Undertaking Reviews for Policy

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EPPI-Centre

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Undertaking Reviews for Policy

James Thomas and Katy Sutcliffe

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The EPPI-Centre is part of the Social Science Research Unit at the Institute of Education, University of London

Plan for the session

- Helping policy makers to use research
- Adapting review methodology to meet policy needs
- Being responsive
- Strategies for when the research is thin
- Responding swiftly

Helping policy makers to use research

- Sandy and Rebecca's talk – research = one source of evidence for policy makers – low down in pecking order
- Methodological rigour essential if assembling evidence to support national policy BUT need to be adaptable so research is
  - **Relevant** – diverse range of questions and evidence
    - and perspectives: see presentation by Sandy Oliver & Rebecca Rees
  - **Implementable** – translatable for relevant practice settings
  - **Responsive** – dialogue essential so can respond to changing/ evolving needs
  - **Timely** – rapid response often required

The Department of Health Reviews Facility

- Since 1995 our aim has been to address the needs of DH Policy Research Programme

- Policy Research Programme: unusual (in UK departments)

- Continued funding/ association with DH rests upon reputation for delivering high quality, useful reviews

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DH policy
teams
     ↕
Department of
health policy
research
programme
     ↕
Reviews
facility (us)
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Developing a 'bespoke' reviews service

- Our early work involved reviews of effectiveness in health promotion ("transferring and translating the model of evidence-based health care to HP & PH")
  - Sexual health; smoking; workplace…
- Policy teams were positive, but wanted more assistance than a straight 'translation' could offer
- For each review we had to 'customise' the approach to meet their needs
- We had to push the boundaries of review methods in order to answer the range of questions they asked
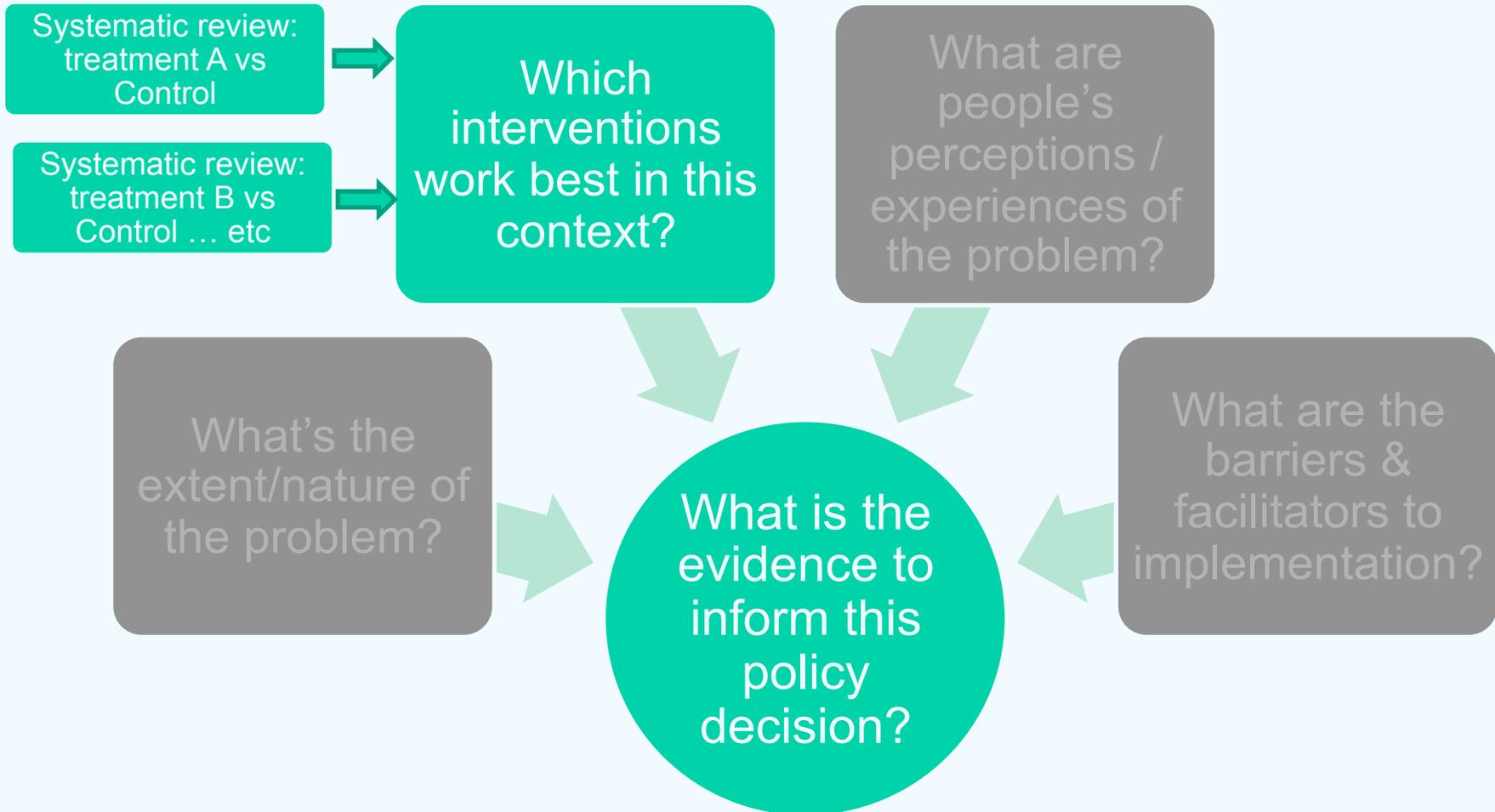
Diversity: Questions and evidence

