

End-Term Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25

Final Report

October 2025



The Commonwealth

EVALUATION SERIES 126

End-Term Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25

Final Report
October 2025



The Commonwealth

Prepared by Aleph Strategies

© Commonwealth Secretariat 2026

All rights reserved. This publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or otherwise provided it is used only for educational purposes and is not for resale, and provided full acknowledgement is given to the Commonwealth Secretariat as the original publisher.

Views and opinions expressed in this publication are the responsibility of the author and should in no way be attributed to the institutions to which they are affiliated or to the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Wherever possible, the Commonwealth Secretariat uses paper sourced from responsible forests or from sources that minimise a destructive impact on the environment.

Published by the Commonwealth Secretariat.

Contents

Acronyms and Abbreviations	vi
Executive Summary	1
1. The Assignment	6
1.1 Context	6
1.2 Purpose and scope	6
2. The Review	7
2.1 Approach	7
2.2 Limitations	8
3. Key Findings: Review of Programmes	9
3.1 Democracy and Governance	9
3.2 Sustainable Development	10
3.3 Resilience and Climate Action	11
3.4 Small and Other Vulnerable States	12
3.5 Cross-Cutting Outcomes	13
4. Key Findings: Organisational Review	14
4.1 Added value of the Secretariat	14
4.2 Ministerial Meetings and forums	15
4.3 Partnerships	15
4.4 Governance and strategic prioritisation	16
4.5 Funding model	17
4.6 Theory of Change and strategic change pathways	17
4.7 Monitoring, evaluation and learning	18
5. Conclusions and Recommendations	20
5.1 Embedding reform	20
5.2 Recommendations	21
Appendix A: An Overview of the Strategic Plan	23
Appendix B: Methodology	26

Appendix C: Table C1: The Matrix	28
Appendix D: Table D1: Case studies	47
Endnotes	56
Management Response and Action Plan	63

Figures

Figure 4.1: CHOGM attendance by Heads of Government	15
Figure 5.1: Key challenges	20
Figure A1: Contributions (paid) received between 2021/22 and 2024/25 (GBP millions)	23
Figure A2: Year to date actual income breakdown between 2021/22 and 2024/25 (GBP millions)	23
Figure A3: Year to date distribution of cumulative expenditure on programme outcomes vs general overheads	24
Figure A4: Cumulative direct expenditure per outcome between 2021/22 and 2024/25	24
Figure A5: Human resources structure and accountability lines	25

Tables

Table 1.1: The assignment	6
Table 2.1: Limitations and mitigation measures	8
Table 4.1: Amity	14
Table 4.2: Year-to-date expenditure on programme outcomes vs general overhead costs (£ million)	18

Acronyms and Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ASG	Assistant Secretary-General
CTU	Caribbean Telecommunications Union
CCA	Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda
CEN	Commonwealth Electoral Network
CEP	Commonwealth Elections Professionals initiative
CFTC	Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation
CHOGM	Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting
CMAG	Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group
COP	Conference of the Parties
CSSO	Commonwealth Small States Office
CYP	Commonwealth Youth Programme
DDF	Democracy Dedicated Fund
DSG	Deputy Secretary-General
EBRs	Extra-Budgetary Resources
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
MEL	monitoring, evaluation and learning
MTR	Mid-Term Review
OSF	Open Society Foundation
SADC	Southern African Development Community
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SG	Secretary-General
SPPDD	Strategy, Portfolio, Partnership and Digital Division
ToC	Theory of Change
UK	United Kingdom
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
US	United States

Executive Summary

Overall findings

Aleph finds the Secretariat to be a unique and valuable organisation. It has something that others do not have – genuine amity, based on high-level trusting relationships and complete neutrality. By and large, it has been using this advantage to deliver real change, especially for member countries in difficulty and for its many small-sized and vulnerable members.

Yet, in its efforts to serve in the face of dwindling resources, the Secretariat has struggled to deliver across its broad portfolio. It now needs to reprioritise according to its strengths. This may include shifting the balance between what the Secretariat enables and what it implements itself. There is also considerable scope for organisational improvement and modernisation. Mounting pressures on funding, and on the multilateral approach generally, mean that the Secretariat must be in the best possible shape if it is to serve the Commonwealth's needs.

Embedding the necessary reforms means a change in the culture of the organisation. This will require no less inspiring and determined leadership than the Secretariat has displayed in the past. The impressive commitment to the Commonwealth

vision, shown by staff at all levels, must now be applied just as passionately to the corporate push for best performance.

Contributions of the 2021/22–2024/25 Strategic Plan

Aleph's Review confirmed positive outcomes across all five pillars (covering no fewer than 45 individual projects). It found a reasonable expectation of impact in most of the programme work it sampled. However, resource-related difficulties were evident across the board, and had led to some lapses and delays. Aleph also found, as did the Mid-Term Review, flaws in the Secretariat's approach to measuring the actual outcomes of its programmes on the ground. These flaws make it difficult to assess real progress using management information alone.

Looking in turn at all five pillars on which the Strategic Plan was constructed:

Democracy and Governance

- Impressive progress has been made in advancing Commonwealth values and good governance across a diverse range

Good practices	Lessons
<p>Good Offices work played a pivotal role in fostering the top-level trust and access that underpin the Secretariat's comparative advantage. This quiet diplomacy pays dividends in engaging the Secretariat to engage effectively in political contexts across the board.</p>	<p>Many challenges owing to inadequate resourcing → Need to define more realistic ambitions</p>
	<p>Slowness to tackle grave operational difficulties → Need to address wider Secretariat problems in defining and monitoring unsatisfactory progress</p>
	<p>Good Offices outcomes and wider benefits not well understood within the Secretariat → Need to promote comparative advantage strategically, also to pursue opportunities, e.g. for even greater targeting of interventions using available intelligence from external partners</p>
	<p>Possibly untapped potential to strengthen the Secretariat's influence in UN human rights mechanisms → Need to amplify the Commonwealth's profile and impact through the CSSO and expert networks</p>

Good practices	Lessons
<p>A strategic (and historical) positioning on climate action through sustained advocacy and agenda-setting demonstrates capacity to advance thinking on biodiversity and climate across the membership – leveraging influence through positioning rather than funding. This shows pay-off even in the absence of major financial investment.</p>	<p>Risk of an unmanaged 'expectation gap' → Need to align ambitions with available resources and clearly distinguished from the roles of other actors</p>
	<p>Contested areas of thought-leadership and influence → Need to develop a strong impact narrative and clear methods of attribution to demonstrate value</p>

of countries, especially through the Secretariat's Good Offices function and legal expertise.

