Introduction
These guidelines have been prepared for people who have agreed to provide peer review comments on a Protocol for a systematic review being prepared within the Cochrane Eyes and Vision Group.

What is the Cochrane Eyes and Vision Group?
The Cochrane Eyes and Vision Group is part of the international Cochrane Collaboration. The Group aims to prepare high quality systematic reviews on the effects of interventions used to prevent or treat eye diseases or visual impairment. The editorial base for the group, located at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, co-ordinates and supports the preparation of systematic reviews by authors all over the world. These high quality reviews are published on The Cochrane Library, an electronic journal published quarterly on CD-ROM and on the Internet that contains a number of databases relevant to evidence based medicine. You can find out more about the Collaboration at www.cochrane.org and about the Eyes and Vision Group at http://www.cochraneeyes.org.

What are Cochrane systematic reviews?
Cochrane reviews use systematic methods to locate, appraise and summarise evidence from controlled trials regarding the effectiveness of health care interventions. The reviews are contained in structured reports that are published on the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews on The Cochrane Library. The first step of the review process is to prepare a protocol for the review.

What is the purpose of the Protocol?
Preparing a review is a complex process that comprises many judgements, as well as decisions about the process and the resources needed. As in any scientific endeavour, the methods to be used should be established beforehand. However, reviews are by their nature, retrospective, since the studies included are usually identified after they have been completed and reported. Therefore, it is important to make the process as rigorous and well defined as possible while maintaining a practical perspective. A protocol for a systematic review should describe the rationale for the review; the objectives; and the methods that will be used to locate, select and critically appraise studies; and to collect and analyse data from the included studies.

What is the purpose of peer review?
All Cochrane protocols and reviews are reviewed by peer reviewers prior to publication. Peer reviewers are people with relevant content, methodological or user expertise, who critically examine reviews in their area of expertise. The aim of this process is to check the quality and importance of the planned review. Peer reviewers’ comments are forwarded to the review author so that the protocol can be amended where necessary, before it is sent for publication. Once the protocol is finalised, work begins on the review itself. When the review is completed the peer review process begins again.

How to return your comments
The remainder of this document gives more detailed information about the sections that are included in a protocol for a Cochrane review. We ask you to refer to this while reviewing the protocol. We are particularly interested in your comments on the proposed scope and content of the review. However, you are welcome to comment on the proposed methods for the review.

We would be grateful if you could separate your comments into general comments (that do not require any changes to be made) and specific comments for changes to the protocol that are required or suggested. It would also be helpful if you could number these into separate points. Please return your comments in an e-mail to Anupa Shah (cevg@lshtm.ac.uk) or by post/fax to Anupa Shah, ICEH, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, Keppel Street, London WC1E 7HT, UK. Fax +44 (0)20 7958 8325.
SECTIONS OF A PROTOCOL FOR A COCHRANE REVIEW

Cover sheet
The cover sheet includes general information about the review including:

Title: The title should succinctly state the focus of the review. It should make clear the intervention(s) reviewed and the problem at which the intervention is directed.

Date next stage expected: to inform readers when they can expect the completed review to be available.

Contact author: This should be the contact details for the person to whom correspondence about the review should be addressed. Co-authors: This should contain the contact details for any co-authors on the review.

Contributions: The names and contribution of all individuals who have contributed to a Cochrane Review should be described in this section. One contributor should be identified as the guarantor of the review.

List of authors for citation: This can be considered the ‘byline’ for Cochrane reviews.

Sources of support to the review: Review authors should give details of grants that supported the review and other forms of support, such as support from their university or institution in the form of a salary.

TEXT OF THE PROTOCOL
The text of the protocol should be as succinct as possible. The target audience for Cochrane Reviews is people making decisions about healthcare. This includes healthcare professionals, consumers and policy makers with a basic understanding of the underlying disease or problem. It should therefore be written so that someone who is not an expert in the area can understand it.

Background: The review should begin with a brief synthesis of the underlying biology and healthcare of the topic being reviewed. This background should make clear the motivation and rationale for the review. It should be presented in a fashion that is understandable to the consumers of that healthcare.

Objectives: This should begin with a precise statement of the primary objective of the review, including the intervention(s) reviewed and the targeted problem. It might also mention why this review was undertaken and how it might relate to a wider review of a general problem. Any prior hypotheses should be stated and the comparisons that are made in the review should be consistent with these. If a review addresses more than one hypothesis and includes several comparisons, the comparisons should be grouped for each hypothesis or question.

Criteria for considering studies for this review: The criteria used to select studies for inclusion in the review should be stated. Types of studies (e.g. ‘all randomised controlled comparisons’ or ‘all double blind randomised controlled trials’), types of participants, types of interventions and types of outcome measures are subheadings in this section.

Search strategy for identification of studies: The data sources used to identify studies should be summarised, including bibliographic databases, reference lists from pertinent articles and books, conference proceedings and personal contact with experts or organisations active in the area. The databases searched, the date they were searched and the terms used should be stated, including any constraints, such as language. If journals were specifically handsearched for the review this should be noted. Any additional data sources used should be listed, including any contacts made with individuals or organisations (including pharmaceutical companies) to identify studies.

Methods of the review: This should include the method used to apply the selection criteria, the criteria used to assess the quality of studies and how they were applied, how data were obtained, how the data were synthesised, and any statistical techniques used and sensitivity analyses performed.

Acknowledgements: This section should be used to acknowledge any individuals or organisations that the authors wish to acknowledge but who have not made a sufficient contribution to the review to be included in the Contributions section.

Conflict of interest: Any conflict of interest capable of influencing the judgements of any of the authors should be reported, including financial, personal, political or academic conflicts. If there are no conflicts of interest, this should be stated explicitly, e.g. by reporting ‘None’.