Six-Step Stakeholder Engagement Framework

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1. Background

Stakeholder engagement in health research is vital to ensure research is relevant, accessible, and useful to end-users. There is growing acceptance that engagement of stakeholders in health research has wide reaching benefits. Examples of these benefits can be seen in **Table 1** below and include improving research quality (Involve, 2013) and relevancy (Kreis et al., 2013), promoting uptake in the use of research in healthcare decision making and reducing research waste (Graham et al., 2018).

Cochrane recognises the importance of stakeholder engagement in health research.

- Cochrane editorial policy states that Cochrane systematic reviews should undergo peer review and have at least one consumer peer review.
- The Cochrane "Guidance note for Cochrane Groups to define systematic review priorities" states that it is mandatory to involve at least one stakeholder in review priority setting exercises (Foxlee et al., 2018).
- In 2018 Cochrane adopted the Statement of Principles for Consumer involvement as Cochrane Policy. Cochrane aims to work closely with consumers to make Cochrane content understandable and accessible worldwide.

This document outlines a Six-Step Stakeholder Engagement Framework, proposed to support Research Groups with stakeholder engagement, regardless of their previous experience.

- We use the term "Research Groups" to represent groups of researchers looking to expand their stakeholder engagement. This may include Groups from within Cochrane, such as Review Groups, Fields, Geographic Groups, and Methods Groups. It may also include researchers from outside of Cochrane, for example based within Universities and healthcare institutions.

- We use the term "stakeholder" to mean "an individual or group who is responsible for, or affected by health- and healthcare-related decisions" (Concannon et al., 2019).

- We use the term "engagement" to mean "an active partnership between stakeholders and researchers in the research process" (Staniszewska et al., 2017).

The Six-Step Stakeholder Engagement Framework has been proposed as a pragmatic process that could be considered when initiating stakeholder engagement in a wide array of projects. Examples include one off events (such as the co-production of systematic review), broader projects (such as the prioritisation of systematic review topics by a Cochrane Review Group), and stakeholder engagement over a sustained period covering several different areas (such as to support the direction or focus of a Research Group and to disseminate research).

We recognise that stakeholder engagement can come with challenges, particularly when resources are limited. However, stakeholder engagement is crucial to offer new perspectives, learning and relevance to health research. In this Framework we are therefore keen to highlight that **there is not a neat 'one size fits all approach' to stakeholder engagement but many ways researchers could engage stakeholders in their work**. In line with this, the Framework aims to cover common and key steps in the engagement process, provide a helpful structure, and raise important considerations for stakeholder engagement, whilst encouraging modifications to be made based on the individual Research Group's circumstance.

The Framework has been produced by Roses Parker and Eve Tomlinson, the Network Support Fellows for the Cochrane Musculoskeletal, Oral, Skin, and Sensory (MOSS) Network and the Cochrane Cancer Network. Development of the Framework was **initiated after realising a need for more support with stakeholder engagement in Cochrane**, following discussions within both the MOSS and Cancer Networks. This Framework is not official Cochrane guidance, and it is not based on a rigorous literature search. However, in conjunction with the experiences of the writers, it has had input from a range of sources, including insights from individuals from

Cochrane Review Groups, individual consumers working with the MOSS Network, the Cochrane Central Executive team, the Cochrane Consumer Network, and the Cochrane Knowledge Translation department. Furthermore, at least one person from the editorial base of each Cochrane Review Group in the MOSS Network was interviewed about their experiences of stakeholder engagement. These case studies are neither all encompassing, nor meant to be a "gold standard" but they are intended to accompany this Framework as a useful resource and can be found here.

The Framework has also been informed by key resources, referenced throughout, such as **the ACTIVE Framework** (Pollock et al., 2019) and accompanying Cochrane resource **Involving People**. ACTIVE was designed to support authors of systematic reviews in stakeholder engagement in review production. Conversely, this Six-Step Stakeholder Engagement Framework is designed to support Research Groups with stakeholder engagement in many areas of functioning, including review production but also in other activities such as the priority setting of review titles or in developing awareness of Cochrane in the relevant academic and clinical area. Nevertheless, the basic principles of stakeholder engagement from the ACTIVE framework apply and we encourage readers to use these resources, in addition to other resources listed in Section 4.