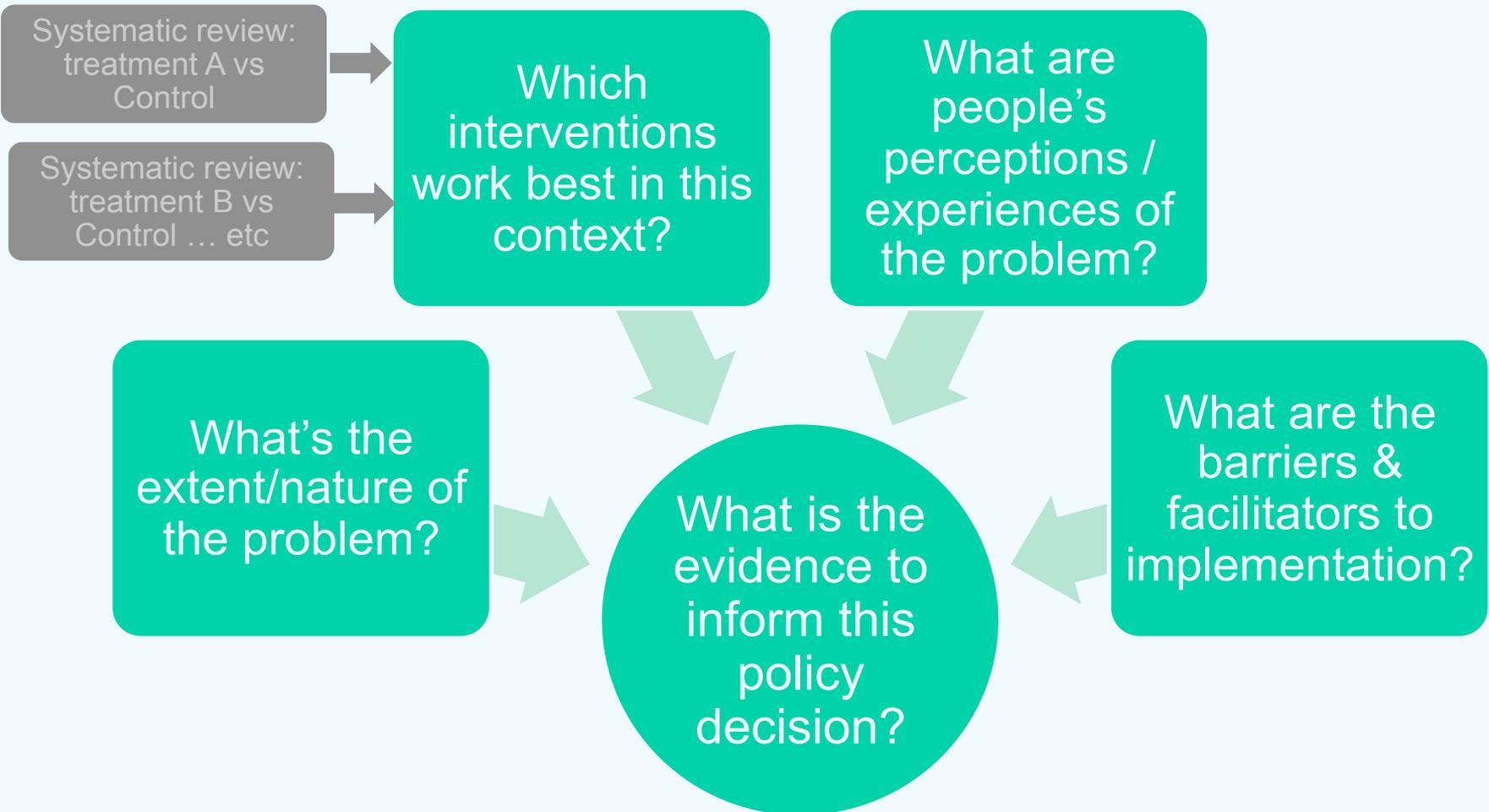| Question types	Evidence types
What works? What's the most effective?	Intervention evaluations (e.g. trials)
What are the barriers/facilitators of implementation?	Process evaluations
What's the extent/nature of the problem?	Epidemiological research (e.g. Survey)
What are people's needs?	Needs assessment
What are people's experiences?	Views research (e.g. qualitative, survey data)
What relationships are seen between phenomena?	Correlational studies

Diversity: Methods

- Methods for appraisal and synthesis **differ according to the nature of included evidence** (fit for purpose)

- The reviews we are typically asked to do involve **more than one type of *question*** and **more than one type of *evidence***

- Therefore a **'mixed-method'** approach is required in which different types of evidence are combined
  - Need to blend micro and macro perspectives

- In many cases **methods development** is required to combine different evidence types

- However, **key principles of research synthesis are not compromised**.

