Working Paper

Lessons learned by the K4D Helpdesk service:

Delivering evidence synthesis for policy and practice

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About this working paper

This paper is a reflection on lessons learned by the Knowledge for Development (K4D) Helpdesk team in delivering evidence synthesis services to the UK Government (initially the Department for International Development, subsequently the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office) over the course of the programme from 2016 to 2022.

K4D services are provided by a consortium of leading organisations working in international development, led by the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), with the Education Development Trust, Itad, University of Leeds Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development, Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine (LSTM), University of Birmingham International Development Department (IDD) and the University of Manchester Humanitarian and Conflict Response Institute (HCRI).

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The author would also like to thank all K4D team members, past and present, and the many people who worked on the related projects that preceded K4D (including GRC, GSDRC, HRC, HDRC, and HEART) for their contributions to developing and improving the Helpdesk service, and the hundreds of DFID and FCDO staff members who have used these Helpdesk services over the years.

The content of this paper does not necessarily represent the opinions of any of the individuals consulted.

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① Introduction

This paper is a reflection on experience and lessons learned over the six years of the Knowledge, Evidence and Learning for Development (K4D) Programme (2016–2022). It reviews what the programme has learned about delivering a rapid-response evidence synthesis service effectively and efficiently. It identifies key features of an evidence synthesis service, the approaches that the K4D Helpdesk service uses to deliver these features, and lessons for consideration by future projects delivering similar services.

The K4D Helpdesk is a desk-based research service that quickly produces short syntheses of evidence, experience, and current thinking on policy and practical challenges in international development and international relations in response to requests from staff members of the UK Government's Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office (FCDO). The Helpdesk service directly supports FCDO staff members' work on specific tasks such as: developing business cases; planning and developing programmes and investments; informing policy positions; preparing for workshops, assignments, and meetings; and informing, supporting, or influencing other Government departments and development partners. The Helpdesk service is also used by FCDO staff members in more indirect ways to: increase their

skills and knowledge more generally; get up to speed with new responsibilities and initiatives; keep up with fast-changing situations; and improve their confidence and credibility when engaging with counterparts. Many Helpdesk reports also have impacts beyond FCDO, as users of the service routinely share outputs with colleagues across the UK Government and with partner organisations. Outputs that are published online are used by a wide range of organisations including bilateral and multilateral agencies, partner governments, NGOs, and academic organisations. The K4D programme has also contributed towards interdisciplinary working and learning across FCDO by routinely addressing research questions from interdisciplinary perspectives, drawing on diverse sources of evidence, and supporting interdisciplinary teams.

The K4D Helpdesk service is quick, reliable, high-quality, cost-effective, and overall well-regarded by service users. FCDO staff members rated 71% of K4D Helpdesk reports as being 'excellent' or 'very good' quality (the top two out of five possible ratings in feedback surveys) and the Helpdesk service achieved a score of A+ ('moderately exceeded expectation') in FCDO's latest (2021) annual review of the programme. As of the end of September 2022, K4D had produced 1,240 Helpdesk reports, an average of 17 reports per month.

❷ Evidence synthesis for policy and programming

Policymakers and practitioners need timely access to current, reliable, high quality evidence to assist in setting policy priorities and in developing and implementing policy, strategy, projects, and evaluations (Langlois *et al.*, 2017, pp. 2, 7; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 7).

Many studies suggest the existence of a 'research-policy divide' that impedes the process of incorporating evidence into policy and practice. Policymakers often lack time, access, awareness, and/or skills to engage with evidence (Oliver *et al.*, 2014, p. 6; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 11). Researchers often lack time, support, resources, skills, and incentives to communicate with policy audiences (Cairney, Oliver, Wellstead, 2016, p. 400). Studies also find differences between research and policy communities in: perceptions and practices around language and jargon; timescales for research and policy work; working with uncertainty; the role of challenge and critique; the role of experience and narrative; the role of personal relationships and trust; and approaches to decision-making (Cairney *et al.*, 2016, p. 400). There is often a lack of networks linking researchers and policymakers, as well as a lack of skills and incentives on both sides to build relationships with each other (Cairney *et al.*, 2016, p. 400; Oliver *et al.*, 2014, p. 1; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 11).

Evidence synthesis is the process of bringing together information and knowledge from a range of sources and disciplines and turning it into accessible, useable knowledge to inform debates and decisions (The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 7–8). There is a broad spectrum of types of evidence synthesis products that address different information needs. At one end of the spectrum are systematic reviews, which are generally considered to be the most comprehensive and highest quality form of evidence synthesis, aiming to systematically capture all available evidence related to a topic (The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 7). Across the middle of the spectrum is a diverse range of 'rapid reviews' with a great deal of variation among products and no standardisation in how they are described or how they are carried out (Haby *et al.*, 2016; Langlois *et al.*, 2017, p. 10; Moher, 2015, cited in Webber, 2015, p. 14). The K4D Helpdesk service produces a range of products that lie at the rapid, inexpensive end of this spectrum of products. Standard Helpdesk reports are completed within one or two weeks, Emerging Issues reports within one month, and Evidence Summaries use just half a day of a researcher's time.

❸ History of the K4D Helpdesk service and its predecessors

The K4D Helpdesk service builds on experience accumulated by a series of programmes which preceded it stretching back to 2001. A series of sector-specific resource centres[1] providing research and call-down consultancy services to professional groups within DFID gradually expanded over the years to take on increasingly wider thematic mandates, eventually leading in 2016 to the K4D programme providing rapid-response research support and organisational learning and development services across all of FCDO.

All of these Helpdesk services had a core element of delivering rapid syntheses of evidence in response to specific research questions, but the services offered by the first such programmes in the early 2000s were limited compared with the service now provided by K4D. The earliest Helpdesk reports offered little more than informal lists of literature with summaries or abstracts, or lists of experts working in a particular field, with little or no synthesis or analysis. Over the years, DFID's (and later FCDO's) needs and expectations grew and research questions became more complex, the Helpdesk operators developed their experience and capacities, and the services became more comprehensive, analytical, and interdisciplinary. The resources allocated to Helpdesk reports also increased over time: early reports were produced within two days of work each, rising to six days under the current K4D programme.

Early Helpdesk services put significant effort into cataloguing and facilitating access to publications, as accessing information in the 2000s was more difficult for DFID staff members than it is today, especially for those based overseas. The GSDRC, for example, created an extensive library of materials with custom-written summaries and offered a 'document delivery service' through the British Library of Development Studies at IDS which enabled DFID staff to request copies of academic papers and other materials to be sent to them by email, fax, or post.