TABLE 1: EXAMPLES OF THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF ENGAGING STAKEHOLDERS

Stakeholder	Potential benefits of increased engagement
Consumers and the public	• Promotes transparency, accountability, and trust in the way that research is produced (Cochrane Consumer Network, 2017). • Results in evidence that addresses consumers' needs (e.g., relevant outcomes identified), reduces waste in research, improves the translation of research into policy and practice, and ultimately leads to improved benefits for health systems and outcomes for patients (Cochrane Consumer Network, 2017). • Is consistent with current health research approaches and is expected or mandated by research funders, partners, and consumers (Cochrane Consumer Network, 2017). • Results in improved awareness of Cochrane evidence among consumers and the public.
Practitioners	• Results in evidence that is relevant to practitioners. • Clinical practice is influenced by the best available evidence. • Practitioners are better able to support patients in treatment decisions. • Improved awareness of Cochrane research among practitioners.
Policy makers and healthcare managers	• Results in evidence that is relevant to policy makers and healthcare managers. • Improved contextualisation of Cochrane evidence so that it can be used in guidelines and policy. • Improved awareness of Cochrane research among policy makers and healthcare managers.
Researchers and research funders	• Results in evidence that is relevant to researchers and research funders. • Primary research that is better designed to fit knowledge gap and research needs. • Increased recruitment of authors, as researchers may choose to publish systematic reviews with Cochrane. • Increased dissemination of Cochrane reviews, leading to increased citations and other measures of reach. • Opportunities for funding of future projects. • Improved awareness of Cochrane research among researchers and research funders.

2. The Six-Step Stakeholder Engagement Framework

The Six-Step Stakeholder Engagement Framework is formatted around the taxonomy from The Cochrane Knowledge Translation Framework (Cochrane, 2017), which describes four types of stakeholder. Note: the definition of policy makers and healthcare managers, and researchers and research funders has been adapted slightly for the purposes of this document, due to this Framework not focusing solely on knowledge translation.

- **Consumers and the public:** those seeking health care, their families and carers, and the public.
- **Practitioners:** of health care including clinicians and public health practitioners.
- **Policy makers and healthcare managers:** individuals and organisations responsible for purchasing healthcare and making higher level decisions about healthcare availability and advice.
- **Researchers and research funders:** those involved in designing, conducting, commissioning, and carrying out research.

The Framework consists of six steps, spanning the process of stakeholder engagement from the planning of engagement (step 1: be clear about the purpose for stakeholder engagement, step 2: reflect on previous stakeholder engagement and consider capacity, step 3: identify relevant stakeholders), to engaging stakeholders (step 4: connect with stakeholders) and considerations following engagement (step 5: report stakeholder engagement, step 6: evaluation and maintenance) (Figure 1).