- The Secretariat has played a critical role in reducing tensions/driving reforms, for example in Brunei Darussalam, Eswatini, Lesotho and Sierra Leone.
- Progress is uneven, often because of chronic resource constraints. Targets related to rule of law frameworks and youth have lagged, and most election reports were very late; some were not released into the public domain.

Sustainable Development

- Notable outcomes have been achieved with regard to sustainable development, including legislative reforms in health and finance; digital trade capacity in small states, expanded use of the Commonwealth Meridian debt system and targeted support to women entrepreneurs and smaller enterprises.

- Scalability and long-term impact remain areas for continued focus.

Resilience and Climate Action

- The relatively new Secretariat flagship of resilience and climate action has added value and advanced thinking on climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.
- Important initiatives, such as the Blue Charter, the Commonwealth Sustainable Energy Transition Agenda and the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub, have supported policy reform and capacity-building, and mobilised approximately US\$500 million in climate finance – with particular benefit to small and vulnerable states.
- However, constraints on resources and operational capacity have tended to fragment follow-through and hold back deeper, more sustained, impact on the ground.

Good practices	Lessons
<p>Ministerial meetings and strong partnerships leveraged with UN agencies further extend the Secretariat's reach.</p>	<p>Underdeveloped reporting framework limits the ability to track contributions and communicate achievements → Need to strengthen this framework for clearer results and enhanced accountability</p>
	<p>Commonwealth Connective Agenda case study showed that discontinuation of some support (e.g. peer learning grants) reduced ability to foster synergies between members, and limited technical engagement → Need to take account of wider strategic impacts in making economies</p>
	<p>Concerns about risks to institutional memory → Need to guard against reliance on consultants without building internal capacity</p>

Good practices	Lessons
<p>Tailored technical support has enabled small states to advance concrete reforms; a direct response to national priorities and constraints boosts the chances of reforms being implemented and sustained.</p>	<p>Uneven confidence in the impact of the Secretariat's work for small and vulnerable states → Need more meaningful high-level indicators to provide systematic evidence, e.g. sustainable capacity enlargement in assisted areas.</p> <p><i>This observation applies generally to the Secretariat's current metrics for cross-cutting and catalytic outcomes.</i></p> <p>Small States Office model has proven effective but requires longer-term funding arrangements to ensure predictability and sustainability → Need to reform funding model</p>

Small and Other Vulnerable States

- Strong strides have been made in elevating small and vulnerable states' concerns in global governance, with Secretariat initiatives evidencing real influence in global policy discussion plus concrete help on debt management and climate change engagement.
- The Small States Office in Geneva has raised the game on human rights and trade policy for small and vulnerable states.

level commitments on gender were reinforced at Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM) and Women's Affairs Ministers Meetings and in Secretariat strategy documents.

- Commonwealth countries score high on youth civic and political engagement.
- However, gaps in disaggregated data make it difficult to assess performance on the ground.

Cross-Cutting Outcomes

- Institutional capacity-building initiatives have targeted both gender and youth cross-cutting priorities. The Year of Youth put in place by Heads of Government boosted the profile of youth in Secretariat programming, and high-

Organisational issues

The Secretariat occupies a distinctive niche in the multilateral landscape, marked by trust-based diplomacy, neutrality and its ability to convene member countries around shared values. Its small size and flexible systems allow for nimble responses – particularly valued by small states – while its amity-based relationships provide high-level access,

Good practices	Lessons
<p>Policy priorities and targeted institutional capacity-building advanced gender and youth agendas (e.g. SheTrades, gender-responsive budgeting in Lesotho and Mauritius and professionalisation of youth work in six member countries). Capacity-building tailored to local needs has again been shown to generate sustainable policy impact (see Small States and Other Vulnerable States, above).</p>	<p>'Divergence between rhetoric and reality' of gender equality policies → Need a strong focus on results as well as clear leadership and accountability to bear down on such scepticism</p>
<p>Embedding cross-cutting priorities into core programmes can ensure they are not treated as stand-alone issues but become part of the broader institutional agenda while also strengthening inclusivity and legitimacy (e.g. gender and youth in the Climate Finance Access Hub, the Living Lands Call to Action and the Blue Charter Incubator).</p>	<p>Uneven internal environment for embedding gender and youth mainstreaming initiatives → Need to tackle working culture and cross-directorate co-ordination</p>

discretion and moral authority. These relationships, key to the Secretariat's success, are not easily replicated by larger treaty-based institutions.

Yet, the Secretariat's strengths come with some long-standing structural and strategic weaknesses. Prioritisation processes have lacked transparency and consistency, with CHOGM mandates and member country requests inconsistently integrated into planning and resourcing. Partnerships are widespread but can be transactional or donor-driven, showing limited alignment with a shared delivery model. Internally, lack of connectivity between results frameworks, programme delivery and institutional learning hampers adaptive management and weakens strategic accountability.

Governance mechanisms are not optimal. The relationship with the Board of Governors has been underutilised: Board meetings have not provided a structured forum for effective oversight or potentially valuable feedback, including political insights. This has contributed to a sense of limited ownership, accountability and visibility for results.

Human resource management also presents some long-standing issues, compounding the challenges. Staff performance is insufficiently linked to the delivery of outcomes, and reliance in some areas on short-term consultants may threaten institutional memory and sustainability. The absence of clear performance standards, especially in relation to programme leadership, and the lack of a unified responsibility framework detract from the transparency and results-based leadership the Secretariat is striving to achieve.