Early services also collected and organised broad overviews of knowledge in the form of 'Topic Guides'. These publications aimed to provide an overview of issues, evidence, and debates across a broad subject for general reference and professional development. They were seen as useful particularly by junior DFID advisers and by advisers changing roles and getting up to speed with new areas of work. These products are no longer produced under the K4D programme, but many are still available on the GSDRC and HEART websites[2].

Many of the programmes that preceded K4D also included significant provision for public dissemination of knowledge and evidence. Outputs from the GRC (beginning in 2001) were initially only available to DFID staff, but in mid-2003 a public-facing website called 'GRC Exchange' was launched where selected outputs were published. Within the

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1. Governance Resource Centre, 2001-2005 (GRC); Governance and Social Development Resource Centre, 2005-2012 (GSDRC); Governance, Social Development, Conflict and Humanitarian Professional Evidence and Applied Knowledge Services, 2012-2016 (GSDCH PEAKS); GSDRC Applied Knowledge Services, 2016-current; Health Resource Centre, 2005-2011 (HRC); Human Development Resource Centre (including health and education), 2011-2012 (HDRC); Health and Education Advice and Resource Team Professional Evidence and Applied Knowledge Services (including health, education, nutrition and social protection), 2012-2016 (HEART PEAKS); and the Health and Education Advice and Resource Team, 2012-current (HEART).

2. See https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides and https://www.heart-resources.org/topic

programmes operating between 2005 to 2016 there was a strong emphasis on sharing outputs through project websites and newsletters, other knowledge hubs, and social media. Having a fully-featured website with collections of past reports also helped DFID staff discover work commissioned by their own colleagues and by other agencies. Under the K4D programme, public communication had a reduced priority, partly due to Government-wide policy against establishing new project websites, although the K4D programme did publish outputs within consortium partners' existing websites (the IDS OpenDocs repository and the GSDRC and HEART websites) and the Government's Research for Development Outputs repository, and new publications were announced via Twitter.

The K4D Helpdesk service today provides three main types of products and can draw on the resources of the broader K4D programme to produce supplementary Learning Products:

> *Helpdesk reports* are summaries of evidence and experience produced in response to specific requests from FCDO staff members.

> *Emerging Issues Reports* are more in-depth products intended to explore a broader range of evidence, investigate a subject more deeply, or explore emerging trends in a more speculative and forward-looking way.

> *Evidence Summaries* identify relevant evidence as quickly as possible and provide limited summaries of evidence without analysis or interpretation.

> *Learning Products* are produced by K4D, but they are not strictly speaking part of the Helpdesk's core offerings as they are managed separately from the Helpdesk service and delivered from a different budget line within the K4D programme. However, the Helpdesk service can draw on these facilities by special arrangement to produce supplementary products such as slide decks, infographics, videos, resource packs, and briefing notes, as well as to organise presentations and meetings.

(4) Features of the K4D Helpdesk service

The Helpdesk service was designed in accordance with terms of reference and performance indicators specified by DFID/FCDO to place a high priority on quality of outputs (particularly focusing on clear, concise, well-organised, and sufficiently comprehensive reports), rapid production, reliable on-time delivery, the ability to deliver large numbers of outputs, and economical production at a standardised cost per output.

The way the Helpdesk service achieves these priorities can be discussed in terms of a range of 'features' such as how it engages with evidence; the content, style, and presentation of its outputs; its production processes; the skills and subject knowledge that it draws on; and the way the service is managed overall (Table 1). The most important of these features to FCDO, based on how frequently they have been mentioned in feedback provided by FCDO staff members on Helpdesk reports, appear to be: the comprehensiveness of the evidence base; the clarity of reports; the speed with which reports are produced; the responsiveness and helpfulness of the Helpdesk team; the quality of the analysis contained in reports; and the administrative efficiency of the commissioning process.

Table 1: Features of the Helpdesk service

Engaging with the evidence	Comprehensiveness of the evidence ★ Dealing with a lack of evidence Accessing local or contextual evidence Evidence in languages other than English Assessing the quality of evidence
Content, style and presentation	Clear, well-organised, concise, and focused ★ Quality of synthesis and the peer review process ★ Other content and presentation issues Gender and disability mainstreaming
The production process	Speed of production ★ Co-developing research questions Commissioning requests ★ Interaction during and after assignments ★ Long-term links between the research team and evidence users
Skills and subject knowledge	Skills needed for evidence synthesis Subject and contextual knowledge Engaging with external experts Overseas partner organisations Building capacities of policy-makers and practitioners to use evidence
Management of operations	Staffing model Recruitment, training, and organisational culture Workflow management Adapting to changing demands

★ Features that appear to be particularly important to FCDO staff using the Helpdesk service.

⑤ Findings and lessons learned

This paper reviews the experience of the K4D programme in delivering the Helpdesk service, organised around the features identified above, drawing on evidence from:

> reviewing academic and practitioner literature related to evidence synthesis and rapid evidence reviews;

> feedback from FCDO staff members on Helpdesk reports collected throughout the life of the programme (consisting of 324 feedback forms);

> K4D's annual progress reports, FCDO's annual reviews of the programme, and other internal project documents and public materials from K4D and FCDO;

> interviews with five FCDO staff members carried out for this report in June and July 2022; and

> interviews with eleven K4D team members carried out for this report in July 2022.

5.1. Engaging with the evidence

5.1.1. Comprehensiveness of the evidence

Evidence from a wide range of sources, disciplines, research designs and methods may be appropriate for answering different types of research questions (Bakrania, 2020a, p. 4; DFID, 2014, p. 3; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, pp. 7–8). A range of 'rapid review' approaches are available to deliver actionable evidence in a timely and cost-effective manner, and there is some limited evidence that good quality rapid reviews are not necessarily less reliable than systematic reviews as a basis for decision-making (Akl *et al.*, 2018, pp. 123–124; Haby *et al.*, 2016; Langlois *et al.*, 2017, p. 10). A robust, transparent research methodology describing the sources consulted and how evidence was screened for consideration is important for producing a credible and useful evidence synthesis product (Bakrania, 2020b, p. 12; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 15).

Access to a comprehensive range of evidence, including drawing on evidence produced using a variety of approaches and sources, is extremely important to Helpdesk service users. The issue of 'comprehensiveness of evidence' was by far the most frequently mentioned factor in FCDO staff members' feedback on Helpdesk reports, featuring in more than half (55%) of all responses received.