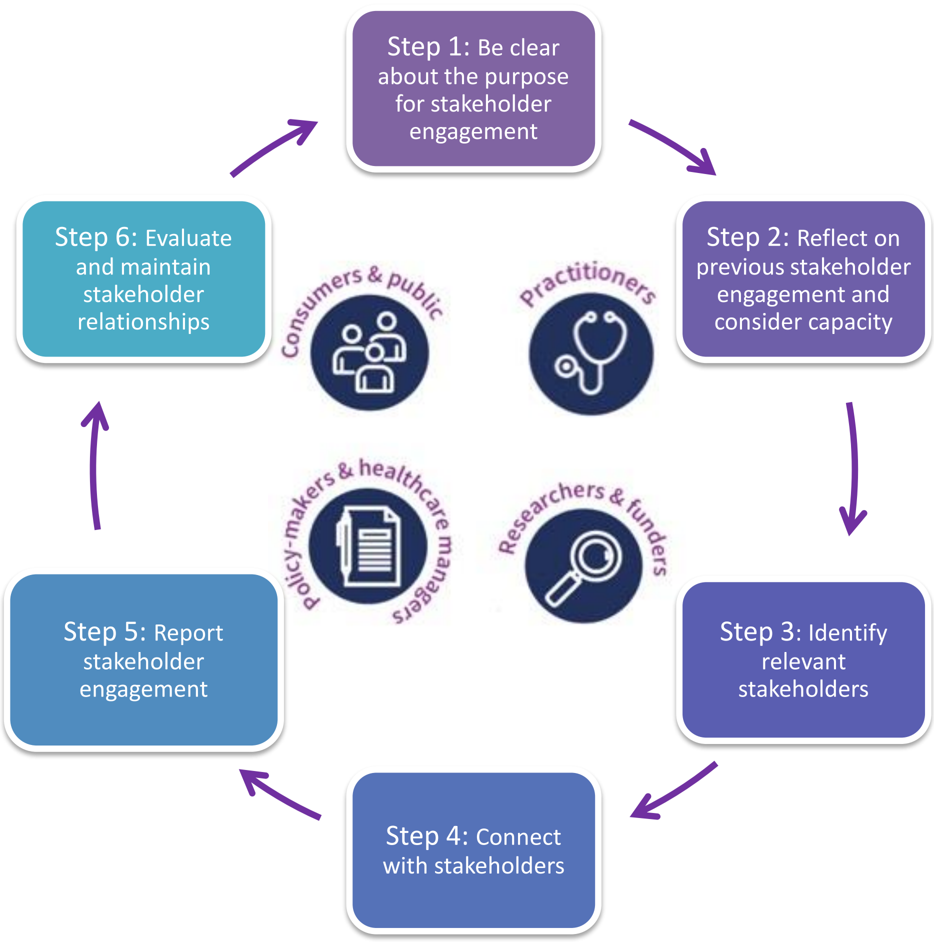

FIGURE 1: SIX STEPS TO STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

2.1 Step One: Be clear about the purpose for stakeholder engagement

In step one, it is important to first be clear about the purpose for stakeholder engagement and to clarify the objective(s) for reaching out to stakeholders. Stakeholder engagement can be beneficial in all research activities and potential benefits are outlined in Table 1. Each project may hold multiple overlapping purposes and further unanticipated benefits may be uncovered as the work progresses. Examples of research activities and projects in which stakeholders could be engaged include:

- Prioritising topics for Cochrane reviews that are important to stakeholders.
- Helping in the production of specific reviews (e.g., co-production or peer review).
- Applying a health equity focus to research production.
- Supporting dissemination/ use of evidence with a specific target audience.
- Developing or running training for specific target audiences.
- Identifying new Cochrane authors with an interest in a specific topic.
- Guiding the Research Group in direction setting for Group activities.
- Funding Research Group activities.
- Creating an "Evidence Ecosystem" (Ravaud et al., 2020) in which the community of clinical trialists, evidence synthesisers, and guideline developers work together to provide a full cycle of evidence.

Further ideas of the purposes of stakeholder engagement and Research Groups' experiences within Cochrane can be found in this report of stakeholder engagement in MOSS CRGs.

In this early step, it is important to think about the potential impact that stakeholder engagement is likely to have on the research project and to be aware that there is the possibility that stakeholder engagement may inadvertently negatively impact on health equity, defined as absence of avoidable and unfair differences in health (Welch et al., 2019), if not intentionally addressed. It is therefore important to keep this in mind when embarking on stakeholder engagement, and throughout the steps in the Framework, to try to ensure that your approach is equitable.

It may be useful to refer to Cochrane's "Involving People" online resource, specifically the module on "general good practice when involving people", in this first step of the stakeholder engagement process. Though the focus of this module is systematic review production, the points covered can be applied more widely. Whilst clarifying your Research Group's purpose for stakeholder engagement, also consider the following two points from the ACTIVE Framework and related Involving People resource:

- What is the desired mode of stakeholder involvement in your work?
    - This refers to the general way in which you want to involve stakeholders in your project. For example, will you approach engagement by seeking one-time stakeholder involvement, continuous involvement or combined (i.e., both one-time and continuous)? Will you seek direct interaction with stakeholders or no direct interaction with stakeholders?
- What is the desired level of stakeholder involvement your work?
    - This refers to the extent to which stakeholders are involved in your work. For example, stakeholder involvement in research can be considered as a continuum with stakeholders leading the project as the highest level of involvement (i.e. lead responsibility for the project), then controlling (i.e. making decision and/or controlling one or more aspects of the project in collaboration with other members), influencing (i.e. advising or providing information but without direct control over decisions), contributing (i.e. providing views, thoughts, feedback, opinions or experiences), then finally receiving (i.e. receiving information about the project or project results) as the lowest level of involvement.

It would also be useful to consider the timing of stakeholder engagement. For example, information gathered from interviewing a sample of five consumers who work with CRGs in the MOSS Network highlighted that some consumers said they would want to be involved right from the beginning, as it may be that they have a differing and useful perspective on what is needed and the purpose of the work. Whereas others might rather wait until the research project had a defined shape.

Overall, as a Research Group, you need to be open to stakeholder input. It is important to take the time to understand your stakeholder's preferences and try to reach a mutual decision with your stakeholders about the desired mode, level, and timing of engagement, whilst also keeping in mind that it may not be necessary to engage all stakeholder groups outlined in Figure 1 in the same way.

