



Responses to the 2006 review of the Steering Group

This document summarizes the responses to date by The Cochrane Collaboration Steering Group to the review conducted in 2006. A summary of its contents was presented at the Cochrane Annual General Meeting in São Paulo in October 2007. The sixteen recommendations of the review have been reorganized into the following five categories:

- 1) Strategic focus
- 2) Communications
- 3) Resource allocation
- 4) Review and monitoring
- 5) Implementation plan

1) Strategic focus

a) **Recommendation 1 – Separate micro-management from policy setting and strategic planning**

Recommendation 1: The Steering Group should consider reorganising its activities in such a way that a more clear separation of 'micro-management' from 'policy setting and strategic planning activities' occurs. A clarification of the responsibilities and duties of the Chief Executive Officer and other Secretariat staff is an essential component of this effort.

Things we have already done

- The Steering Group has made it an explicit goal to focus primarily on policy setting and strategic issues, and has taken the following steps that addressed this recommendation:
- Half-day sessions have been set aside at Steering Group mid-year meetings for discussion of major strategic issues, in conjunction with Centre Directors and Co-ordinating Editors. Beginning with the 2007 mid-year meeting in Amsterdam, a further half-day was committed to a second strategic discussion limited to Steering Group members.
- The Steering Group agenda has become more strategically focussed: it is now structured around the strategic plan with separation into items for discussion or decision and items just requiring Steering Group consent.
- The CEO has taken on more of the micro-management of the organisation, particularly in matters arising from decisions taken by the Steering Group.
- Biannual reports from the Steering Group's Advisory Groups have been removed from the Steering Group agenda, to be dealt with by the Executive via a single annual report from each Group, with the Convenor joining the relevant Executive telephone conference.

Things we are planning to do

- Re-examine the priorities of individual items on the strategic plan to ensure that the highest priority issues are receiving adequate attention.

- Further clarify roles and responsibilities of elected posts (such as Co-Chairs), Officers (such as CEO), and sub-groups (Executive, Monitoring and Registration Group and Publishing Policy Group), together with the Secretariat, to ensure that delegated decision-making operates as expected, thus freeing up the Steering Group to focus on strategic issues.

Things we will consider

- Formally dividing Steering Group activities and policy decisions into two categories: organisational, business and finance (OBF) decisions; and methodological, technical and scientific (MTS) decisions relating to our published product.

b) Recommendation 12 – Link strategic planning to budget and priorities

Recommendation 12: The Steering Group should make a strong effort in its strategic planning to link it transparently to the Collaboration's priorities and budgetary plans, and to identify explicit outcomes against which the implementation of its policies can be evaluated.

Things we have already done

- A cash flow forecast spreadsheet is reviewed at each Steering Group meeting. The document breaks down expected expenditures by project, and provides explicit links to specific items on the strategic plan for each project.
- A document outlining principles for the use of Collaboration funds has been prepared by the Treasurer as a basis for discussing the use of core funds across the collaboration. It is anticipated that these discussions will lead to the identification of effective funding strategies at the next meeting of the Steering Group in April, 2008
- The question of monitoring implementation was discussed under Recommendation 2.

c) Recommendation 3 – Proactive approach to ensuring quality of reviews

Recommendation 3: A more proactive role should be played by the Steering Group in ensuring the quality of reviews by setting up specific organisational arrangements such as working more closely with Co-ordinating Editors, implementing mechanisms to audit methodological and content quality of sample(s) of reviews periodically in The Cochrane Library, appointing a Cochrane Library editor-in-chief and/or an editorial board.

Things we have already done

- Active steps have been taken to work more closely with Co-ordinating Editors: through the joint strategy meeting at mid-year Steering Group meetings; and through provision of financial support to the Co-ordinating Editors' executive to attend these meetings and to produce a background paper for discussion at them.
- The 2007 joint strategy meeting considered a proposal from the Co-ordinating Editors' executive for the establishment of a Co-ordinating Editors' board, and the Steering Group has subsequently funded the further development of this concept and a meeting of Co-ordinating Editors to be held in January 2008.

- A call for proposals to conduct an assessment of the quality of Cochrane reviews from a variety of perspectives is being prepared for consideration by the Executive.
- Consideration is being given to finding additional ways to support Methods Groups. Despite the fact that they usually have little or no funding, these Groups have made significant contributions to the quality of Cochrane reviews and could probably contribute more with additional financial support.

d) Recommendation 4 – Prioritization of Reviews

Recommendation 4: Explicit mechanisms to promote prioritisation of reviews are urgently needed. As the issue of prioritisation emerged as a critical issue in this review, the Steering Group should take decisions aimed at putting in place the experimentation(s) suggested by the 'brainstorming session' held at the Steering Group meeting in Khon Kaen, Thailand, in 2006, paying special attention to the pros and cons of implementing the different options.