K4D Helpdesk researchers use a non-systematic, 'organic' approach to searching for relevant literature, rather than an exhaustive approach such as would be appropriate in a systematic review. This includes using online search engines, academic databases, subject knowledge, following citations and cross-references, and consulting colleagues and external experts. K4D researchers have very good access to a wide range of online materials because they are based at major universities; this significantly reduces a common barrier to accessing information.

Lessons:

> Comprehensiveness of evidence is a high priority and Helpdesk reports should be as comprehensive as time and resources allow.

> K4D's rapid approach to searching for evidence has generally provided good results, and is quick and cost-effective compared with more formal systematic approaches.

> Helpdesk reports should include statements about their methodologies more consistently.

> Basing researchers at major universities with full access to academic library services is a cost-effective way of getting access to a wide range of high-quality evidence.

5.1.2. Dealing with a lack of evidence

International development and international relations work is inherently complex, fast-changing, uncertain, and takes place in environments where there is often limited capacity to collect robust data. It is not unusual to encounter situations where there is a lack of high-quality published evidence about the desired topic or context.

Clear communication between researchers and requesters about the amount and type of evidence available on a topic is important to successful delivery. K4D researchers search thoroughly for evidence using multiple approaches and consult with colleagues and external subject specialists to be sure that they have not overlooked relevant sources and to verify the extent of evidence available. When the amount of information available on a topic is limited, researchers discuss the situation with the individual commissioning the report and together decide how to proceed, which helps manage expectations and provides an opportunity to change approaches if needed. If the task proceeds to completion, researchers will describe the process they followed and outline the related bodies of evidence that they found.

Lessons:

> Limited availability of evidence is an inherent challenge of working in international development and international relations.

> Researchers need good access to a wide range of evidence sources and benefit from the ability to consult subject specialists to identify relevant sources and/or confirm situations where there is a lack of evidence.

> Clear and open discussion about strengths and weaknesses of the evidence base and the flexibility to adjust approaches to collecting evidence are important.

5.1.3. Accessing local or contextual evidence

Policy-makers often seek to draw on evidence that reflects their own specific context, but local-scale evidence may not be available in all settings (Akl *et al.*, 2018, p. 123) or in forms and languages that international researchers can readily access. In the K4D programme, access to evidence specifically

focused on local contexts is often important. FCDO staff directly commented on this issue in only 4% of the instances of feedback provided on Helpdesk reports, but anecdotally the Helpdesk receives many research questions that focus on specific local contexts and require locally-relevant evidence.

However, evidence about specific locations and evidence produced by small local organisations can often be difficult to locate, assess for quality and validity, and integrate with evidence from other sources. Locally-produced evidence is also often rated as lower quality than evidence from international sources (Akl *et al.*, 2018, p. 123). Experience in the K4D programme confirms that such evidence often requires more time and effort to collect and synthesise than evidence from high-capacity international organisations, and may be less precise, less consistent, or otherwise lower quality.

Lessons:

> Limited availability of context-specific evidence is an inherent challenge of working in international development and international relations, especially in low- and middle-income countries.

> Context-specific and locally-produced evidence from small and potentially low-capacity sources is likely to be more difficult to collect, more difficult to synthesise and less robust than evidence from high-capacity organisations, and needs to be appropriately described to users.

> Future research services might consider developing more partnerships and networks with research organisations in low- and middle-income countries to improve access to context-specific evidence, and potentially consider efforts to build local research capacities, but this would come with additional costs.

5.1.4. Evidence in languages other than English

Searches for evidence would ideally span multiple languages, rather than being restricted to English, but this would have considerable implications for the manageability, scope, and cost of research (Bakrania, 2020b, p. 14). In feedback on Helpdesk reports and in interviews, FCDO staff members expressed some interest in drawing on evidence

published in languages other than English, but do not appear to see this as a high priority. The K4D Helpdesk normally operates only in English, although in a few cases the service has been able to match researchers who have appropriate combinations of language and subject knowledge to specific assignments. In other cases, researchers have opportunistically drawn on material published in languages that they happened to be familiar with to supplement a report. There are some pools of evidence which are only available in languages other than English, including some materials produced by academic institutions, governments, and NGOs in some countries or regions, as well as materials from some regional intergovernmental organisations and regional development banks. However, the generally high quality of Helpdesk reports (as evidenced by feedback from FCDO staff using the service) suggests that searching only in English does capture a sufficient range of evidence for most K4D assignments. Expanding the service to routinely seek evidence in multiple languages appears unlikely to be cost-effective, but having the capacity to occasionally work in other languages where there is a specific need to do so would be useful.

Lessons:

> K4D's practice of working only in English for most assignments, and occasionally taking opportunities to draw on material in other languages on a case-by-case basis, appears to have been sufficient to meet most of the needs encountered.

> Establishing a permanent capacity to work in multiple languages across multiple subjects would be expensive and there does not appear to be a strong demand for this at present. However, having some capacity to occasionally work in other languages where there is a specific need to do so would be useful.

5.1.5. Assessing the quality of evidence

Evidence synthesis products should describe the quality of the evidence that they draw on, so that readers can determine how much confidence they

should place in research findings and make fully informed decisions (Bakrania, 2020c, p. 7; DFID, 2014, p. 2). Guidelines are available for assessing the quality of research and bodies of evidence, but rapid reviews of evidence do not normally include formally evaluating the quality of the evidence found (Collins *et al.*, 2015, p. 5). FCDO staff members rarely commented on the strength of the evidence base in their feedback on Helpdesk reports, which might indicate that current K4D practices are satisfactory or that such an analysis is not considered necessary within a rapid Helpdesk report.

K4D researchers assess the quality of individual studies based on rapidly considering proxy indicators, rather than undertaking formal evaluations, to speed up the research process. These indicators of quality include: the identity and reputation of the author and publisher; whether the material has been through a peer review or other quality assurance process; the clarity and structure of the material; whether conclusions follow logically from the evidence presented; whether the material is based on empirical evidence rather than being opinion or advocacy; and whether it is objective and balanced in tone.

K4D Helpdesk researchers report the size and consistency of a body of evidence based on published reviews and assessments by experts in the relevant field, rather than by conducting a new comprehensive evaluation themselves.

Lessons:

> K4D's approaches to assessing the quality of individual studies (based on readily apparent proxy indicators of quality and assessing the strength of a body of evidence based on published literature reviews and other research) appear to have been adequate for the purposes of the programme, and are quick and cost-effective.