2.2 Step Two: Reflect on previous stakeholder engagement and consider capacity

Reflect on previous stakeholder engagement

After outlining the purpose for stakeholder engagement, it may be beneficial to reflect on previous and/or current stakeholder engagement. Considering past successes and challenges will help inform future engagement work. Some questions to consider are:

- What has worked well in previous stakeholder engagement? Did we fulfil our objectives? Was the engagement useful for the Research Group and the stakeholder?
- What have been challenges in previous stakeholder engagement? What could we do differently to maximise impact and use resources effectively?
- Is it important to initiate new stakeholder engagements, or reinitiate partnerships that may have faded?
- Is it possible that past stakeholder engagements have inadvertently added to health inequities, for example by not including a diverse stakeholder group?

Consider capacity

Capacity is likely to vary between individuals in the Research Group and may differ depending on the time of year or other projects currently being undertaken. It is important to be aware of potential limits on your capacity for undertaking stakeholder engagement, to ensure that you can initiate stakeholder engagement, act on stakeholder input and manage the relationships you develop sustainably.

Research Groups should not be discouraged if capacity is low; this Framework is designed to increase stakeholder engagement within current capacity. We encourage you to aim for a level of engagement you can feasibly achieve with the resources you have, learn from the experience, and perhaps try to think about long-term stakeholder engagement goals and plan for funding to achieve them. For example, if you have limited resources you might decide to work with multiple stakeholders but on shorter and less involved partnerships (see Section 2.1 for consideration about levels and approaches to involvement), work with one or two key stakeholders only, or seek partnerships with stakeholders who have the capacity to lead the work or have funding to support you in doing the work. Examples of stakeholder engagement from Research Groups with a range of differing capacities can be found in this report of stakeholder engagement in MOSS CRGs.

When considering capacity, it may also help to anticipate level of impact stakeholder engagement is likely to yield (high, or low) in the research project compared to anticipated level of effort from Research Group and stakeholder for engagement (high, or low). See Table 2 (Mind Tools, 2021). Note that ranking should be based on the specific objectives which stakeholder engagement could produce and stakeholder engagement work should be planned to achieve these results.

TABLE 2: RANKING USING EFFORT AND IMPACT ASSESSMENTS

	High impact	Low impact
High effort	Major project	Time waster
Low effort	Quick win	Fill-in project

2.3 Step Three: Identify relevant stakeholders

Step three of the stakeholder engagement process involves identifying relevant stakeholders to engage in your work. As a Research Group, you will need to make an active effort to identify and engage stakeholders, rather than wait for stakeholders to come to you. This step is likely to differ depending on whether you are aiming to identify individuals to involve in a specific research project or more generally, to identify organisations that may be of relevance to your Group.

When identifying stakeholders, it is first important to consider which broad stakeholder type(s) you want to engage. You can do this by selecting from the stakeholder types outlined in the Cochrane Knowledge Translation Framework (Section 2.1) or from the stakeholder type framework of your choice (Concannon et al., 2019). Whether you want to focus your efforts on one or more stakeholder types will be driven by your collaboration needs and your capacity. There is often overlap between stakeholder types and roles may not be tidy and structured, for example a researcher may also be a patient. If you are aiming to find a stakeholder to represent a certain stakeholder type (e.g., policy makers and healthcare managers), it is important to remember that whilst this can be mutually agreed with the stakeholder, each individual brings a unique set of experiences and cannot be expected to represent all views within a stakeholder group.

It may be useful to consider the following questions in regards to each of the stakeholder types to decide if it is important to involve them in your work (Concannon et al., 2019):

- What decisions do they make?
- How are they affected by your work?
- What is the number of people you would like to and can realistically engage (considering budget)?

Identifying organisations

Once you have decided on the stakeholder types you will involve, you can start to work on finding them! It may be useful to create a “map” or list of specific stakeholders to connect with. Stakeholder mapping can help you to visualise who your key stakeholders are and can be particularly useful if you are aiming to map out organisations. In this instance, you might benefit from gathering details of organisations contributing to relevant guidelines, searching organisation’s websites, and using social media to find out more about their scope, key personnel, and reach. Using this type of “systematic selection” (Haddaway et al., 2017) you can map out relevant organisations into a table or spreadsheet. See Table 3. If stakeholder maps are created, it is important to keep them up to date if they are to be used again, as stakeholder information and relevance of stakeholders to your Research Group is likely to change over time. An example of a stakeholder mapping process using these methods in the Cochrane Cancer Network can be found in Section 4.

TABLE 3: METHODS OF STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFICATION (HADDAWAY ET AL., 2017)

Method of selection	Description
Purposive	Identifying and inviting specific stakeholders based on criteria determined by researchers in relation to the specific project.
Snowballing	Using a list of stakeholders who are then asked to suggest further stakeholders who continue to suggest further stakeholders.
Open call	Using a public forum, often social media, to advertise for stakeholders.
Systematic	Systematic identification of stakeholders mirroring methods to identify research in systematic reviews. This method is least likely to lead to biased stakeholder groups but is resource intensive.

