

UK BRAG

Framework for conduct of BRAG Reviews of 'Future Priority' areas for research

Rationale: It is important for the credibility of reviews undertaken by BRAG that review teams use appropriate rigour, and that they design and provide outputs appropriate to the needs for evidence.

The following is a list of points to consider when planning and reporting on the review. See also the checklist in Appendix I.

Planning the review:

The evidence need and the need for the review.

It is important to be clear from the outset as to why the review is necessary and what the need is for evidence. When writing up, the desired policy outcome, how the review will be used, and by whom (who is the audience), should all be kept under consideration. A BRAG review should be credible to all stakeholders through its transparency and objective methodology.

A review may be commissioned for a number of reasons. For example;

Parliamentary interest in a topic may have highlighted a lack of evidence on which to base policy, in which case a review of current work may be a pre-cursor to recommendations for future work aimed at filling that evidence gap.

There may be knowledge of piecemeal work, and a review is needed to provide a coherent overview, as well as to clarify where there are knowledge gaps.

Whatever the background, the reasons behind calling for a review need to be clearly stated, along with why there is the evidence need. The intended use of the review also needs to be clear. Stating the desired outcome should govern the structure of the review and the way in which results are reported. In presenting the results of the review, the way in which the review will be used, and the level of knowledge of the user, also needs to be kept in mind. Given that all UK BRAG reviews are published on

the web site, it is better to assume a lack of knowledge on the part of the reader than to use jargon and acronyms.

Conflicts of interest

Report authors should always be alert for any potential conflicts of interest. The most likely scenario is that an author will be involved in bidding for research funding in an area related to that of the review. There is the potential for other conflicts of interest however, such as being on a journal editorial board and having a draft paper submitted on a topic under review. Ideally any conflicts of interest will be identified at the start of a project, and any UK BRAG sub-committee member, or contractor, undertaking a review will declare potential conflicts of interest at the outset. Conflicts of interest arising during the course of a review should immediately be declared, either to the sub group Chair, and the Chair of UK BRAG, or to the UK BRAG secretariat. Conflicts of interest that do arise during the course of a review should be honestly reported, along with how they were dealt with. Given that BRAG reviews are generally intended to be advisory rather than prescriptive, and that BRAG does not distribute research funding, it seems unlikely that withdrawal or recusal would be necessary. However, in some circumstances it may be appropriate for the withdrawal or recusal of the person, for all or part of the review, or for the relevant part of the report writing.

Defining the questions to be addressed

The review should be clear from the outset as to the questions to be addressed. If at all possible questions should be defined in such a way as to require analytical answers. For example asking, “Are there evidence gaps” – which tempts a simple “yes” or “no” type answer, would be better asked as, “How much work on this topic can be cited? How much need is there for up to date information on the topic, which cannot be answered by existing or forthcoming publications?” “How accessible is current information on this topic?”

How the evidence is to be collected - Sources of information

Dependent on the timescale and resources for the review there will be more or less opportunity to access the full range of sources of information. There is a judgement to be made concerning the balance between the need for objectivity, transparency and rigour and the time and effort available. Timeliness is often a driving factor in the policy process and this may limit the opportunity to employ the full weight of methodology.

A second consideration in planning the conduct of the review is the nature of the question. An open-framed questions such as ‘what are the available options for x?’ may require survey of opinion and input of ideas from a wide range of experts and stakeholders. A closed-framed questions such as ‘what has been the impact of x on y?’ might use systematic searching of the literature, extraction and synthesis of data to produce a mean measure of effect. Consequently it should be kept in mind that a BRAG Review does not have to be a literature review. Many BRAG Reviews are an exploration of views involving experts and stakeholders to better define the questions that need to be addressed with respect to evidence gaps

Whichever of the options is taken, clear terms of reference should be defined at the outset so as to make clear the process and the types of data to be included and excluded. Depending on the nature of the review it may involve searching for data, consulting experts or sampling stakeholder views. Any search strategy should also be agreed upon *a priori* and clearly stated in the report methods section. This includes what was searched (e.g. databases, organisational websites) when the search was conducted and how potentially relevant articles were captured (the keyword search strings used). In other cases it may include who was consulted and how their views were captured.

Clarity is needed in terms of the type of publication or evidence that is required, or that is acceptable for the study in question. In some cases peer reviewed journal papers will be preferred, in others it will be a case of looking at what books have been published, or if there are any research reports in existence, and if so, how easy they are to access – for example are they still in print, or available on line? Records Centre data, and NGO reports may also be sources of information. In many cases a broad review of all available information will be needed. In all cases it is vital that reporting is clear as to the sources of information and about the strengths and weaknesses of each source.

The desired policy outcome, how the review will be used, and by whom, will all influence what information can be considered “relevant”, and where it is appropriate to search for evidence.