> Evidence synthesis reports should clearly describe the sources they are drawing upon so that readers understand their reliability.

5.2. Content, style, and presentation

5.2.1. Clear, well-organised, concise, and focused

Evidence synthesis products should be written in plain language that is understandable by non-specialists, avoiding the use of jargon and technical terms as much as possible, by a writer who is experienced in presenting information clearly, concisely and objectively (Kelly *et al.*, 2017, p. 97; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, pp. 9, 15).

Feedback from FCDO staff members confirms that it is critically important that Helpdesk reports are clear, well-organised, concise, and focused. More than half (52%) of all feedback responses commented on one or more of these characteristics, with the vast majority (89%) of feedback indicating that Helpdesk reports were 'fully' or 'to a large extent' clear and easy to engage with.

K4D emphasises communication skills in its recruitment process and provides support and training on clear, concise communication to researchers throughout their careers. The team has a style guide that emphasises clear, direct language and provides guidance for structuring reports. Guidance for the peer review process emphasises that reports must flow logically, be concise and be easy to understand.

Lessons:
> Evidence synthesis reports must be clear, well-organised, concise, and focused.

> K4D has achieved good results in these areas by recruiting researchers for their communication skills, providing guidance and training to researchers throughout their careers, and including these areas in guidance for peer reviews.

> Future research services might consider introducing additional steps to improve the presentation and editorial quality of reports. This might include, for example, more intensive peer review, editing, and/or proofreading stages, although such measures would increase costs and slow the production process.

5.2.2. Quality of synthesis and the peer review process

The usual approach recommended in the literature to ensure the quality of evidence synthesis products is some form of peer review. However, there is a lack of guidance in the literature about how quality should be judged and how reviews should be carried out.

FCDO staff members indicate in their feedback on Helpdesk reports that the majority (71%) are of 'excellent' or 'very good' quality, 20% are rated 'good', and a significant minority (9%) fall below expectation with ratings of 'fair' or 'poor'. Interviewees generally understand quality to mean reports that are well-structured, clear, readable, and present a sufficient depth of information considering the availability of information for the topic. Reasons given by FCDO staff for rating reports as low quality include insufficient comprehensiveness or quality of evidence, a lack of new information, inadequate breadth or depth of analysis, not focusing adequately on the question, and inadequate skill or knowledge on the part of the researcher.

The K4D Helpdesk service includes an internal peer review as part of the process of producing every Helpdesk report. However, the time pressure on Helpdesk reports is such that reviewers have very little time to engage with a report, and the time available for revisions is similarly very limited. Some FCDO staff members have suggested introducing additional quality assurance steps to improve the quality of Helpdesk reports, such as engaging subject specialists outside the team to review reports before they are completed. The K4D Helpdesk has so far maintained this as an internal process to speed up production, maintain the reliability of on-time delivery, and keep costs down. The Helpdesk team also feels that keeping the process internal has contributed to building a positive organisational culture and to strengthening researchers' capacities.

Lessons:
> The K4D programme has achieved generally good results on quality, but a significant minority of reports (9%) fall below expectation. Reasons given by FCDO staff for rating reports as low

quality included insufficient comprehensiveness or quality of evidence, a lack of new information, inadequate breadth or depth of analysis, not focusing adequately on the question, or inadequate skill or knowledge on the part of the researcher.

> Future research services should consider potential ways of addressing the quality shortcomings identified. Options might include, for example, making different choices about the working time allocated to tasks, researchers' skill sets, how assignments are allocated to researchers, quality-assurance processes, or other measures. However, such changes would be likely to increase costs, slow production, and make delivery times more variable.

5.2.3. Content, presentation, and alternative formats

The format of an evidence synthesis product is often tailored to its audiences. Products may include features such as: short summaries of key messages; discussing policy implications; using varied formats such as text, tables, or graphics; varying the emphasis on results, analysis, or methods; discussing the strength of the evidence; and targeting messages to particular audiences (Tricco, Cardoso, *et al.*, 2017, pp. 113–114).

Feedback on Helpdesk reports from FCDO staff indicates that they appreciate reports that contain a high level of detail, identify additional resources for further reading, include graphical content, are well-presented without spelling or typographical errors, and contain recommendations for further work. There is also an appetite in FCDO for a wider range of product formats, including 'deep dives' into evidence, slide packs, blogs, increased graphical content, and in-person or online presentations and discussions.

The K4D programme limits the range of formats for Helpdesk reports to speed up the process, manage expectations, and ensure consistency in time and cost. Helpdesk researchers have the freedom to present information in different formats within the time and resources allocated, and can negotiate additional resources on a case-by-case basis.

Lessons:

> Future research services should consider whether some form of copy-editing or proofreading stage could be introduced into the production process. This would add a small amount to costs and delivery times but might be a cost-effective way of slightly raising the editorial quality of reports.

> Future research services should consider offering a wider range of products, such as evidence syntheses at varying levels of depth, slide packs, blogs, graphics, and in-person or online presentations and discussions. However, a broader menu of bespoke products will require a greater breadth of technical capacities, increased management costs, and will involve greater variability in cost and delivery times compared with a narrower and more standardised product range.

5.2.4. Gender and disability mainstreaming

Gender and disability are important considerations in development because people of different genders and with various types of disabilities are affected differently by poverty, development, conflict, and disasters, and face different barriers in accessing services, economic resources and political opportunities (Kangas *et al.*, 2014, p. 4; Rohwerder, 2015, pp. 1–2).

FCDO considers gender and disability to be important cross-cutting issues (FCDO, 2022), although feedback on Helpdesk reports rarely include direct comments on how these issues are addressed except when the main focus of a report is on gender or disability.

K4D has placed a high priority on gender mainstreaming since its inception. The programme has also begun incorporating disability issues into Helpdesk reports more consistently, but disability is less widely addressed in published research, so less information is generally available. The Helpdesk service provides training and guidelines for researchers and peer reviewers, has assembled lists of relevant resources, and undertakes annual reviews of Helpdesk reports to assess the degree to which gender and disability issues have been addressed. In the programme's most recent annual review (2021), 84% of all Helpdesk reports were considered to have addressed gender issues and 50% had addressed disability.

Lessons:

> Evidence syntheses should include evidence disaggregated by gender and disability where it is available, highlight ways in which the experiences of different populations can differ, and draw attention to gender and disability issues in all outputs wherever possible.