Things we have already done

- 'Prioritisation' was the topic of the joint strategic session at the 2006 mid-year meeting, and this led to a call for proposals to address the Collaboration's needs identified at the meeting.
- Following the 2006 session, the Steering Group launched the Prioritisation Projects Fund to address this area. Five projects were funded and are in progress.
- Once the funded projects are nearing completion, a follow-up meeting will be held, including people external to the Steering Group, to discuss the implications for the Collaboration and how any changes would be implemented.
- An evaluation of the completed projects will be performed to determine how well these activities addressed the prioritisation needs identified at the 2006 joint strategic session.
- The Monitoring and Registration Group will include an item in the next round of monitoring reports that asks individual entities about their prioritization activities. Results will be summarized and discussed by the Steering Group.

Things we are considering

- A call for proposals for an additional round of prioritisation projects will be considered once our experience with the current projects has been assessed.
- We are looking at the pros and cons of implementing the suggestion in the strategic discussion that a 'rapid response' team be set up to produce reviews on high priority topics quickly.

2) Communication

a) **Recommendation 6 - Internal communication mechanisms**

Recommendation 6: The Steering Group should take seriously the challenge of improving the effectiveness of its internal communication mechanisms with entities. Respondents have suggested specific solutions that the Steering Group should consider for possible implementation. Internal language barriers (true and potential) in an international organisation such as The Cochrane Collaboration, and all ranges of possible remedial actions, should be carefully considered.

Things we were doing prior to the review

- Both CCInfo and Cochrane News were being used as vehicles for internal communication within the Collaboration and for communication between entities and the Steering Group.
- Each Steering Group member has a designated 'constituency' (authors, centres, TSCs, etc) and is expected to be the main conduit for communication between the Steering Group and their constituents.
- Steering Group agendas are circulated to all the Cochrane entity mailing lists before each meeting, and minutes are made widely available after each meeting.
- The amount and variety of information available on cochrane.org has been increasing month by month.

Things we have instigated since the review

- A Steering Group Bulletin is produced and circulated following each Steering Group meeting. The Bulletin provides a brief summary of key issues being considered by the Steering Group in a format that is more user-friendly than the Steering Group minutes.
- Background papers that are classified as 'open access' are now available to all entities in Archie, and links to these documents are provided from relevant items in the Steering Group minutes to provide fuller context to the minutes.
- 'Communication' has been added as a standing agenda item for each Publishing Policy Group meeting, with an explicit discussion of which items need to be communicated, to which Collaboration members, and by whom.
- The overuse of 'push' communication techniques such as e-mail or distribution lists can overburden people without necessarily improving communication. The Steering Group is therefore investigating the use of 'pull' techniques or of a combination of push and pull approaches. The CEO and Co-Chairs are consulting with the Cochrane IMS and web teams about the possibility of using newer communication technologies (such as wikis, blogs, social networking, etc) as part of our overall communication strategy.

Things we are planning

- The editor of CCInfo and Cochrane News will be undertaking a survey shortly to identify people's communication needs and preferred methods.

- Discussing ways to improve our communication with entities, including better ways of canvassing groups for their input before Steering Group meetings
- Asking the website manager to investigate better ways of helping people find the information they are looking for, paying attention to ‘internal language barriers’ such as the large amount of jargon and acronyms used within the Collaboration, as well as the different first languages of members of the organisation.
- Asking the Monitoring and Registration Group to include a question on the monitoring form about the entity’s communication strategy.
- Hiring a Project Support and Communications Officer whose job description will include a focus on internal communications.
- Asking the new Project Support and Communications Officer to undertake a communications survey to understand the Collaboration’s communication needs and bottlenecks better.
- Drafting a communications implementation document to tie all of these ideas together in a comprehensive plan.

Things we are considering

- Working on additional ways to enhance the accessibility and timeliness of information that is already available about the Steering Group, its sub- and advisory groups, and the Secretariat in Archie, cochrane.org and in other places.
- The question of whether the Collaboration should take greater responsibility for the content and conduct of its Colloquia will be discussed with the Centre Directors and Colloquium Policy Advisory Group.

b) Recommendation 9 – Collaborative relationships with external organizations

Recommendation 9: The Steering Group should be more proactive in establishing collaborative relationship(s) with external organisations. This ‘ambassador-type’ role should be played by the Co-Chair(s) or by a person specifically appointed by the Steering Group and identified for her/his specific skills in the area. If identified from outside the Steering Group, such a person should report periodically to the Steering Group and be monitored regularly on her/his performance.