Key issues going forward

Reforms, such as the Theory of Change, introduced at the start of the Strategic Plan period – and recently overhauled for the new Strategic Plan, – have indicated growing recognition of the need for institutional renewal. In addition, immediately prior to this Review, the incoming Secretary-General put in place a major work of reform. This reflected her agenda as well as calls for reform from the Secretariat's Board and other stakeholders. Aleph's Review has advanced in parallel with this work and aims, as far as is possible, to complement it.

The Review report focuses on the key challenges that need addressing to drive necessary reforms and help bring about the change in culture that will make them everyone's priority:

- The Board is poorly positioned to exercise meaningful governance and accountability.
- The Secretariat has been spread too thinly.
- The comparative advantage of amity has lacked strategic focus.
- Staff performance management has been underdeveloped and un-strategic.
- Specifications of Directors' duties as senior responsible owners of major projects fall short of mandated standards for effective governance, accountability and delivery.
- The Theory of Change and the monitoring, evaluation and learning systems do not make a real difference to most staff.
- The Secretariat's funding and financial systems are not fit for purpose.

Recommendations

The Review of Programmes identifies good practices and lessons looking forward. In addition, Aleph makes 16 specific recommendations addressed to top management. These are aimed at driving forward the change in organisational culture that is needed if the Secretariat is to thrive. There are five main categories; the first three are for immediate action and implementation and the latter two will require substantial further preparatory work.¹

As soon as possible

1. The Secretary-General should work with the Board to change the culture so that funders have genuine oversight of the Secretariat's work and are meaningfully engaged in its development. The recommendations include: engaging the Board meaningfully in systematic prioritisation, project deferral and scaling; and establishing small ongoing thematic groups for dialogue between reporting cycles – addressing challenges, opportunities and risks.
2. The Deputy Secretary-General of Corporate Affairs and the Deputy Secretary-General of Programmes should work together to turbo-charge the culture of programme management and corporate responsibility, and to empower managers to manage. The recommendations include: clarifying

and unifying the responsibilities and accountabilities of programme managers and directors in light of **mandated international functional standards** for programme management; and ensuring programme leaders have devolved to them much greater financial and decision-making autonomy, in line with best practice.

3. The Deputy Secretary-General of Corporate Affairs should, in liaison with the Deputy Secretary-General of Programmes, build a genuinely useful culture of learning so that the Secretariat can adapt, and improve continuously, in a fast-changing global context. The recommendations include: repositioning monitoring and evaluation as more adaptive and learning-oriented; standardising how teams verify results across Verto and other platforms; and enhancing the Theory of Change as a contribution-based model.
5. The Deputy Secretary-General of Corporate Affairs should modernise the Secretariat's funding and financial systems and make them fit for purpose. The recommendations include: overhauling and rationalising funding arrangements; upgrading the accounting system to match or exceed standards in peer multilaterals; and a major push to remedy the current disjunct between planning and budgeting cycles.

Requiring more substantial efforts

4. The Deputy Secretary-General of Programmes should put in place the foundations of a much stronger performance-based management culture, boosting visibility, accountability and performance and facilitating a more productive relationship with Board members. The recommendations include: a new and unified high-level performance dashboard or platform for Senior Management and the Board (integrating programme, financial and risk data and aiming at active monitoring, learning and decision-making); and pay-related performance agreements for Senior Directors and above, as well as a new performance management framework for all staff, based on the Generally Accepted Performance Principles approved by Commonwealth member countries.

1. The Assignment

Table 1.1: The assignment

Assignment title	End-Term Review of the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25 and Organisational Review
Requesting office	Strategy, Portfolio, Partnership and Digital Division of the Commonwealth Secretariat
Point of contact	Olivia Geymond
Primary audience	The Secretariat's Board, Secretary-General and senior management Potentially of significant interest to member countries, partners and stakeholders
Assignment type	End-term external perspective on process and performance, drawing upon fresh data and insights from a range of primary sources and with reference to future strategy and priorities as well as to the Secretariat's value proposition. Final report not to exceed 20 narrative pages
Start date	1 May 2025
End date	30 September 2025

1.1 Context

The Commonwealth Secretariat is the central institution and intergovernmental agency of the Commonwealth of Nations.² Headed by a Secretary-General (SG) and guided by the Commonwealth Charter and the Memorandum of Governance Arrangements, it facilitates collaboration between members, including biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGM).^{3,4,5} It also provides technical assistance to member countries, reflecting their evolving needs and agreed mandates as well as the values and aspirations in the Commonwealth Charter.

The Secretariat programmes its work as multi-year strategic plans, setting out priorities in light of the funds made available to it and in line with strategic directions approved by the Board of Governors. The four-year plan under this Review implemented a portfolio of 45 projects under a budget of approximately GBP144,600,000.⁶ This is summarised, alongside accountability arrangements, in Appendix A.

The Review coincided with the appointment of a new SG, The Hon. Shirley Botchwey, and a developing agenda for institutional reform and financial sustainability, reflecting her priorities as well as recommendations made by the Board.⁷

1.2 Purpose and scope

The purpose and scope of this Review, including specific research questions, are laid out in the Methodology section at Appendix B.

In summary, the Review was required to:

- Evaluate the Secretariat's performance during 2021–2025, identifying lessons to be learned as well as good practices and success factors;
- Review the strategic positioning, structure and processes of the Secretariat in light of ongoing reform initiatives to help maximise impact, sustainability and value for money.⁸

A key need was to clarify the specific contribution made by the Secretariat across its four⁹ principal pillars of work (Democracy and Governance; Sustainable Development; Resilience and Climate Action; and Small and Other Vulnerable States) and to help optimise this in serving the needs and mandates of member countries, particularly Commonwealth small states, going forward.