> K4D has mainstreamed gender in Helpdesk reports through training staff, establishing guidelines and standards, and carrying out annual evaluations. Disability issues are being addressed in similar ways but are not yet as fully integrated.

5.3. The production process

5.3.1. Speed of production

Timeliness is one of the most important factors supporting the use of evidence by policymakers (Oliver *et al.* 2014, p. 1). Producing high-quality, comprehensive, accessible, and relevant evidence synthesis products in policy-relevant timeframes is a widely recognised challenge for researchers (Akl *et al.*, 2018, p. 123; Hering, 2016, p. 364; Langlois *et al.*, 2017, pp. 7, 15; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018).

In feedback on Helpdesk reports from FCDO staff, speed of delivery was one of the most frequently mentioned aspects of the service (mentioned in 29% of feedback responses).

The K4D Helpdesk research process and staffing model were designed with speed and reliability as core priorities. Part of this design was to standardise certain aspects of the service, including the range of products available, the working time allocated to each assignment, and many of the steps in the production process. This achieves faster production than designing each report as a fully bespoke product, but still allows for some flexibility. K4D also established a fixed team of researchers, whose working time is dedicated to the Helpdesk service and can be controlled by the Helpdesk coordinator. This increases reliability compared with the 'pool of experts' model used by many research services. However, constant pressure for rapid completion of reports, combined with the breadth and complexity of many requests, can be stressful for researchers.

Lessons:

> Quick and reliable delivery of reports is critically important.

> K4D's production process and staffing model prioritise speed, reliability, and the control and standardisation of costs; this is achieved in part by limiting the diversity of product types and the depth of specialist expertise offered.

> Future research services might consider whether the same combination of priorities will continue to be appropriate, or whether other approaches can be used to ensure rapid delivery of outputs.

> The pressure on researchers to produce reports in very short turnaround times can be intense and requires careful management to avoid burnout.

5.3.2. Co-developing research questions

Developing a clear and appropriate research question, defining the scope of an evidence product, and clarifying expectations requires dialogue between policy-makers and researchers at the beginning of the process (King *et al.*, 2017, p. 26; Langlois *et al.*, 2017, p. 12).

Feedback on the Helpdesk service shows that FCDO staff members clearly welcome the opportunity to discuss ideas and complex problems with researchers. They appreciate critiques and challenges to their thinking and assumptions, and recognise the importance of collaboration in developing an appropriate research question and defining the scope of the work.

The K4D team also considers it important to discuss research questions with Helpdesk users at the beginning of the process to ensure a clear, useful, feasible question, and to manage expectations. Researchers discuss questions with requesters to: clarify the question; define the scope of the research; define key terms; agree the format of the report; understand the purpose of the question and how the results will be used; discuss the availability of evidence; and confirm deadlines and procedures. Co-developing research questions requires considerable experience and confidence on the part of researchers, pointing to the need for adequate training and mentoring.

Lessons:

> The collaborative process of discussing research ideas, problems and needs is very valuable, not only as part of the evidence synthesis process, but also as an opportunity for FCDO staff to discuss issues with knowledgeable counterparts.

> Future research services may consider expanding opportunities for such discussions, although it may be expensive and complex to arrange the availability of enough suitable experts to cover a sufficiently broad range of subjects.

5.3.3. Commissioning requests

Contractual and operational details of how evidence synthesis services might work effectively with their clients are rarely discussed in the literature.

In feedback on the Helpdesk service, FCDO staff members show that they greatly value the low transaction costs, absence of administrative barriers to commissioning K4D Helpdesk reports, and the collegiality and informality of the service.

The K4D Helpdesk was designed to be easy for FCDO staff members to use with minimal transaction costs. All FCDO staff members have the authority to commission assignments within defined limits without seeking approval. Requests can be commissioned by sending an informal email without needing to find or fill out forms. Costs are standardised and covered through a central budget so that the service is free at the point of use to FCDO staff members. Many elements of the Helpdesk are standardised to streamline the process and define clear expectations about what the service can provide.

Lessons:

> Keeping administrative barriers to a minimum has been a very important factor in achieving broad use of the service across FCDO. This has been facilitated by a significant degree of trust and delegation of authority between FCDO and the K4D consortium.

5.3.4. Interaction during and after assignments

Involving policy-makers throughout the process of producing evidence synthesis products, from the design of the research question to the interpretation of findings, increases the relevance and applicability of the resulting products, as well as increasing the uptake of evidence into decision-making (Haby *et al.*, 2016, p. 2; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 15; Tricco, Cardoso, *et al.*, 2017, p. 113; Tricco, Zarin, *et al.*, 2017, p. 73).

There is some desire from FCDO staff members for the Helpdesk service to be a more interactive and iterative process. In feedback provided on Helpdesk reports, 4% of responses mentioned this issue, consisting of eight respondents who commented positively on how researchers had revised reports in response to feedback and four who requested more scope for such revisions. Three out of five FCDO staff members interviewed for this report similarly expressed a desire for more interaction with researchers during and after an assignment.

The Helpdesk team acknowledges that close interaction and co-production of research reports has many benefits. Current K4D policies emphasise the need for good communication with requesters throughout the process, but place some limits on interaction to balance the benefits of co-production with the need to control costs and manage delivery schedules.

Lessons:

> K4D designed its processes with limits on opportunities for interaction in the research process as a way of controlling costs, speeding up the process and increasing the reliability of on-time delivery.

> Future research services might consider the possibility of offering a more interactive and iterative service, although this would likely come at increased cost and increased challenges for managing delivery.

5.3.5. Long-term links between the research team and evidence users

Knowledge brokering is an iterative and bidirectional process that requires long-term partnerships and effective communication between the producers and users of evidence. This helps research teams build confidence and trust, respond effectively to demand, and identify and anticipate knowledge needs and fill gaps (Akl *et al.*, 2018, p. 124; Hering, 2016, pp. 364, 367; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 11).

FCDO staff clearly value the interactions they have with the research team. In 30% of instances of feedback on Helpdesk reports, they comment on the K4D team's responsiveness, helpfulness, communication, or similar attributes, almost always in a positive sense. FCDO staff members interviewed in 2021 and 2022 similarly stated that they welcomed the informality and collegiality of the relationship with the K4D team.