Answering questions of effectiveness with systematic reviews

Systematic review: treatment A vs Control

Systematic review: treatment B vs Control … etc

Which interventions work best in this context?

What are people's perceptions / experiences of the problem?

What's the extent/nature of the problem?

What is the evidence to inform this policy decision?

What are the barriers & facilitators to implementation?

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Broader systematic evidence syntheses

Systematic review: treatment A vs Control

Systematic review: treatment B vs Control … etc

Which interventions work best in this context?

What are people's perceptions / experiences of the problem?

What's the extent/nature of the problem?

What is the evidence to inform this policy decision?

What are the barriers & facilitators to implementation?

Diversity example: Tobacco Sources Review

- **Aim**: To explore how young people aged 11-18 years access tobacco in the UK

- **Methods**: 3 interconnected syntheses

  - Statistical meta-analysis of survey data from young people in the UK to reveal the most common routes of tobacco access

  - Thematic synthesis of qualitative research from young people in the UK to reveal barriers and facilitators of tobacco access

  - Descriptive map of intervention evaluations to examine how which barriers facilitators current interventions are targeting, and which they are not

Being responsive throughout the review

Outset	**Determining scope –** Conceptual framework/protocol ensures clarity/shared vision about review focus **Determining how findings will be used** – to ensure final product will be usable/useful **Determining deadlines** – Is some evidence needed sooner? Is a rapid approach required?
Interim	**Refining review question** - Identify potential areas for in-depth review from a 'descriptive map' of research? **Changing direction** – Change in policy priorities or an empty review requires a change of tack? **Staged outputs** – Is evidence what expected? Is it presented in a suitable format?
Post synthesis	**Supporting implementation** – Is evidence from process evaluations/views required to assist with implementation of evidence on effectiveness?

Strategies for when the research is thin

- Identifying gaps in the evidence is useful – but more useful for research commissioners than policy makers

- Use of 'best available' evidence avoids an 'empty' review

  – Use less restrictive quality threshold to increase volume/coverage of data set BUT transparency about limitations of evidence is essential (WoE)

  – If compromise on quality is not appropriate – then use 'other evidence types' to illuminate issue (e.g. as for tobacco sources review)

Responding swiftly

- Policy customers often require a rapid response
- They also need to meet high standards *and* are typically broad/complex
- Methodological innovation and dialogue with policymakers are required to develop robust and appropriate solutions
- Options for responding swiftly include
  - Rapid Evidence Assessments (REA) - restricted search/ curtailed scope (specific localised policy needs)
  - Text mining – automated identification of relevant evidence
  - Review of Reviews (RoR) – assemble evidence from existing systematic reviews
  - Staged outputs – prioritise delivery of parts of review

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Conclusion: Adapting to policy needs – two essential steps

- Ensuring that review findings are policy relevant and implementable requires
  - **Dialogue** – working closely with policy makers (and other advisors) to understand what they want to know and how they plan to use findings
  - **Adapting review methodology** – thinking creatively/pushing boundaries (whilst maintaining rigour)

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For further information see:

EPPI-Centre website: http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk

And our book!
Gough D, Oliver S, Thomas J (2012)
An Introduction to Systematic Reviews. London: Sage

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an introduction to
SYSTEMATIC REVIEWS

DAVID GOUGH   SANDY OLIVER   JAMES THOMAS
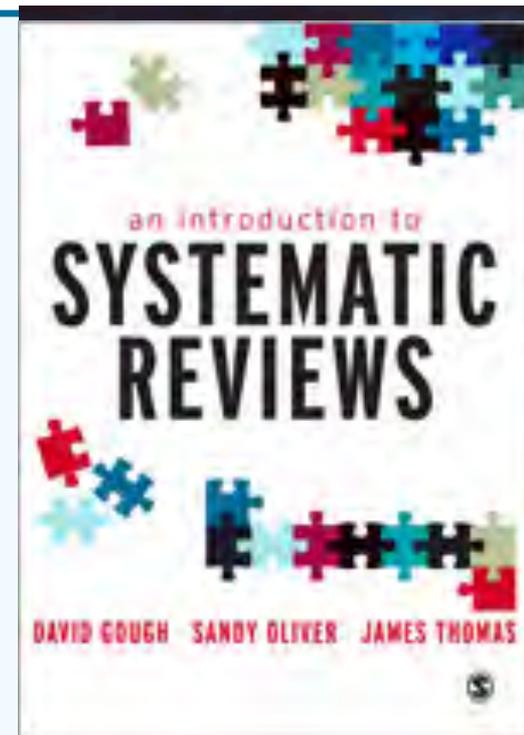
Thank you

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