficiency of searching in REAs (and can contribute to other elements of a review – see, for example, Beverly, Booth & Bath, 2003). Searching is more difficult than may be imagined and many experienced reviewers see information specialists as an essential part of the review team. Commissioners should suggest, either via terms of reference or during protocol development, that review teams consult an information specialist to support searching. While sourcing an information specialist may

be easier for researchers based in universities, non-academics have brought in independent information specialists to support REAs.

Commissioners should be aware that more configurative reviews often take a different approach to searching than more aggregative reviews. More aggregative reviews aim to be relatively comprehensive, while configurative reviews often sample purposively (Flemming and Noyes, 2021). Searching in configurative reviews may also be more iterative than in more aggregative reviews.

How should critical appraisal be done in REAs?

Critical appraisal – analysis of the methods, results and conclusions of studies included in a review – is often seen as a necessary part of an REA, although some published reviews do eschew appraisal.

Appraisal is commonly used in two ways in an REA. First, studies appraised as providing low-confidence findings are sometimes removed prior to analysis. Second, confidence in studies supporting particular claims made by a review are used to inform statements about the confidence readers can have in the claim. For example, Selby and Daoust (2021) claim there is "strong evidence" that adaptations to coastal hazards affect migration from areas where these hazards are common as a result of finding a number of high-confidence studies identifying this relationship. Quality of underlying evidence – or risk of bias – is one of several criteria used in the common GRADE approach to assessing the certainty of evidence in reviews, which has been used in REAs (Al Duhailib et al., 2024).

Critical appraisal is conducted using a critical appraisal "tool", with the choice of tool depending on the types of study included in the REA. Doing critical appraisal is something with which review teams – particularly teams of relatively inexperienced reviewers – can struggle. This is often the result of not knowing what appraisal tool to use and/or trying to invent a bespoke tool. There are lots of existing tools out there well matched to any study design that might arise. Some of these can be easily applied by newer review teams, such as the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (Hong et al., 2018). Commissioners should feel comfortable recommending use of existing appraisal tools to review teams. It should be noted that some review types, such as realist reviews, consider quality of evidence in very different ways to other more common types, such as reviews of intervention effectiveness. A collection of tools is available from the SURE team at Cardiff University (Cardiff University, n.d.)

How should REAs answer questions about intervention effectiveness?

Reviews of intervention effectiveness aim to provide a good estimate of the effects of a specific intervention (intervention-oriented reviews), or of several different interventions designed to produce the same type of outcome (outcome-oriented reviews). These types of review identify and synthesise the results of impact evaluations, often exclusively quantitative impact evaluations of interventions.

Effectiveness questions are commonly answered in two ways. Using meta-analysis or "vote counting".

Meta-analysis is the "statistical combination of results from two or more separate studies" (Deeks et al., 2024). Meta-analysis is almost

universally considered superior to other methods – and it is possible to do meta-analysis in REAs (e.g., Malhotra et al., 2024).

REAs might not use meta-analysis to answer "what works" questions, however, for one or more reasons, including:

- Use of different effect measures or statistical heterogeneity in included studies (McKenzie & Brennan, 2019)
- Incomplete reporting of outcomes or effect estimates (McKenzie & Brennan, 2019)
- Predominance of qualitative impact evaluations
- Reviewer inexperience or discomfort with conducting meta-analysis

There are a range of options for synthesis when meta-analysis cannot be conducted, but by far the most common is "vote counting" (Gough, Oliver and Thomas, 2017). Vote counting involves forming an assessment of the effectiveness of an intervention by counting the number of studies showing benefit, i.e., a positive effect on the outcome of interest, and comparing this with the number of studies showing harm, i.e., a negative effect (McKenzie & Brennan, 2019). Unlike meta-analysis, vote counting provides no comment on the size or precision of the effect. It's also been shown to lack statistical power – that is, it likely will not find an intervention works when it does (Hedges and Olkin, 1980)

Some reviewers find vote counting an acceptable alternative when meta-analysis cannot be performed, but others do not. Narrative summary – which looks more like an annotated bibliography – may be used where review teams are uncomfortable with vote counting.

It is important that the research team tells you how analysis is conducted when meta-analysis is not used and that you ensure a suitable alternative is used. It is very common for reviews that don't apply meta-analysis to fail to report their analytical approach transparently (Cumpston et al., 2023). This can lead to user mistrust in the findings and, worse, hide unsystematic approaches to analysis. Commissioners can review – and share – existing guidelines on reporting when meta-analysis is not done (e.g., Campbell et al., 2020).

It is also strongly recommended to include a summary of findings table at the start of effectiveness review reports. These show the effect on the intervention(s) on each outcome, and an overall assessment of the confidence in that outcome. The confidence in the outcome is based on the GRADE criteria, which assess the size, variability, relevance and confidence we have of the studies used to calculate each effect.