Open, clear, prompt communication, and a collaborative, constructive, flexible approach contribute to maintaining good working relationships with service users. K4D's policies and procedures emphasise prompt and open communication, including requirements for communication at specified points in the process. K4D also provides templates and examples to help researchers and the management team. The K4D Helpdesk staffing model, with a fixed team of researchers dedicated to the Helpdesk service, facilitates building relationships with service users. K4D has notably built good working relationships with FCDO's regional research hubs, which have integrated the Helpdesk service into their routines and frequently use it to lay the groundwork for designing larger projects, to extend and build on research carried out by the research hubs themselves, and to respond to other rapid research needs.

Lessons:

> K4D has built strong links with FCDO teams and staff through open, clear, and prompt communication; a collaborative, constructive, and flexible approach; and maintaining a consistent team of researchers who work with evidence users.

5.4. Skills and subject knowledge

5.4.1. Skills needed for evidence synthesis

Evidence synthesis is a distinct activity that involves understanding research needs, designing research questions and strategies, searching for evidence and quickly assessing its quality and relevance, collecting and organising information, and clearly and concisely communicating findings. Researchers working in this area need methodological expertise in producing evidence synthesis; the ability and desire to engage and negotiate with policy-makers; potentially skills in areas such as statistics, information technology, and communication; energy and commitment; and a range of other professional skills such as flexibility, enthusiasm, creativity, courage, tact, and negotiation (Akl *et al.*, 2018, p. 124; Bakrania, 2020d, p. 6; Hering, 2016, p. 364; Phipps and Morton, 2013; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 15). Within academia, evidence synthesis is not as highly esteemed and rewarded as original research, which makes synthesis work unattractive for many researchers (Hering, 2016, p. 364; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 9). This may be less of a problem in other organisational contexts.

FCDO staff are broadly satisfied with the level of expertise that K4D researchers have demonstrated in evidence synthesis. Service users providing feedback on Helpdesk reports rarely (2% of instances) mention these skills, but when they do, it is almost always to praise the skills of the researchers involved.

K4D recruits Helpdesk researchers specifically for their research and communication skills, reinforces these skills through training throughout their careers, and locates them in organisational units where they can specialise in evidence synthesis without taking on other academic duties. K4D researchers each have particular areas of subject knowledge, but are also expected to be able to engage flexibly with a wide range of topics and bring together evidence across multiple disciplines and specialties.

Lessons:

> K4D has developed a team with good evidence synthesis skills by recruiting staff members with these specific skills, providing ongoing training throughout their careers, and designing job descriptions around the evidence synthesis function rather than a typical mix of academic duties.

5.4.2. Subject and contextual knowledge

Teams producing evidence synthesis products need to have sufficient expertise in the subject being addressed. In larger projects, it is common to assemble teams of people with relevant backgrounds to bring together an appropriate combination of subject matter expertise and experience in evidence synthesis; to draw in the requisite experience from a wider organisation, network, or advisory group constituted for this purpose; or to carry out an *ad hoc* search for specialists (Bakrania, 2020b, pp. 13–14; Bakrania, 2020d, p. 6; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 17).

FCDO staff are largely satisfied with K4D Helpdesk researchers' level of knowledge, although a significant minority express a desire for greater specialist input. In their feedback on individual Helpdesk reports, FCDO staff members commented on this issue in 3% of responses, evenly split between commenting that the researcher who prepared their report was or was not sufficiently knowledgeable. Interviews with FCDO staff also showed mixed views, with three out of five interviewees in 2022 suggesting that certain assignments which were particularly specialised or sensitive would have benefited from greater subject expertise.

The K4D team includes researchers recruited for their evidence synthesis skills, for particular areas of thematic knowledge, and to a lesser extent, for regional knowledge. They tend to cover moderately broad thematic areas rather than being narrowly specialised. K4D researchers are based at consortium partner organisations where they can consult colleagues for advice, and they also routinely contact other experts outside the consortium to obtain specialist input. The core team is occasionally supplemented by consultants who are engaged either for specific subject or contextual knowledge, or to provide more general additional capacity during periods of high demand.

Lessons:

> K4D researchers have sufficient expertise to engage with most issues in the subjects that they cover, and routinely consult specialists within and outside their own organisations.

> K4D researchers have specialty expertise in certain narrow subjects, but the team does not have in-house specialists covering every subject that it could be potentially asked to investigate.

> Future research services might consider how to identify research questions that require greater specialisation and might consider handling them using different procedures from those used for more standard evidence synthesis requests. However, the wide range of topics and geographies that a service like K4D might need to address would require a very large pool of specialists, each of whom would be consulted infrequently, which would entail significant recruitment and management challenges, and such an operation would be likely to be considerably more expensive, slower, and less reliable and consistent than K4D's current normal process.

5.4.3. Engaging with external experts

Evidence synthesis teams may seek to engage with subject experts to obtain advice on the research question, the scope of the research, the search methodology, and especially recommendations for sources of evidence (Bakrania, 2020b). 'Expert opinion should be used with caution', however, as it may be subject to biases (Collins *et al.*, 2015, p. 17).

FCDO staff value contributions from experts outside the K4D team and find it useful to follow up with these individuals for further discussions. A small proportion of feedback provided by FCDO staff on Helpdesk reports (2% of responses) mentioned the value of engagement with outside experts, and three FCDO staff members interviewed in 2021 and 2022 noted that going beyond desk-based research and contacting relevant experts directly was useful.

K4D researchers routinely collect advice, comments, or recommendations for literature and information sources from subject experts outside the core team. These external specialists are identified through online searches, publications, and (occasionally) personal referrals from colleagues. These efforts collect a significant number of voluntary

contributions: in 2021, for example, the team obtained *pro bono* advice from 220 professionals affiliated with 139 different organisations outside K4D. However, contacting external experts for contributions is unreliable and carries risks of bias, conflict of interest, uncertain quality, and overweighting of views compared with other (quality-assured and peer-reviewed) sources.

Lessons:

> Contributions from experts outside the core research team can be valuable, but they carry risks of bias, conflict of interest, uncertain quality, and overweighting of individual views. The process of identifying and contacting external experts is also unreliable.

> Future research services might consider whether there might be ways to more effectively solicit advice and comments from external experts, although this could be more expensive and slower than K4D's current process.

5.4.4. Overseas partner organisations

Involving researchers from low- and middle-income countries in evidence syntheses can bring knowledge of local contexts useful for interpreting research findings and understanding their relevance to new contexts, and can support engagement with local stakeholders representing diverse backgrounds (Pan *et al.*, 2021, p. 2). However, there is generally a low level of capacity in low- and middle-income countries for conducting rapid evidence reviews (Mijumbi-Deve and El-Jardali, 2017, pp. 86–87).