How the evidence will be presented

In planning the review, consideration should be given as to how the results will be presented. For example, if there has been stakeholder consultation (see below), how

will that feedback be reported? The review report should make clear all sources of information, and the reasons for using those sources.

Where there are multiple dependent factors, leading to complex reporting, it may be helpful to present a summary matrix table. Again, if this is considered at the outset, it will help in both design of the review and in reporting. A full discussion of review results should be given, but there should also be a summary included in any report, with references back to the relevant substantive part of the report.

If appropriate, maps, diagrams or charts are very useful to summarise information. Again thought should be given to this at the outset, if possible. Care should also be taken not to try and include too much information in any single figure – these should be easy to understand at a glance. If more than two sets of information appear on any one figure, then a second figure should be used instead! What is obvious to authors may not be obvious to the reader, so care should be taken to ensure clear labelling of figures. Poor labelling of figures is a common complaint amongst referees of journal papers, and is an easy mistake to make.

Stakeholder consultation

Before a review gets underway, there also needs to be some thought as to which groups could be considered stakeholders, and whether or not those stakeholders should be consulted. If there is to be stakeholder consultation this will affect the time it takes to do the review, and the way in which results are presented. Similarly, if there is to be stakeholder consultation, the suggested protocol for the review should be included in the consultation. Consideration should also be given as to who might be considered expert in a field, and how to obtain expert opinion. Time considerations may affect who is consulted and how that consultation is carried out, but every effort should be made, where consultation is needed, that appropriate organisations and people are asked for feedback. An open consultation should be publicised via the web site, and should involve the UK BRAG secretariat. The secretariat should also be able to help with formulating consultation questions – the way in which questions are framed is very dependent on how responses are to be collated.

Review limitations

If there are limitations to the review, these should be openly stated in reporting. Limitations can be pressures of time, difficulties with availability of information (due to commercial in confidence restrictions for example) or lack of UK expertise. It may also be that the remit of UK BRAG limits a review, for example restricting

investigation to the UK and Crown Dependencies only, when future researchers might wish to consider expanding the scope to international issues.

Reporting on the outcome:

Stating the obvious

It is important that UK BRAG reviews are readily accessible and easy to cite. With this in mind each report should have a citation reference and a summary at the start.

Much “grey” literature, and unfortunately some past UK BRAG reports, have basic information such as date of publication missing from the title page.

The summary should be clear as to the principal messages of the review. These will have much more impact if they can be condensed down to between one and three clear points. If one of the outcomes of the review is to suggest research topics, then these should be prioritised.

Reporting on methods

See also “Sources of Information” on page 2.

It is important that reports include as much detail as possible as to the methods used in any review. Points to include should cover where, how and when the research team searched for relevant data or other input. Sources cited should all be dated so that the reader can see how old data are. In some cases the only data available will be quite old, which may in itself be evidence of the review need, and should be highlighted in reporting.

The reasons for selecting the data sources should be clear, and it should be made obvious to the reader as to the relevance of the sources used, and why they were selected.

Any issues to do with data access during the search and retrieval process should also be reported. If data are not publicly available this should be stated, with reasons as to why the reader will not be able to source original data. Similarly if original data are openly accessible, then it should be stated as to how this can be done.

Discussion of results and outcomes

In discussing results, basic statistics from the search results of the review should be stated. So for example, number of articles retrieved, or number of relevant studies

examined should be quoted, and how these affect the strengths and weaknesses of the conclusions should be discussed.

The conclusions will also be influenced by how easily accessible data were, and the form in which they were retrieved, and again this should be included in the discussion. Volume and quality of the data or studies cited should also be discussed, along with how closely the studies fit the purpose of the review.

The conclusion of the review should look at the implications for policy and research, and whether or not there is sufficient understanding of the topic to inform policy need. Gaps in the evidence that prevent confident decision making should be identified, and recommendations for future research should be clearly prioritised.

And finally there should ideally be examination as to how research can be improved going forward, for example in terms of study designs, and data management, so as to assess the prospects for improved understanding in the foreseeable future.

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March 2011

Appendix I

Checklist of points to consider:

At the outset

- a) State the evidence need
- b) Define the questions to be addressed
- c) Consider how the evidence is to be collected and presented- issues are timescales, format of evidence available, need for informed expert opinion vs scientific papers and reports
- d) Is there a need for stakeholder consultation, and if so, who? – an issue is the time available
- e) Are there any conflicts of interest? Look at group membership, any consultants or experts consulted and also stakeholder consultation
- f) Review limitations – these will need to be reported

When reporting

- a)
- b)
- c)
- d)
- e)
- f)
- g) Ensure the title page has a citation reference with a date
- h) Membership of group, any stakeholders consulted, and expert opinion sought should all be listed
- i) Methods used should be detailed
- j) Statistics on searches should be included
- k) Conclusions should look at implications for policy and research - gaps in evidence that prevent confident decision making should be identified, recommendations for future research should be prioritised
- l) Improvements for the future should be examined