Things we were doing prior to the review

- A range of post holders (such as Steering Group members, Centre Directors and Co-ordinating Editors) within the Collaboration have ‘ambassadorial’ responsibilities, reflecting the Collaboration’s devolved and international structures.
- We have an ongoing relationship with The Campbell Collaboration.

Things we have initiated since the review

- We have begun discussions about our relationship with the Guidelines International Network and have accepted the invitation for a member of the Collaboration to join their advisory board.

Things we are planning

- Additional Steering Group discussions about some of the issues raised by increasing external collaborative relationships. These include the balance that needs to be struck between the ambassadorial roles of the Steering Group, Co-Chairs, and CEO with the roles of Centres, Review Groups, Fields and Methods Groups; the aims and objectives to be used in establishing and working on such relationships; the trade-offs of effort vs. benefit of such relationships; and the potential for distraction from the Collaboration's core mission.

Things we are considering

- The current Co-Chairs feel stretched in their current role, so the addition of ambassadorial expectations would be difficult to meet. We are therefore considering changes to the roles or terms of Co-Chairs to allow such an expansion.
- Linking with external organisations could also be a part of the remit of a new post of editor-in-chief.
- Examining the criteria for assessing endorsements drawn up by the Steering Group in 2005 to see if they might be used to cover affiliations and partnerships.
- Ongoing consideration of who our key stakeholders are.

3) Resource allocation

a) Recommendation 13 – Formal mechanisms for use and allocation of resources

Recommendation 13: Formal and explicit mechanisms should be set up for prioritisation and decision-making processes about the use and allocation of resources, allowing the Collaboration's members opportunities to comment on and give input to the Steering Group's proposals.

Things we were doing prior to the review

- The Annual General Meeting has always provided a detailed Treasurer's report with the opportunity for comment and questions by Collaboration members.

Things we have initiated since the review

- The Steering Group Bulletin is used to alert members about new proposals for the use of funds.
- The document on principles for the use of Collaboration funds discussed above will outline additional mechanisms.

b) Recommendation 8 – Strengthening the Secretariat

Recommendation 8: The Steering Group should carefully review whether the Secretariat includes all the skills that are needed to assist it in its executive function. Strengthening and diversifying the staff of the Secretariat would seem appropriate in order to free up Steering Group time and to improve several issues that have emerged as critical in this review (i.e. internal communication). Skills that may have priority include packaging and dissemination of information (i.e. journalism), and the ability to foster and motivate entities' involvement in various activities of the Collaboration.

Things we have initiated since the review

- Steering Group discussions of this topic have resulted in a decision to add a Project Support and Communications Officer and one or more individuals with fund-raising expertise to the Secretariat.
- The role of the Project Support and Communications Officer will be to maintain an overview of all Cochrane-related projects being undertaken by Cochrane contributors globally; to communicate information effectively between relevant internal stakeholders to ensure that the right people have the right information, of sufficient quality, at the right time, to better support evidence-based decision-making, and to ensure that duplication of effort is minimised; to provide limited support to those undertaking Cochrane-related projects to ensure that they are enabled to plan and conduct projects effectively; to maintain information flows about core business processes to better support decision-making at all levels and in all areas, and particularly by the Steering Group; to ensure good communication regarding ongoing Cochrane projects internally and externally; and to undertake other centrally-driven project-related tasks as required.
- The fund-raiser role is addressed in the next section of this paper.

c) Recommendation 5 - Secure funding for sustainability

Recommendation 5: A specific strategic action stream should be developed in collaboration with the different entities (Review Groups, Centres, other entities) to secure the funding needed for long-term sustainability. This action should be seen as linked to the issues addressed in Recommendation 9. Entity' representatives on the Steering Group should play an active co-ordination role toward their constituents and favour the development of actions that the Steering Group should try to implement at Collaboration level.

Things we have initiated since the review

- Charged the Co-Chairs and CEO with taking a strategic role in fund-raising, identifying opportunities, and influencing decision-makers and funding bodies rather than writing grants.

Things we are planning

- With a view to helping entities and the Collaboration generally, the CEO will seek a professional consultant to undertake a scoping exercise to advise the Steering Group on ways of raising funds. This exercise will involve contacting members of the Collaboration to find out what works for them, and talking to

people outside the Collaboration such as stakeholders, to produce a series of recommendations.