FCDO staff members rarely directly mention engagement with overseas partner organisations in their feedback on the Helpdesk service, but some have suggested that involving overseas partners might help improve access to contextually relevant knowledge and subject specialists.

The Helpdesk does obtain inputs from individual experts in other countries on an *ad hoc* basis but has no ongoing partnerships with organisations outside the UK. The K4D team feels that it would be beneficial to develop more links with Southern partners, but that this has not been possible within the resources available for the programme, and a larger consortium would likely entail increased costs for management, training, travel, and incentives.

Lessons:

> Future research services might consider ways of developing stronger networks with partners in low- and middle-income countries to improve access to local knowledge and expertise. However, this would likely involve higher costs for management, training, travel, and incentives.

5.4.5. Building capacities of policymakers and practitioners to use evidence

Barriers to the use of evidence by policymakers may include inadequate access to materials, inadequate research skills, time pressures, competing policy priorities, and a lack of networks (Oliver *et al.*, 2014, p. 6; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 11). The uptake and use of evidence in policy and practice can be strengthened by building up research users' capacities to commission research, interpret and use evidence synthesis, recognise good synthesis, understand when and how to use synthesised evidence, and align with globally recognised terminology and standards of quality and rigour (Bakrania, 2020a, p. 4; The Royal Society and The Academy of Medical Sciences, 2018, p. 23).

The Helpdesk service is widely recognised as saving FCDO staff members time in accessing evidence. Some FCDO staff members also report limited capacity or expertise to search for, summarise, and/ or evaluate evidence. In interviews conducted in 2022, four out of five interviewees noted that they lacked evidence synthesis skills comparable to what the K4D Helpdesk researchers provided. Non-skill-related barriers, such as the cost of database and journal subscriptions and adequate Internet connections, are often mentioned in the literature on evidence synthesis but are rarely mentioned by FCDO staff.

Lessons:

> The principal barrier to accessing evidence mentioned by FCDO staff members is lack of time, and the K4D Helpdesk is recognised as saving a great deal of time.

> Other barriers to accessing evidence that FCDO staff experience include limited capacity to search for, summarise, and/or evaluate evidence. The K4D Helpdesk has not been tasked with helping build capacity in these areas.

5.5. Management of operations

5.5.1. Staffing model

The K4D Helpdesk uses a fixed team of researchers who are hired specifically for the K4D programme and are dedicated to it either full-time or for a fixed proportion of their working time. This contrasts with the 'expert pool' model used by many research services, in which a pool of specialists is identified who can (in principle) be called upon to respond to requests, but who do not have a fixed obligation to respond. The model that K4D follows supports faster and more reliable delivery, low transaction costs, better cost control, and more consistent service to clients than the 'expert pool' model. However, K4D's approach also means that the range of specialist skills available within the team is limited, making this approach most suitable where requirements for specialist skills are moderate. K4D occasionally supplements its fixed team with external researchers contracted to provide specialist skills or to meet surges in demand that exceed the capacity of the fixed team.

Lessons:

> K4D's staffing model of relying primarily on a fixed team of researchers is well-suited to meeting its priorities of fast, reliable, and consistent delivery of services at a low and standardised cost with minimal administrative overheads.

> Drawing on external consultants has helped the service respond to demands for specialist expertise or to meet surges in demand, but K4D has found that external consultants are often more expensive than in-house staff (both in direct costs and in administrative overheads), slower to deliver, and less reliable.

> Future research services will need to determine the size and composition of the research team appropriate to the particular needs that they will be expected to satisfy.

5.5.2. Recruitment, training, and organisational culture

Until the later stage of the programme, most K4D researchers were recruited specifically for the K4D team rather than being transferred from other duties within their home organisation. The recruitment process placed more weight on communication skills, experience working in a policy or practitioner environment, and flexibility in engaging with a range of subjects than is the norm for most academic researchers. In the last few years of the programme, it became increasingly common for researchers to be only partly dedicated to the K4D programme while also having other responsibilities in their home organisations. This change in practice was influenced by strategic desires to involve researchers in other work going on across their organisations, and by financial constraints and uncertainties which made it impractical to hire dedicated staff for sufficiently long periods at all consortium partners.

The K4D Helpdesk service has developed comprehensive policies and procedures which record and build on experience gained within the K4D programme and from its predecessors. Training for researchers emphasises peer-to-peer mentoring as the primary approach, alongside formal instruction in K4D's procedures. The research team has created a supportive and close-knit organisational culture that values giving and receiving feedback, learning from experience, and constant improvement.

Lessons:

> K4D's recruitment and training practices have produced a team that is well-suited to the task of evidence synthesis.

> K4D has benefited from thoroughly documenting policies, procedures, practical experience, and advice for researchers.

> Keeping documentation constantly under review and updated through discussions at regular team meetings has supported constant improvement of services and learning from experience.

> K4D has developed a close-knit, researcher-driven organisational culture through its recruitment, training, professional development, and peer review practices.

5.5.3. Workflow management

Coordination of work in progress and of researchers' workloads and availabilities has been supported by effective and experienced management, a close-knit team, and online tools for team coordination. K4D

staff members note that the Helpdesk manager should have experience producing these kinds of reports, as without this it would be difficult to fully appreciate the process and make appropriate decisions. Matching requests to researchers' knowledge and interests is critical for producing good quality reports and sustaining motivation. Managing researchers' workloads and balancing them with a variety of tasks is important to avoid burnout. An online work queue system based on Microsoft SharePoint helps track work in progress and staff availability.

Managing fluctuations in demand for the Helpdesk service is a significant challenge, with demand ranging from 6 requests per month to 31 requests per month over the lifetime of the project. During busy periods, the Helpdesk manager recruits consultants and obtains additional support from consortium partner organisations, supports Helpdesk researchers in dealing with increased pressure, and negotiates with requesters about the urgency and sequencing of requests. Using personnel outside the core team introduces risks of unreliable or inconsistent delivery and incurs additional costs, but has been an important way to maintain throughput.

Lessons:

> Effective and experienced management with the ability to evaluate research requests, authority to control and balance researchers' workloads, and good knowledge of researchers' skills and interests has been essential to coordinating workflows and delivering a high volume of research outputs.

> A rapid, demand-responsive service must be able to respond to fluctuations in demand; for K4D, the ability to draw on appropriately experienced temporary staff and to negotiate deadlines have been important ways of coping.