How should REAs answer questions about intervention cost-effectiveness?

Questions about cost-effectiveness are often of interest to policymakers but reviews, including rapid reviews, addressing cost-effectiveness seem far less common than effectiveness reviews. REAs can and have (e.g., Malhotra et al., 2024) answered questions about cost-effectiveness, however. These typically bring together economic evaluations – e.g., cost-effectiveness analysis and cost-benefit analysis – to answer questions about whether or to what extent an intervention or set of interventions has been found to demonstrate value for money.

Analytical methods for cost-effectiveness reviews are perhaps less well established than those for effectiveness reviews – although there is some guidance out there (e.g., Gomersall et al., 2015). Due to well-documented challenges with using meta-analysis to synthesise evidence from economic evaluations, cost-effectiveness reviews tend to take a narrative approach (Shields & Elvidge, 2020). Reviews of cost-effectiveness generally report the range of estimates rather than attempting to synthesise them. For example, Malhotra and colleagues (2024) present ranges of benefit-cost ratios for different forms of ecosystems-based disaster risk reduction intervention.

This does mean that any review is unlikely to provide a single figure for the value for money of an intervention, which policymakers may be seeking. Commissioners should ensure that they and the research team are upfront about the kind of answer cost-effectiveness reviews can provide. Sharing examples can help with this.

How should REAs answer more configurative questions?

Questions about effectiveness and cost-effectiveness are considered more aggregative than configurative in that they combine findings from studies in a "cumulative way to produce a more precise and reliable understanding" (Gough, Oliver and Thomas, 2017).

Reviews at the more configurative end of the spectrum instead focus on differences and develop concepts or theories, rather than testing them. For example, Wagner et al. (2024) aims to explore the varied risks and challenges faced by children born of conflict-related sexual violence and the many ways in which these challenges impact their lives in different contexts.

The range of analytical methods used in primary qualitative research is vast, and methods in more configurative synthesis are also numerous. While Gough, Oliver and Thomas (2017) suggest that processes in configurative reviews are less "formal", they identify three common, somewhat formalised, approaches to more configurative analysis that can be applied in rapid reviews: framework synthesis, thematic synthesis and meta-ethnography.

Gough, Oliver and Thomas (2017) provide an introduction to these three approaches – as do other recent overviews, such as Flemming and Noyes (2021). Commissioners seeking more knowledge of these can draw on published methods papers and a range of worked examples, including:

- Brunton, Oliver and Thomas's (2020) review of framework synthesis
- Carroll, Booth and Cooper's (2011) worked example of "best-fit" framework synthesis and Carroll et al.'s (2013) methods paper on this variant
- Thomas and Harden's (2008) example of thematic synthesis
- Britten and colleagues (2002) worked example of meta-ethnography and France et al.'s (2019) review of practical approaches to meta-ethnography

Some guidance exists too for choosing among the various options. For example, Booth et al. (2018), maps out the level of expertise required for different qualitative review types, as well as time requirements. Both framework synthesis and thematic synthesis are identified as having relatively a low time requirement –

potentially making them good fits for REAs. A “Right Review” tool has also been developed to help researchers and commissioners wade through the many options (Amog et al., 2022).

As Gough, Oliver and Thomas (2017) note, however, configurative synthesis can be more “messy” than its primary research cousins – and REA teams commissioned by FCDO have often gone for hybrid, iterative and/or creative approaches. Cao et al. (2023), for example, draws on both content and thematic analysis to identify barriers to addressing climate-related losses and damages and explore how the many barriers interact with one another.

That said, it is worth commissioners taking a view on appropriate methods and providing direction to novice qualitative reviewers. It is not uncommon for inappropriate, aggregative methods to be applied in answering more configurative review questions (Bach-Mortensen & Verboom, 2020)

How can other common questions be approached?

Two other types of questions come to mind as being frequently of interest to policymakers: questions about when and for whom interventions are effective, and questions about the nature of published literature.

Questions about when and for whom interventions work can and have been answered in different ways. Realist synthesis, mentioned above, is designed to answer exactly this question. While FCDO has commissioned few realist reviews, recent efforts to engage the realist community – via the RAMESES listserv – have sparked lots of interest in engaging in commissioned rapid reviews.

Review teams also tackle the question of for whom and when interventions work via combining aggregative and configurative approaches in a mixed methods synthesis. For example, Aventin et al. (2023) combine meta-analysis, meta-regression and ‘best fit’ framework synthesis in what they describe as an “effectiveness-plus” review of interventions involving men and boys in family planning. Similarly, Saran et al. (2025) combine meta-analysis and configurative analysis of process evaluations to explore the extent to which, and why, carbon pricing schemes work in East Africa.

Reviews that map the literature are also of interest in policymaking. It should be noted, however, that interest often comes from embedded evidence brokers who may be trying to encourage their colleagues to apply evidence, and so the pathway to uptake may be longer and more complicated.