Identifying individuals

If you do not have the resources to complete an in depth identification process, or you are aiming to identify a few key individuals to work with, for example to be involved in a specific one-off project or systematic review, “purposive selection” or the use of known contacts may be useful (Haddaway et al., 2017). See Table 3. You may wish to think about organisations or individuals relevant to your work and speak to colleagues to find mutual connections. If you already have a few stakeholder connections then it may be helpful to reach out to them at this stage - not necessarily to pursue their specific involvement but because they may insights into methods of stakeholder identification you are unaware of and may be able to suggest individuals or organisations you would otherwise not have considered.

Cochrane Review Groups have also found their editors a helpful source of information at this stage and Cochrane's TaskExchange may provide needed capacity (See Section 4 for links to a report of MOSS CRG experiences and TaskExchange). Cochrane’s Involving People resource also gives tips on identifying people to involve in systematic review production. Note: consumers have pointed out to us that it is helpful to involve more than one consumer as there is a lot of pressure being the only one and if someone drops out, it’s hard to catch up partway through. This may be true for other stakeholder groups as well.

Once you have a map of relevant organisations and you want to select representatives from them or you have a list of individuals and want to select the most appropriate individuals to work with, you might find it useful to think about what you are looking for in stakeholders to create a maximally effective researcher-stakeholder team. For example, you may want to consider the stakeholder’s expertise or experience, their communication skills, capacity, motivation, training requirements and equity and diversity in the team. This list is not exhaustive and there is currently ongoing work within the Multi-Stakeholder Engagement (MuSE) Consortium to expand on this stakeholder selection guidance. This will be linked when available.

2.4 Step Four: Connect with stakeholders

Step four involves connecting with stakeholders. This can seem daunting, and it can be difficult to know where to start. However, completing steps 1-3 of this process ensures you are equipped for this stage as you will likely have identified stakeholders, have an accompanying list of objectives you wish to achieve through your engagement, an idea of the mode and level of stakeholder involvement you are seeking (see Section 2.1, and Involving People). Below you will find some tips for connecting with stakeholders.

Seek out your stakeholders

- Consider where you will find your stakeholders and be able to connect with them, rather than waiting for them to come to you. Existing forums may be helpful to use to connect with stakeholders, for example:
    - Mumsnet for UK based parents.
    - Carer forums on Facebook or Instagram. Consider approaching the admin of the group who will have a relationship with the members and can advise on the suitability of your request and practicalities of how to engage their group.
    - Faith based institutions or organisation – these have been used successfully by researchers in the covid-19 pandemic (Koenig, 2020; Merry et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2021; World Health Organisation, 2020).
- Try to think beyond your own context to regions and settings effected by health inequality. Cochrane Geographic Centres may help reach different geographic settings.

Connect with stakeholders

- Consider consulting colleagues to see if there are already existing relationships with the stakeholders you have identified. This may be particularly relevant in the case of organisations. There may be an existing relationship that needs to be understood before approaching.
- Go for it! Start small. It can be daunting but it's good to jump in, whether it's by email, letter or phoning someone up.
- Document your attempts - keeping track of when you have reached out to stakeholders and responses received.
- If you don't get an answer, follow up on your initial correspondence. It is good to be persistent with contact to maximise your chances of getting a response, but after 2 or 3 chasing emails, know when to stop! Don't worry if you don't get a positive response – there may be many reasons why an individual or organisation isn't able to engage with you at this time.
- Be clear from the outset on what the project is, what you are expecting from the stakeholder, what you will offer in return, timelines, and any other relevant information.
- Ensure that what you are proposing offers mutual benefit and be clear about what you are offering and what you want to achieve from the relationship.
- Building rapport is a critical part of the process. It can take a lot of investment to have a meaningful connection. It is important to listen to your stakeholder and find areas where your interests overlap.
- Be flexible with formality. We have heard from consumers in Cochrane that the formality of TaskExchange and the rigid use of technologies like Archie and RevManWeb can be a barrier to engagement. Unless work with Cochrane is a large part of their life, stakeholders may not want to spend the time learning these technologies. Consider whether you can make engagement easier by using Word, PDFs, email, social media platforms or even vlogs. Perhaps your stakeholder would rather just have an informal chat.
- Discuss the mode of involvement (i.e. leading, controlling, influencing, contributing, or receiving) and level of engagement (i.e. continuous involvement, one-time involvement, combined involvement, top and tail involvement) that you wish to adopt in stakeholder involvement (Pollock et al., 2019). Be open about this so you can come to a mutual agreement with your stakeholder.