2. The Review

2.1 Approach

The Review lasted from 1 May 2025 until October 2025. The full methodology is at Appendix B. In outline, Aleph's approach was to consolidate the existing evidence base, and to develop an external perspective on the Secretariat's work going forward, taking full account of the context and drawing upon fresh data as well as insights from a range of primary sources.¹⁰

This endeavour used a mixed-method qualitative (primary) and quantitative (secondary) approach. Aleph conducted a desk review and literature review of available documentation; key informant interviews with staff (past and present), external key stakeholders, donors and beneficiaries; participatory workshops; and face-to-face interviews. In total, Aleph conducted 84 interviews. Aleph also took available opportunities to attend scheduled events where the Secretariat engaged directly with staff and or stakeholders.

Aleph devised a matrix of criteria and indicators to ensure review questions were addressed systematically. The matrix is listed as Appendix C to this report. The matrix provides evaluative context and an important point of reference for answering the questions for this Review.

Aleph sought to identify information gaps in the project documentation available and, as far as practicable, to address them using the methodological tools available to it. This included a more detailed examination of five selected projects, reported in Appendix D.¹¹ The projects are as follows.

- The SG's Good Offices.
- The Elections Programme.
- The Commonwealth Small States Office (CSSO).
- The Commonwealth Call to Action on Living Lands Charter.
- The Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda (CCA) on Trade and Investment.

2.2 Limitations

Table 2.1: Limitations and mitigation measures

Limitation/risk	Comment/mitigation
<p>Findings relevant to organisational reform do not fit with the Secretariat's developing reform agenda.</p>	<p>The timing of the internal review was outside Aleph's control. However, it liaised closely with the Secretariat, delivering two presentations on preliminary findings for discussion in early July and a further presentation on proposed conclusions and recommendations for discussion with top staff (the latter occurred after the new Strategic Plan had been finalised internally).</p>
<p>Gaps in outcome and impact data undermine the analysis and prevent meaningful aggregation of results at programme and portfolio levels.</p>	<p>Aleph conducted a thorough desk review and cross-checked available data from multiple sources. Its bespoke Matrix of criteria and indicators helped reduce gaps and inconsistencies in the results framework for the projects. Aleph also engaged with staff and stakeholders to gather fresh qualitative insights, and cross-checked to ensure that, as far as possible, reliable conclusions could be drawn from incomplete or inconsistent data. Yet, despite best efforts, Aleph was unable to secure as many interviews as was desirable with certain stakeholders (e.g. High Commissioners, external observers of the Good Offices work) to ensure the high level of cross-checking it sought. Also, because of the delays in securing interviews, some data-gathering had to take place alongside early analysis and drafting of findings.</p>
<p>Limited opportunities to view the Commonwealth 'in action' constrain the capacity for insight.</p>	<p>It did not prove possible to access potentially informative Ministerial events during the Review, such as the Health Ministers' Meeting in Geneva and the Trade Ministers Meeting and the Commonwealth Business Summit in Windhoek, Namibia, or to experience encounters with the Board. Data collection from senior staff responsible for Board liaison was also less complete than planned, nor was approval granted for a presentation to the Board of this report with a discussion of recommendations. These factors may have adversely impacted Aleph's depth of understanding and insight.</p>

3. Key Findings: Review of Programmes

According to its management information, the Secretariat delivered impressive results across all five pillars (covering no fewer than 45 individual projects). In general, Aleph's evaluation confirmed positive outcomes across the board as well as a reasonable expectation of impact in most of the programme work selected for special study. However, resource-related difficulties were evident, and led to some lapses and delays. Aleph

also found, as did the Mid-Term Review (MTR), some significant problems with the Secretariat's approach to measuring outcomes on the ground. Inevitably, such shortcomings impact confidence in management assessments of progress in member countries.

The following digests of findings should be read alongside the analyses and findings in Appendix C and Appendix D.

3.1 Democracy and Governance

Highlights and good practices	Challenges and lessons
<p>Management data suggest that, on average, 60 per cent of yearly performance indicators were met or exceeded, while the rest showed good progress every year, excepting a few delays in the onset of the strategic plan.¹²</p> <p>Respondents and Aleph's case study show the Secretariat's critical role in reducing tensions/driving reforms in, e.g., Brunei Darussalam, Eswatini, Guyana, Sierra Leone and Zambia. Such activity fosters the top-level trust and access that underpin the Secretariat's comparative advantage, enabling it to engage effectively in political contexts that facilitate all its work.</p> <p>Some impressive progress has been made in advancing Commonwealth values and good governance, e.g. synergetic impacts with the CSSO Geneva-based technical assistance to Guyana on human rights promotion and protection. The Secretariat's support to member countries to establish or strengthen national human rights institutions could reasonably be expected at the least to boost awareness of human rights norms on the ground.</p> <p>Member countries appreciate work on fair elections, rule of law and anti-corruption, citing judicious use of the Secretariat's convening power and ability to provide discreet, trusted assistance – especially through its Good Offices function and legal expertise.</p> <p>High-level declarations at CHOGM and consensus-building at Law Ministers' Meetings reflect the Secretariat's active role in upholding shared values.</p>	<p>Progress is uneven, in part because of chronic resource constraints. Targets related to rule of law frameworks and youth lagged and most election reports were very late – some had to be left unpublished. This has forestalled efforts to gain traction and impact synergistically with other in-country projects and has damaged the Secretariat reputationally. Slowness to grip recurrent operational difficulties (such as the chronic failures to meet targets for publication of election observation reports) points to problems in the Secretariat's approach to defining and monitoring unsatisfactory performance.</p> <p>The many challenges arising from inadequate resourcing underscores the need to define more realistic ambitions.</p> <p>Some interlocutors saw scope for a higher profile for the Commonwealth in United Nations human rights mechanisms and considered that the Secretariat, including the CSSO Geneva-based human rights experts, should do more to help identify opportunities for this, despite the absence of a right of initiative.</p> <p>Good Offices outcomes and wider benefits are not well understood within the Secretariat. This risks diminution of the organisation's comparative advantage as well as limiting the scope for exploring even better results, e.g. by means of greater strategic prioritisation and targeting of interventions with more use of available intelligence from partners.</p>