Scoping and mapping reviews are designed to bring together large bodies of evidence and describe the nature of that evidence base – it’s size, distribution etc. They’re particularly helpful for telling you where there is an abundance of literature – and where there are important gaps – while providing users easy access to studies.

There are well established approaches to scoping and mapping reviews and an abundance of guidance, including:

- Guidance on the differences between review types in this space (Campbell et al., 2023)
- The Joanna Briggs Institute’s commonly cited guidance on scoping reviews, perhaps the most common among this type of review (Peters et al., 2020)

- The Campbell Collaboration's guidance for producing evidence and gap maps (White et al., 2020).

FCDO has commissioned a number of rapid scoping review and evidence and gap maps, including Malhotra and colleagues' (2024) conflict and atrocity prevention evidence and gap map.

Can't AI just do all this?

Not *yet*.

While some AI-assistance in reviews has been commonplace for a while – for example, the priority screening features in various review software – new applications, particularly of generative AI, is booming. New literature is being published documenting the benefits and perils of using AI in evidence synthesis all the time and it's hard for commissioners to know where this leaves us.

The AI Methods Group – a collaboration between the major synthesis bodies, Cochrane, the Campbell Collaboration, JBI and the Collaboration for Environmental Evidence, is perhaps the best source of reliable information on AI for synthesis. This group has begun to set out guidance for the use of AI in reviews (Thomas et al., 2025). While standards for rapid review may ultimately become looser than those for full systematic reviews, it's worth commissioners being aware of this guidance. Similarly, as the literature develops, more synthesis will be published to help commissioners understand when AI use is appropriate in reviews (e.g., Clark et al., 2025).

3. Supporting use

How should a review be reported?

Reporting can become something of a battleground if not agreed upfront. Users tend to want short, plain-language reports, whereas researchers will often write long technical reports by default.

Ultimately, REAs are a piece of research and there are standards around reporting this kind of research. Researchers may well wish to report the review in full to high reporting standards, producing a large, detailed report. Full reports of reviews can exceed 100 pages in length. This "scientific document of record" will be useful to other researchers. Some review users may be happy with long reports, and users who are already well versed in the topic may find delving into the full detail valuable. Others might not be able or willing to digest a long report.

Users' objections to long technical reports can often be mitigated by:

- Requesting short summary sections that pull out key messages, particularly on the findings and their implications – the parts users a more interested in
- Encouraging the use of plain language as far as possible, but particularly in summary sections, which are more likely to be read
- Commissioning secondary, stand-alone outputs (more on this below).

Some users will, however, insist on shorter reports. Where this is the case, it's important that this is communicated to and discussed with the research team at the outset of the project.

What else can be done to maximise uptake?

Developing additional outputs is a common way to facilitate uptake. FCDO has tried producing a range of additional outputs for commissioned research, including:

- Policy briefs or other short summaries of findings and implications, such as plain language summaries
- Presentations
- Blog posts
- Social media messages
- Podcasts
- Infographics
- Journal articles
- Maps and databases of studies, and other outputs that catalogue and/or summarise findings from multiple studies
- Organisational resources, such as guidance or training materials, that integrate research evidence

Unfortunately, while there is some evidence on derivative products – such as Arnautu and Dagenais' (2021) review on policy briefs – there doesn't seem to be much condensed evidence-based guidance for commissioners seeking to understand what works. This means it's all the more important to engage with users to understand how they like to consume research and what might work for them.

Evidence does suggest that discussion is important. Studies have shown that research use often emerges during policy discussions (Yanovitzky & Webber, 2020). And FCDO research has found that having researchers in

the room during these kinds of discussion can contribute to this (Achillini & Burge, 2024). For this reason, FCDO REA contracts ask researchers to budget time for engagement after reports are finalised. This, ideally, goes beyond presentations and allows time for genuine back and forth between researchers and users as the latter consider implications of findings for their work.

How can I measure success?

There's some debate on what success looks like in terms of REA outcomes. Instrumental use of findings, i.e., the direct application of findings in decision-making, is often considered the goal, but lots of evidence in commissioned research suggests that this type of outcome is the exception rather than the norm. Contributing to this is the fact that few REAs will find clear, unambiguous answers to the questions being asked.

"Conceptual use" – most commonly understood as enlightenment or changed thinking – is also frequently seen as a goal of research. Consensus on how this should be measured – and standardised measurement tools – have proven elusive, perhaps due to the slippery nature of the construct.

This doesn't mean that commissioners shouldn't attempt to measure these things – and many have. For example, Bragge and colleagues (2025) evaluate user satisfaction and identify a range of instances of rapid reviews contributing to decision-making in Australia and Canada. FCDO collects data on user perspectives, conceptual use and instrumental use of all commissioned REAs.

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