- Work with your stakeholder to understand how much input they want from you. Some will want to be given a task and left alone, others will appreciate regular check-ins. Ensure you have capacity for their preferred level of engagement. If you lack capacity, consider whether an existing or previous stakeholder can act as a “buddy” for the new stakeholder.
- Be sensitive to the needs of others. This can be particularly crucial when engaging consumers in your work. If you are seeking input from someone with lived experience of a research area, it is important to be aware of possible sensitivities and to talk to people with experience of working with these groups prior to engagement. Talk to the individuals to understand their situation and any adaptions that might be necessary to accommodate their needs. You may need to consider support, training for consumer and team members, compensation. Resources created by the Cochrane Consumer Network, including a guide for authors involving consumers in reviews, may help you and these can be found in Section 5.

Acknowledge stakeholder input and give something back

- Feedback to stakeholders throughout engagement as much as possible. This should include what you have learned from them, what specifically you appreciated, how they have helped.
- Feedback in a timely fashion and keep them informed just as you would members of your own team.
- Feedback in an understandable way. Consider your language, presentation, and format.
- If you have offered certificates, badges, membership points, or any other notional or material reimbursement, ensure this is provided. Do not leave it to the stakeholder to chase you on this.

Quick wins if capacity is low

Note: these quick wins all have limitations and should not be a substitute for carefully considered stakeholder engagement. It is important to stress that tokenism in stakeholder engagement can be damaging.

- **Leveraging existing relationships:** Check to see if colleagues have existing relationships with relevant committees/ professional organisations/ academic institutions/ individuals. It may be appropriate to ask colleagues for contact details or an introduction to personalise your contact and give you a direct route into an organisation.
- **Events:** Network at events (even online events) to connect with stakeholders. If you are trying to link in with an organisation, talk to people at events to find connections. They may not be the right people, but it is likely that they will know of the right people to contact.
- **Cochrane TaskExchange (https://taskexchange.cochrane.org/):** Cochrane's TaskExchange platform "connects people working in health evidence with people who have the time and skills to help". This can help connect with stakeholders, especially consumers, on several projects including prioritisation, translation, and review production.
- **Peer review:** Most CRGs regularly use peer/consumer reviewers. These individuals may be able to help in other ways such as dissemination or providing introduction to other stakeholders.
- **Social media:** Social media is increasingly important for healthcare users (Pershad et al., 2018). One potential platform, Twitter, has 330 million monthly active users (Lin, 2019) and therefore provides a unique opportunity and resource for stakeholder engagement. Tagging charities, organisations, and key individuals in Tweets can be a helpful way to increase awareness in your work. Doing blogs or running TweetChats can further increase your profile and engagement. If capacity is low, consider recruiting a social media champion, (perhaps via task exchange), to manage your engagement this way. Another option if capacity is low is to try to attend a TweetChat run by someone else rather than organising one yourself. Note that the principles of relationship and rapport building apply to social media as well; your efforts will be far more successful if you use it strategically and build an online community.
- **Registering as a stakeholder with guideline developers:** Large guideline developer organisations have capacity to sign up as a stakeholder, which offers the opportunity to

2.5 Step Five: Report stakeholder engagement

Step five of the stakeholder engagement process involves reporting stakeholder engagement. Transparent reporting of stakeholder engagement is crucial to ensure fair acknowledgement of stakeholder time and effort. After ensuring permission is sought, stakeholders can be acknowledged via co-authorship of publications, documentation in methods of reports, or mentioning within acknowledgements sections of publications (Haddaway et al., 2017).

Reporting of stakeholder engagement also allows evaluation of stakeholder engagement. Future stakeholder engagement work may benefit from previous reporting, as it will allow you to critically assess impact and success. Reporting of stakeholder engagement also enhances the evidence base of stakeholder engagement in research and provides resources, examples, and encouragement to other researchers.

The GRIPP2 reporting checklist (Staniszewska et al., 2017) provides guidance for reporting patient and public involvement (PPI) in research including key PPI concepts that authors should consider in publications and reports to improve quality and transparency of the PPI evidence base. It is useful to consider all items though it may not be necessary to report every item. Though tailored for PPI in research, this checklist may also be useful when working with other stakeholders.

More specific to systematic review production but likely applicable across projects, the ACTIVE framework (Pollock et al., 2019) gives useful guidance about reporting consumer involvement in systematic reviews. Pollock and colleagues posit that key components of stakeholder engagement for review authors to report include information about who was involved, methods of recruitment, mode of involvement, the stage in the review process in which stakeholders were involved, and the level of involvement.