3.2 Sustainable Development

Highlights and good practices	Challenges and lessons
<p>Management data on this pillar show that, on average, 93 per cent of yearly indicators were met or exceeded. The other indicators show good progress.¹³</p> <p>Notable outcomes included legislative reforms in health and finance, digital trade capacity in small states, expanded use of the Commonwealth Meridian debt system and targeted support to women entrepreneurs and smaller enterprises.</p> <p>Ministerial meetings and strong partnerships leveraged with agencies like the World Trade Organization (WTO), the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the International Trade Centre have further extended the Secretariat’s reach.</p> <p>Aleph’s case study of the CCA suggests excellent strategic alignment and good value for money overall, e.g. it delivered a full regional workshop in the Caribbean for GBP15,000, through partnerships, and can show clear contributions to regional co-operation, legal harmonisation and digital trade readiness for countries like Fiji, Jamaica, Malawi and Samoa.</p>	<p>Some initiatives remain too small in scale or pilot in nature to show impact: scalability and long-term impact tracking remain areas for continued focus.</p> <p>The CCA case study shows that discontinuation of some support (e.g. peer learning grants) reduced ability to foster synergies between members and could limit technical engagement.</p> <p>Concerns about risks to institutional memory suggest a need to guard against heavy use of consultants without building internal capacity.</p> <p>Limited resources or in-kind support hinder consistent, equitable delivery across regions and clusters – making it difficult to achieve ambitions.</p> <p>Underdeveloped reporting framework (especially regarding impact and the logic of change pathways) limits ability to attribute and track contributions and showcase the meaningful work it has been possible to achieve under this pillar. There is a need to strengthen this framework for clearer results and enhanced accountability.</p>

3.3 Resilience and Climate Action

Highlights and good practices	Challenges and lessons
<p>Management data show that, on average, 80% of the indicators were met or exceeded every year, with almost none of them being delayed except at the onset of the Strategic Plan period. These achievements are despite a severely limited budget in many areas of activity.¹⁴</p> <p>The relatively new Secretariat flagship of resilience and climate action has added value and advanced thinking on climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.</p> <p>Important initiatives, e.g. the Blue Charter, Commonwealth Sustainable Energy Transition Agenda, and the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub, have supported policy reform and capacity-building, mobilising approximately US\$500 million in climate finance – with particular benefit to small and vulnerable states and showing what the Secretariat can put on the table.</p> <p>Aleph's case study of the Living Lands Charter (adopted by all member countries in 2022) evidences valued, synergetic work and telling contributions to promising initiatives, such as securing climate funding for the Zambezi Basin and establishment of the Great Green Wall initiative in South Africa.</p> <p>Strategic and historical positioning on climate action (dating from 1989 at least) through sustained advocacy and agenda-setting shows how significant value can be added by the Secretariat even in the absence of major financial resources – advancing thinking on biodiversity and climate across the membership and leveraging influence through strategic positioning.</p>	<p>Constraints on resources and operational capacity tended to fragment follow-through and impede deeper, more sustained impact on the ground. The Living Lands case study indicates stakeholder concerns about evenness of delivery, linked to disjunct between ambition and resources.</p> <p>Though Aleph's Living Lands case study suggests the Secretariat can add value, it highlights the risk of an 'expectation gap' between ambition and what can be delivered on the ground. Contested areas of thought-leadership and influence require a strong impact narrative and clear methods of attribution to demonstrate value. Strategic positioning is key.</p> <p>There is evidence of risk of an expectation gap, underlining the need to align ambitions with available resources and to distinguish roles clearly from those of other actors.</p>

3.4 Small and Other Vulnerable States

Highlights and good practices	Challenges and lessons
<p>Strong strides have been made in elevating small and vulnerable states' concerns in global governance, with two out of three management performance indicators being met or exceeded every year on average and the others showing good progress.¹⁵</p> <p>Initiatives like the Commonwealth Universal Vulnerability Index and the Joint Advocacy Strategy with the United Nations reflect a growing influence in global policy discussions. Active participation in Conferences of the Parties (COPs), debt relief advocacy at Finance Ministers' Meetings and support for the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States underline its role as a platform for amplifying small states' voices.</p> <p>Concrete results include over US\$335 million mobilised through the Climate Finance Access Hub (CFAH), expanded use of the Meridian debt management system in 39 countries and adoption of model laws for climate, energy and ocean governance. Tailored technical support has helped small states advance reforms in public finance, energy and maritime policy.</p> <p>Aleph's case study of the CSSO in Geneva showcases efficient and effective help on human rights and trade, leveraging the Commonwealth's strengths and boosting visibility. Donors are voting for 'more CSSO' with their wallets.</p>	<p>Progress is not uniform. Follow-through on implementation and systematic tracking of outcomes remain limited, as does communication of results to donors.</p> <p>Stakeholders value the Secretariat's convening power and neutrality, but some raised concerns about visibility as well as the relatively small scale of engagement.</p> <p>More meaningful high-level indicators are needed to provide systematic evidence to strengthen confidence, e.g. sustainable enlargement of sustainable capacity in assisted areas. <i>This observation applies more generally to the Secretariat's current metrics for cross-cutting and catalytic outcomes.</i></p> <p>The CSSO model has proven effective, but it requires longer-term funding arrangements to ensure predictability and sustainability.</p>