5.5.4. Adapting to changing demands

The K4D Helpdesk service has adapted existing products and processes, responded flexibly to changing demands, and rapidly designed and produced new product types to respond to new knowledge needs. Adaptation has been particularly facilitated by flexible programme design and management: FCDO and the K4D consortium have updated specifications, budgets, and performance indicators, and have shifted resources from one activity to another, to meet changing demands throughout the programme. Adaptation has also been supported by the skilled, dedicated, and motivated project team and its collaborative organisational culture, and by embedding K4D researchers within major academic institutions where they can easily seek expert advice. The most significant example of new product development during the programme was the creation of the COVID-19 Evidence Summary series in early 2020.

Lessons:

> Adapting to changes in evidence needs has been facilitated by flexibility on the part of both FCDO and the implementing agencies to update specifications, budgets, and performance indicators throughout the programme, by the breadth of the programme, and by the flexible and skilled research team.

6 Conclusion

The findings and lessons above suggest that three broad groups of factors appear to have contributed to the success of the K4D Helpdesk service: the *people* involved in delivering the service, particularly the permanent research team; the *procedures* established to streamline production processes and support rapid, reliable, and cost-effective delivery; and the *relationships* between the K4D Helpdesk and service users in FCDO.

People: The K4D Helpdesk relies on a permanent team of skilled and knowledgeable researchers whose working time is dedicated to delivering the Helpdesk service. They are recruited with particular attention to evidence synthesis and communication skills, in addition to subject knowledge, regional knowledge, and flexibility. They are given training and support throughout their careers. The team has developed a close-knit, researcher-driven organisational culture, and researchers have significant autonomy in their work. Team members are motivated and empowered to continuously improve and adapt the service. Temporary consultants supplement the core team to help meet specific expertise needs and to handle surges in demand. The management team can more effectively coordinate and support the research team when they have practical experience in evidence synthesis and research communication.

Procedures: The K4D programme has developed and documented procedures to streamline the production of Helpdesk reports which meet the majority of service users' needs quickly and cost-effectively. These include procedures and standards for commissioning tasks, defining research questions, collecting and evaluating evidence, structuring and presenting information clearly and concisely, consulting specialists outside the core team, mainstreaming gender and disability, and quality assurance. A balance between standardisation and flexibility within defined limits has helped ensure rapid and reliable delivery, quality and consistency of service, and control of costs. Procedures are regularly reviewed and updated to learn from experience and to improve working practices. The service adapts its products and procedures to meet changing evidence needs.

Relationships: The K4D team works with service users collaboratively, constructively, and flexibly, and emphasises clear, open, collegial communication at all stages of work. It has developed trusted working relationships with organisational units across FCDO, which has supported the use of evidence across FCDO and minimised administrative barriers to the use of the service. Both FCDO and the K4D consortium have shown flexibility in adapting specifications and performance indicators throughout the programme to respond to changing needs.

The K4D Helpdesk service's current operational model is of course not the only possible approach to delivering an evidence synthesis service. The K4D Helpdesk was designed, guided by terms of reference and performance indicators specified by DFID/FCDO, to place a high priority on quality of outputs, rapid production, reliable on-time delivery, the ability to deliver large numbers of outputs, and economical production at a standardised cost per output. The way the present service operates is one way of satisfying the programme's priorities and constraints, working within the resources available to the programme.

Some of the lessons identified in this paper point towards possible alternative approaches or activities that might be of interest to future research services. Many of these alternatives appear likely to entail trade-offs such as higher or more variable costs, and/or slower and more variable delivery times, than the K4D Helpdesk's current operational model. However, providers operating with different priorities or resource constraints, or deploying innovative new methods, might consider some of the following ideas in developing a future evidence synthesis service:

> develop more partnerships and networks with other research organisations, particularly in low- and middle-income countries, to support access to a wider range of sources of evidence and expertise;

> introduce additional steps to improve the presentation and editorial quality of reports, such as more intensive peer review, editing, and/or proofreading;

> explore ways to increase the comprehensiveness and quality of evidence in reports, improve the quality of analysis and tightness of focus of reports, and/or adjust the skill sets and knowledge of researchers involved in producing reports;

> more routinely and proactively offer a wider range of products (such as evidence syntheses at varying levels of depth, slide packs, blogs, graphics, and more opportunities for in-person or online presentations and discussions) as alternatives to or supplements to 'standard' Helpdesk reports in a way that is even more closely integrated with the Helpdesk service than in the current K4D programme;

> offer a more interactive and iterative service, with more opportunities for service users to provide input to reports, and to make changes during the production process; and/or

> identify research questions that require highly specialised expertise and handle them differently from standard evidence synthesis.

Annex: Methodology

This report draws on the following sources:

> Literature review: Materials from the academic and practitioner literature were found by using Google and Google Scholar to search for materials related to evidence synthesis and rapid evidence reviews; selected from items already known to the author from previous work on this subject; selected from items recommended by colleagues within the K4D team; and found by following citations within publications already found to be relevant. A large proportion of the research on evidence synthesis comes from the field of medicine, although for the purposes of this report materials related to evidence synthesis in international development and other fields were also specifically sought out.

> Feedback collected on Helpdesk reports throughout the life of the programme: Every time the K4D Helpdesk service delivers a report, the person who requested the report is asked to complete a short online feedback survey. Over the lifetime of the programme, 31% of requesters have returned these surveys, providing a total of 326 responses with comments on various aspects of individual Helpdesk reports and/or the overall service.

> Evidence previously collected by the K4D programme about Helpdesk performance and other K4D and DFID/FCDO documents including annual progress reports, annual reviews by DFID, the *Helpdesk Manual*, monitoring and evaluation reports, and other project documents. These documents include information collected from interviews with FCDO staff in 2019, 2020, and 2021 about various aspects of the performance of the service.

> Interviews with five FCDO staff members carried out specifically for this report, and a public presentation by one FCDO staff member, in 2022.

> Interviews with eleven K4D team members carried out specifically for this report in July 2022.

The author of this report was the manager of the K4D Helpdesk service from 2016 to 2019, and the manager of several of the evidence synthesis services that preceded K4D. This report is therefore informed by deep familiarity with the K4D programme and its predecessors, but it also cannot be, and does not attempt to be, an unbiased evaluation of the programme. Rather, this report seeks to collect and document practical knowledge and lessons learned from the K4D team in an effort to pass on institutional memory to future projects working on similar tasks.

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