- Undertaking a scoping exercise to determine the amount of fund-raising support already available to entities, and possibly under-utilised, through institutional support. Many entities pay increasing overhead charges, and they should expect to receive value-for-money from this, including fund-raising support.
- Employing one or more fund-raising specialists to lead on individual funding bids and to assist entities in developing their own fund-raising plans. The exact role and scope of the post(s) will be outlined following the scoping exercise referred to above. The fund-raiser(s) will not necessarily be located in Oxford, and the possibility of hiring individuals for limited time periods to be based near a specific Cochrane entity with an identified fund-raising opportunity will be considered.

4) Review and monitoring

a) **Recommendation 14 – Collaboration-wide review**

Recommendation 14: The need for a Collaboration-wide review emerged both from the analysis of the questionnaires and from the interviews. If such a review is undertaken, the Review Panel warns that it would entail considerable costs and should be carefully thought through in terms of its expected benefits and the acceptability/feasibility of the changes that may emerge as to the structure of the organisation.

Things we have initiated since the review

- Jeremy Grimshaw of the Canadian Cochrane Centre has agreed to lead this review.

Recommendations 7 and 15 contain recommendations for consideration during the Collaboration-wide review and have been passed on to Dr. Grimshaw

Recommendation 7: The representation of entities on the Steering Group may be reconsidered, though no clear-cut suggestions emerged from this review. Issues that may deserve discussion are the current mechanism of having two Co-Chairs, the personal/professional characteristics that Co-Chairs should have, the possibility to recruit as Steering Group members 1-2 persons external to the Collaboration (with a view to advancing strategic relationships with other international organisations).

Recommendation 15: If a Collaboration-wide review is to be implemented, the Review Panel recommends that several specific points should be part of it. The balance between a 'centralised' and a 'devolved' organisation with particular reference to the general issue(s) of setting the Collaboration's policies regarding: identification and implementation of mechanisms for prioritisation of reviews; establishing funding mechanisms (including a central fund) for entities; the 'executive' function of the Secretariat and CEO, and their responsibilities/accountability toward the Steering Group for specific functions. The optimal composition of the Steering Group, with particular reference to: the most appropriate model for constituencies' representation; the membership (only the Collaboration's members, or open to other members and, if so,

why); The Chair(s) role, her/his expected characteristics, the rationale of one Chair/two Co-Chairs; the type of 'professional/time commitment' for some members with special reference to Chair(s) (i.e. the possibility of partial or full salary or compensation to the organisations to which they belong for the time dedicated to the Collaboration). The explicit responsibility and accountability of the Steering Group with respect to establishing permanent and long-lasting relationship(s) with external organisations.

b) Recommendation 10 - Next Steering Group review

Recommendation 10: Given all the considerations above, no change to the current frequency of Steering Group reviews can be recommended. The issue should be reconsidered in light of the changes to the Steering Group's structure and duties that may be decided after this review.

- The next review of the Steering Group is planned for 2010.

c) Recommendation 11 – Criteria for monitoring performance

Recommendation 11: The Steering Group should set criteria or key performance indicators for judging its performance and that of the Collaboration as a whole, to aid monitoring of progress as well as future reviews similar to this one.

Things we were doing prior to the review

- The Monitoring and Registration Group uses a set of indicators in its ongoing monitoring of Cochrane entities.

Things we are planning

- We have begun discussion of a set of dashboard' indicators for regular review by the Steering Group. These are not formal 'key performance indicators' but are designed to give a series of rapid snapshots that will allow the Steering Group to monitor several key aspects of the health and functioning of the organization and to track them over time.

d) Recommendation 2 - Auditing how main policy decisions are received, understood, and followed

Recommendation 2: The Steering Group should consider the pros and cons of setting up mechanisms for auditing how main policy decisions are received by entities, whether they are fully understood, as well as the opportunity to assess adherence to them periodically.

Activities to address this recommendation have been discussed above in the 'Communications' and 'monitoring performance' sections.

5) Implementation plan

Recommendation 16: The Review Panel recommends that the discussion and actions taken as a consequence of this review be timely and transparent. To this end it recommends that the Steering Group finalises an implementation plan within the next few months.

- The contents of this document were formally presented at the Annual General Meeting during the São Paulo Colloquium in October 2007.

- The document will be widely circulated within the Collaboration and comments will be appreciated.
- The contents of the document and elaboration of the items it contains will be included on future Executive and Steering Group agendas.

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