3.5 Cross-Cutting Outcomes

Highlights and good practices	Challenges and lessons
<p>According to management data, all of the indicators were met or exceeded each year or at least showed good progress – e.g. youth political participation initiatives, programme budget allocations to youth and gender priorities.¹⁶</p> <p>Institutional capacity-building initiatives targeted both gender and youth cross-cutting priorities. E.g. the Year of Youth of Commonwealth Heads of Government further boosted the profile of youth in Secretariat programming, prompting and guiding a range of actions under the four ‘E’s.¹⁷ High-level commitments on gender were reinforced at CHOGM and Women’s Affairs Ministers’ Meetings and in Secretariat strategy documents.</p> <p>Commonwealth countries score high on youth civic and political engagement compared to the global average (2024 Global Youth Development Index Report), likely reflecting 50+ years of the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP).</p> <p>There is evidence of policy and legislative development, e.g. development of a best practice guide on child forced and early marriage, gender-responsive legislative drafting in natural resource development, model provisions on safeguarding in sports and sector-specific gender equality toolkits, such as <i>Turning the Tides of Inclusion</i> for ocean-based sectors.</p> <p>There is also evidence of direct impact in member countries, e.g. establishment of youth ministries.</p> <p>Gender and youth considerations were integrated into high-level initiatives, including the Commonwealth Climate Finance Access Hub, the Living Lands Call to Action and the Blue Charter Incubator. Advocacy also occurred via convening platforms like the Commonwealth Women’s Forum and the Commonwealth Youth Forum.</p> <p>This shows that targeted institutional capacity-building can generate sustainable policy impact, e.g. SheTrades initiative, gender-responsive budgeting training in Lesotho and Mauritius and professionalisation of youth work in six member countries.</p> <p>It also demonstrates that embedding cross-cutting priorities into core programmes can ensure they are not treated as stand-alone issues but become part of the broader institutional agenda, strengthening inclusivity and legitimacy – e.g. gender and youth in the Climate Finance Access Hub, the Living Lands Call to Action and the Blue Charter Incubator.</p>	<p>Persistent gaps exist in available gender-disaggregated data, e.g. monitoring data on violence against women and girls, inhibit a complete performance picture on the ground – and accountability – in member countries as well as the Secretariat. There is limited evidence of consistent monitoring or systematic collection of disaggregated data.</p> <p>There is a need for a strong focus on results as well as clear leadership and accountability to tackle the divergence between rhetoric and reality perceived by respondents.</p> <p>Improving the environment for embedding gender and youth mainstreaming initiatives requires tackling the working culture and cross-directorate co-ordination.</p> <p>Some youth political participation initiatives were delayed, mainly because of resource difficulties. Inevitably, this narrows outcomes and indicates a need for strategic repositioning, if reputational damage is to be avoided.</p>

4. Key Findings: Organisational Review

4.1 Added value of the Secretariat

The Secretariat holds a distinct position in the multilateral landscape. This owes largely to its trust-based relationships, associated convening power and niche expertise. The Secretariat’s relatively unbureaucratic decision-making processes mean it can also be quicker and more flexible than other international organisations. Aleph found evidence of these characteristics in all its case studies, especially in the Good Offices function and regarding Secretariat support to small states.¹⁸

Member countries and partners consistently identify high-level access, neutrality and trust as the Secretariat’s key assets. The consequence of these is *amity* – a highly prized diplomatic advantage, yet one not easily generated by the treaty-based and more formal multilateral institutions. Aleph

considers that *amity* is apt to identify in a single word the unique strengths and capabilities through which the Secretariat performs better, more efficiently or with greater impact than others. It is the core of the added value of The Secretariat.¹⁹

Our Prime Minister came to CHOGM, not the big UN meetings. We have a special relationship with the Commonwealth.”

High Commissioner

Yet, though *amity* identifies the Secretariat’s greatest strength – and pinpoints what often makes it an attractive potential partner – the concept is not consistently communicated or fully leveraged across the organisation.

At a time when the Secretariat and many multilaterals are experiencing declining support, the organisation needs to be clear about its key

Table 4.1: Amity

Characteristics of amity	Commonwealth Secretariat	United Nations	Regional multilateral	Bilateral
Subsists in high-level personal-political relationships	✓	✗	?	✓
Interventions based on individual circumstances and needs; not treaty-framed	✓	✗	?	✓
Free from donor, national or geopolitical interest	✓	?*	✓	✗
Possesses global moral authority focussed on an eminent figure	✓	✓	✗	?
Fosters sense of kinship based on common values	✓	✗	?**	?

✓ Yes

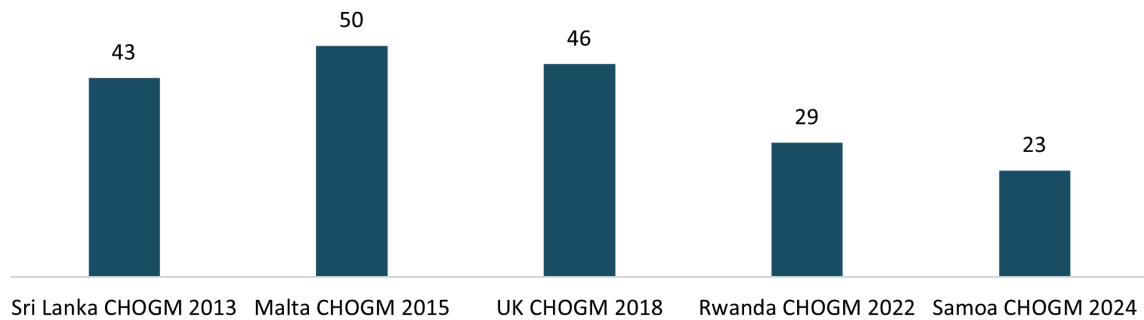
✗ No

? Arguable

* Security Council connects the organisation to geopolitical realities

** Common geographical and cultural features, not common values as such

Figure 4.1: CHOGM attendance by Heads of Government



comparative strengths – and to play to them. This means giving amity the strategic focus and institutional coherence (and performance evidence) needed to consistently reinforce and sustain the competitive edge.

4.2 Ministerial Meetings and forums

Shared interest as well as regional and national self-interest are undoubtedly important, yet Aleph found that the Secretariat's convening power rested in part on the Commonwealth's sense of shared values and heritage as well as on the quiet diplomatic help given to many states over the years through the exercise of the Good Offices function in politically sensitive contexts.²⁰ Critical to the close relationships the Secretariat maintains with all its members are the biennial CHOGM meetings and the ministerial meetings or policy forums where the Secretariat brings governments and stakeholders together on shared priorities.