Note that reporting does not need to be via publications. Although publications are important for the academic community, it may help to use less formal methods such as social media, infographics, or newsletters.

2.6 Step Six: Evaluate and maintain stakeholder relationships

Important learnings can be gained from evaluating whether a stakeholder relationship has achieved the objective originally intended. Having clearly defined the purpose for engagement in Section 2.1, outlined the specific objectives for engagement with each stakeholder in Section 2.3, and reported engagement Section 0, you are then able to develop ways of understanding whether your objectives have been met.

Evaluative indicators need not be complex. Regular and informal feedback from the stakeholder may be sufficient to understand whether both parties feel engagement is working. It is helpful to ensure that your stakeholders know you are open to receiving feedback and for you to be aware of subtle expressions of uncertainty which may indicate discontentment in your stakeholder. Note that some stakeholders may be eager to feedback, but for others they would rather not. You will need to work with your stakeholder to identify their preference for this step and may want to consider finding ways of gathering feedback whilst providing anonymity or without the need for blame.

The following questions may be useful to consider:

- Has the engagement added value to your work?
- Is it sustainable?
- Has it been deemed successful by your stakeholders?
- What difference did it make?
- Has the engagement resulted in mutual learning?
- What did it change?
- Has the engagement had a positive impact on health inequity?

More formal evaluation can be conducted through widely used evaluation techniques such as focus groups, semi-structured interviews, or surveys (Esmail et al., 2015). This may be useful to evaluate the stakeholder engagement process itself. Beware of the potential for moving from involvement to research, at which point issues such as ethics and research governance need to be considered (Hoddinott et al., 2018). If there is a desire to do a more formal evaluation, there are several resources which have suggested domains and indicators that may be useful to consider:

- Cochrane Knowledge Translation Resources: 3-part webinar series and related resources exploring evaluation of knowledge translation projects: https://training.cochrane.org/resource/evaluating-knowledge-translation-part-1.

- The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) guidance on co-production (Johns and Paylor, 2018) identifies five key principles of co-production that should be demonstrated when co-producing a research project: sharing of power, including all perspectives and skills, respecting and valuing the knowledge of all those working together on the research, reciprocity, building and maintaining relationships. The following resource suggests approaches and tools for evaluating the impact of co-producing research: https://www.invo.org.uk/posttypepublication/guidance-on-co-producing-a-research-project/

- Esmail *et al.* (2015) posit four considerations for researchers including: 1) establishing an evaluative framework or set of criteria for engagement prior to research activity (in conjunction with stakeholders); 2) using predefined, validated tools where possible to evaluate stakeholder engagement; 3) conducting evaluations at continuous or regularly scheduled intervals throughout the process; 4) involving external evaluators and documenting the context and process of engagement as part of the evaluation.

Stakeholder engagement cannot continue without maintenance. If you wish to maintain stakeholder relationships then being clear about timelines, responsibilities from both sides of the relationship, and how the relationship will be managed can help. If a relationship is working well and there are plans to continue working together, then you may want to consider making it a formal partnership, which may require a more formal memorandum of understanding or contract. A template for this along with further resources can be found here.

In contrast, it is also useful to remember that people may change roles or leave companies, and the research landscape changes quickly too, therefore it might be that some partnerships are not necessary to continue. In some instances, it is important to move on, look up, and consider what is next. In line with this, consumers told us that the cyclical nature of this Framework is important to them. Priorities for researchers and stakeholders will change over time, therefore as exemplified in Figure 1 it is useful to view the stakeholder engagement process as an ongoing cycle. It is important to remember that Step One follows Step Six, as every project has potential value for the next project.

3. Conclusion

Effective stakeholder engagement has potential to transform both the conduct of research and its application. It may increase the extent to which evidence is trusted and used, which could result in end-users, such as patients and healthcare professionals, making more informed decisions and ultimately lead to better health.

This Six-Step Stakeholder Engagement Framework is intended to support Research Groups with the process of stakeholder engagement, from planning and connecting with stakeholders, through to reporting, evaluating, and maintaining stakeholder engagement. It does not mean to suggest that all six steps must be completed to successfully engage stakeholders. In contrast, it encourages modifications to be made based on the individual Research Group's objectives and resources.

Overall, it is hoped that this Framework has the potential to assist Research Groups with stakeholder engagement by raising useful considerations and signposting to helpful tools, thus improving stakeholder engagement, and enhancing the relevancy and usability of health research.

4. Resources

Stakeholder engagement frameworks

- **ACTIVE Framework:** Framework to describe stakeholder engagement in systematic reviews.