"Consultation is the lifeblood of the Commonwealth"

Declaration by Commonwealth Leaders, 1965

CHOGM and thematic ministerial meetings, e.g. on health, youth, trade and climate, have shaped joint declarations and influenced national policies. Initiatives such as the Youth Development Index and the Climate Change Finance Access Hub demonstrate the Secretariat's ability to set norms and provide practical support. However, informants pointed out that Heads of Government were increasingly sending deputies to CHOGM and that participation at Ministerial Meetings may come from representatives of member countries who are not in a position to translate commitments into action (see Figure 4.1). This is a cause for concern as gaps in top-level political engagement can prove infectious, limiting the weight of decisions taken as well as follow-through at national level.

There is scope for the Secretariat to keep closer tabs on such details of representation and include them (with contextual analysis) as indicators of the underlying strength of its comparative advantage.²¹

4.3 Partnerships

The Secretariat engages in a range of programme-aligned partnerships, with notable successes in areas such as health, youth development, climate finance and trade. Collaborations with organisations like the World Health Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund and private foundations have supported the delivery of key initiatives, while the Secretariat's convening power and trusted relationships – the comparative advantage of 'amity' identified earlier – give partners access to high-level stakeholders and sensitive policy spaces.²²

In general, partnerships present a mixed picture. Some areas, e.g. health, demonstrate effective collaboration and tangible results; others, e.g. elections support, show limited engagement and underdeveloped potential.²³ Evidence on outcomes is similarly mixed, with some partnerships leading to meaningful results and others suffering from delayed implementation, limited planning or unclear roles.²⁴ Aleph gained the impression that partnerships were sometimes pursued simply as a means of securing funds rather than as part of a broader strategic vision. This means potential opportunities are missed to leverage the Secretariat's recognised value and trust to attract collaborators with aligned missions.

The Secretariat has formal co-delivery frameworks or joint accountability mechanisms, which can reduce the potential to scale or sustain results. However, these are not universal or applied consistently or tracked. Implementation efficiency is also uneven: in some cases, e.g. technical assistance in trade and rapid responses during

political crises, the Secretariat delivers faster than larger multilateral agencies. However, systemic issues – bureaucracy, outdated systems and procurement delays – frequently slow programme delivery. Long processing times for partnership funds (e.g. 18 months for the Gates Foundation) reflect these broader inefficiencies. Also, many projects are implemented by short-term consultants, raising concerns about continuity, sustainability and the development of internal capacity.

Collaboration with system actors such as the Commonwealth Foundation and the Commonwealth of Learning remains somewhat fragmented. Siloed working, lack of role clarity and weak internal communication dilute collective impact. Some events risk being performative rather than policy-shaping, and reporting on influence is often anecdotal rather than evidence-based.

Overall, the Secretariat performs at a satisfactory level: it maintains active partnerships and delivers in priority areas. Yet inconsistent co-ordination, weak strategic orientation and systemic delays limit the overall value, reach and timeliness of its collaborations.

4.4 Governance and strategic prioritisation

Overall, the Secretariat demonstrates a reasonably good level of alignment with member countries and regional priorities, especially for small states. However, engagement mechanisms at the governance level lack depth and continuity. While the Secretariat can pivot in response to formal requests or political declarations, there is no structured institutional mechanism to consistently anticipate and embed global and regional shifts into strategic planning, programme design or resource allocation. The absence of a clear prioritisation process, coupled with limited budgetary flexibility, constrains the Secretariat's ability to respond effectively. As a result, efforts risk being spread too thin, reducing the potential impact of initiatives.

Aleph found an underdeveloped system for prioritising work. CHOGM mandates and the Commonwealth Charter are referenced in the Secretariat's strategic documents, which signals high-level political alignment, but Aleph found no clear or shared definition of what constitutes a CHOGM 'mandate', or an operational mechanism to

integrate them systematically into project planning. Further, CHOGMs occur after the Strategic Plan is already in place, meaning that alignment tends to happen by design or by retrofitting: the 'mandates' thus reinforce rather than reshape strategic direction.

Importantly, CHOGM mandates are not necessarily accompanied by allocated budgets. They are more likely to deliver funding gaps, especially given the declining contributions by member countries.²⁵ So there is a potential disconnect between resourcing decisions and the priority areas identified by member countries – unless dedicated funding has been secured through Extra-Budgetary Resources (EBRs).

The Secretariat demonstrates growing recognition of global and regional trends. There is some integration of these issues into its programming, largely in response to CHOGM mandates, member country requests and Ministerial declarations. Key global priorities, such as digital transformation, climate change, youth development and health, have been reflected in programme areas, with initiatives like the Commonwealth Oceans Declaration and digital entrepreneurship support for women showing alignment with global priorities. Tools such as the Vulnerability Index and the Youth Development Index have helped frame shared challenges across member countries and inform targeted support. These examples reflect a degree of responsiveness and a willingness to adapt to the evolving global context.

Consultations with the Board of Governors provide a formal avenue for engagement, but their potential is not fully realised. While the Board serves as a platform for member country representation, meetings have been insufficient for deep strategic engagement and opportunities for dialogue limited.

"Frankly, the meetings are far too long and far too boring."

Board member

"Papers on important reforms come too late or are table-dropped on us. They don't really want to know what we think."

Board member

The Secretariat provides avenues for stakeholder engagement, primarily through CHOGM, Ministerial Meetings and informal consultations. These are widely seen as effective spaces for discussion, with small states noting that the Commonwealth gives

them a global platform and amplifies their voice in international fora. However, some stakeholders felt that, while member countries have a voice, feedback and inputs are not consistently integrated into programme design or review. Though dialogue between the Secretariat and member countries is reported to be frequent, particularly in technical areas, some appear to feel disengaged. In particular, London-based High Commissioners feel disconnected from in-country Secretariat activities, sometimes learning about projects or country visits after the fact.²⁶ Internal silos and communication gaps mean feedback loops are weak. Engagement with technical Ministries in capitals is uneven and sometimes embarrassingly uncoordinated.²⁷

Board meetings, which could serve as an important link with member countries, were repeatedly described in interviews as unsatisfactory, fractious or lacking in meaningful discussion, further contributing to a sense of disconnect. While many member countries recognise that the Secretariat does good work, communications were not seen as optimal, leaving valuable results under-acknowledged and reducing opportunities for shared learning or political buy-in.