- **A Framework for Stakeholder Engagement during Systematic Reviews and Maps in Environmental Management –** Framework to describe stakeholder engagement in systematic reviews and maps in the field of environmental management.

- **Business for Social Responsibility Stakeholder Engagement Framework –** Framework for stakeholder engagement rooted in the field of business.

Case studies of stakeholder engagement in Cochrane

- **Stakeholder engagement experiences from the CRGs in the Musculoskeletal, Oral, Skin and Sensory (MOSS) Network –** Report by the MOSS Network containing information gathered from interviews with MOSS CRGs detailing examples of stakeholder engagement.

- **Case studies of partnerships in Cochrane –** Cochrane Knowledge Translation department web page featuring case studies of partnerships in Cochrane

- **Identifying stakeholders using stakeholder mapping in Cochrane Cancer –** Cochrane Community blog-post outlining a stakeholder mapping project conducted within the Cochrane Cancer Network.

Online interactive resources and webinars

- **Cochrane Involving People online learning resource** – Online Involving People resource for systematic review authors and editors to support them in getting people involved in the production of systematic reviews (including Cochrane consumers: patients, their families and carers, as well as other members of the public; and health care teams). Open access – just sign up with a free Cochrane account.

- **Cochrane Consumer Training**: A collection of training resources for those who want to involve consumers in the production of systematic reviews.

- **Guidelines International Network (GIN) PUBLIC Toolkit –** The GIN PUBLIC Toolkit aims to support effective public and patient involvement in the development and implementation of clinical practice guidelines. It gives a forum for communication between patient and public organisations, guideline developers and researchers.

- **International Network for Patient and Public Involvement Webinars:** Webinar series about involvement of consumers in research.

Relevant Cochrane Groups and resources

- **Cochrane Formalising Strategic Partnerships Working Group** – This Working Group supports the partnership of Cochrane Groups as needed, in an advisory capacity. The Group has developed a guidance note to support Cochrane Groups in partnership development.

- **Cochrane Consumer Network –** The Cochrane Consumer Network is a body of patients, carers and members of the public based in 79 countries, who contribute to the work of Cochrane's Review Groups and Centres. The Consumer Network has developed a brief guide for review authors about involving consumers in Cochrane reviews and a statement of guiding principles relating to consumer involvement. For further help and advice on this, the Network is open for contact using consumers@cochrane.org.

- **Cochrane Knowledge Translation Resources –** Resources addressing how knowledge translation is being adopted across Cochrane, including case studies of partnerships in Cochrane, evaluation tools to find out whether research has an impact, and tips on working with policy makers.

- **Cochrane Conflict of Interest Policy –** Cochrane's Conflict of Interest Policy is accessible here.

- **Cochrane Partnership Policy –** Official Cochrane Partnership Policy which provides definitions and guidance for Cochrane Groups interested in working with external partners. Last updated February 2016.

- **Cochrane Memorandum of Understanding template –** A template developed by Cochrane for a Memorandum of Understanding is accessible here.

- **Cochrane TaskExchange** – A website connecting people working in health evidence with people who have the time and skills to help. Cochrane TaskExchange allows you to browse a list of experts when you need help with a research project, let people know what you are looking for and when you need it and find a task that matches your expertise and availability.

- **Priority Setting Guidance Note for Cochrane Groups –** Guidance Note developed by Cochrane outlining mandatory and highly desirable standards for research priority setting. As of March 2021, engaging with at least one stakeholder group is a mandatory standard.

Other resources

- **GRIPP2 reporting stakeholder engagement tool –** This reporting checklist by Staniszewska and colleagues (2017) gives guidance for reporting of patient and public involvement in health and social care research.

- **Stakeholder analysis** - A stakeholder analysis matrix template is available from Tools4Development. Likewise, this planning tool developed by MEASURE Evaluation at McMaster University aims to support groups in stakeholder analysis and engagement.

- **Practical Guidance for Involving Stakeholders in Health Research –** In this paper Concannon et al outline guidance for stakeholder engagement, including a comparison of the different frameworks available for identifying stakeholder types and guidance on appropriate roles and modes of engagement.

- **Effective communication with policy makers –** The Bennet Institute for Public Policy, Cambridge, has created a guide for academics about how to communicate effectively with policy makers. In 2020, University College London launched an open access 4-part Public Policy Engagement Masterclass Series, offering researchers skills for effective academic-policy engagement.

- **DynaMed** – DynaMed aims to provide useful and accurate evidence-based content to healthcare professionals at the point of care to improve health outcomes worldwide.

- **EvidenceAlerts** –EvidenceAlerts is an internet service that notifies physicians and researchers about newly-published clinical studies.

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