"I sit for a whole day, and I still don't know what the Secretariat results on the ground are."

— Board member

4.5 Funding model

Aleph found the Secretariat's funding and financial systems to be not fit for purpose. Planning and budgeting cycles are misaligned, the funding model is an operational hindrance and accounting tools as well as rules covering financial delegation are inefficient and fall short of the standards in peer multilaterals.

The Secretariat's funding model is based on annual budgeting. This sits uneasily alongside multi-year programming requirements, making it difficult to plan and sequence projects effectively. The overall budget envelope has diminished over time, further constraining delivery. While the organisation is rightly focused on balancing the books, Aleph found limited strategic thinking about optimising resources. For example, restricting foreign travel produces easy savings but may block crucial face-to-face fostering of relationships that deliver the Secretariat's strategic advantage – and may spoil the business itself in some cases.

"We are clipping our own wings and shooting ourselves in the foot."

Programme manager

Budget execution and resource utilisation demonstrate moderate effectiveness, with most budgets absorbed across programmes, albeit with significant challenges in efficiency, balance and predictability. Approximately 71 per cent of total expenditure has been directed towards programme outcomes, indicating a reasonable prioritisation of delivery over overheads. However, actual budget execution has dropped over the years, reflecting emerging capacity constraints, including procurement delays, staffing limitations and absorptive challenges (see Table 4.2).

Systemic inefficiencies compound these constraints. Outdated finance systems, manual budgeting tools and slow bureaucratic procedures delay disbursements, harm the Secretariat's reputation with donors and lead to payment delays to staff and to debtors beyond contractual limits. Multiple interviewees referred to delayed invoices and expenses. Most expressed an expectation of poor service levels.

Dependence on short-term consultants obscures true cost structures and raises questions about the Secretariat's staffing model.

The funding system is creaking under the strain of lower contributions plus increased reliance on EBRs. This underlines the need for clear strategic prioritisation, driven by the Board, which capitalises on the Secretariat's comparative advantage. Although value for money is demonstrable in select areas, this is mainly because staff deliver with very limited resources. Weak links between planning and budgeting, coupled with insufficient strategic oversight, undermine efficiency generally.

4.6 Theory of Change and strategic change pathways

The Theory of Change (ToC) presented in the Strategic Plan can be criticised yet it represented a big step forward in articulating how the Secretariat seeks to create value as a convenor, technical adviser and normative actor. Unfortunately, no institutional process was put in place to promote

Table 4.2: Year-to-date expenditure on programme outcomes vs general overhead costs (£ million)⁸³

Financial year		Outcomes	Overheads	TOTAL
2022	Budget	30	12.8	42.8
	Expenditure	26.8	11.9	38.7
2023	Budget	29.3	12	41.3
	Expenditure	28	11.8	39.8
2024	Budget	33.6	12.4	46
	Expenditure	28.3	11.8	40.1
2025	Budget	29.8	11.7	41.5
	Expenditure	25.7	11	36.7

the ToC itself or to assess whether its causal pathways remained valid. Improvements are now in hand.

In practice, the ToC has been a non-issue for many staff, and is only rarely cited in programme documents, project design or results reporting. By and large, prior to 2025, the use of ToC as a key design and management tool was extremely limited.

A clear impact pathway was set out in the Secretariat's Results Framework, linking activities and outputs to long-term outcomes. This suggests a degree of conceptual clarity at the strategic planning level. Yet Aleph found only limited evidence that impact pathways consistently informed programme design, direction or decision-making across the Secretariat. While some teams may draw on them during planning, there is no institutionalised mechanism ensuring their use in delivery, adaptation or performance tracking, and limited understanding on how the pathways are intended to shape implementation.

Limited understanding and ownership of the ToC at the programme level is exacerbated by an organisational culture in which the basis for constructive debate about strategic direction or results is weak. This may reflect understandable concerns about reprioritisation – underscoring the need for leadership and more active Board participation in the process.

4.7 Monitoring, evaluation and learning

The Results Framework conceptually aggregates outputs, outcomes and impacts, but it is not used consistently to guide delivery or reporting. Nor is it clear that it necessarily provides meaningful insights into performance on the ground.

In any event, Aleph found that MEL practices were uneven and lacked institutional coherence.

The Secretariat's MEL system does not ensure adaptive decision-making based on results. Compliance is weak across programmes and there is no formal learning agenda or feedback loop in place. While some divisions demonstrate good practices in data use, learning processes are largely ad hoc, undocumented or individually led. On cross-cutting areas such as gender, youth and inclusion, references exist at the strategic level, but there is limited evidence of consistent monitoring, leadership or accountability mechanisms. Disaggregated data are not systematically collected or used.

There is evidence of improvement, with the development in 2025 of a new ToC, with improved logical pathways, but significant data gaps remain, such as in mapping the Secretariat's value proposition to the different outcomes and acknowledging the intermediate steps required to achieve the change sought. Efforts to validate progress against certain levels of the Results Framework encounter incomplete or unavailable data, reflecting an inability at multiple levels to extract relevant evidence that the Secretariat is making a measurable difference.

The Secretariat regularly commissions evaluations, programme reviews, country reports and case studies, which demonstrate a wide body of documentation from which learning could be drawn. However, although Aleph saw some work to synthesise this material, it was difficult to trace how recommendations had been tracked and used to inform organisational decisions, adaptation or strategic planning.

By and large, learning tends to be equated with reporting. When real learning does occur it is typically informal, decentralised and driven by individuals or teams. There are no structures or expectations to capture lessons and apply them at the institutional level. Neither is there an established mechanism to ensure recommendations from one Strategic Plan Review feed into the development of the next. This gap contributes to the recurrence of similar issues across cycles. The fact that the next Strategic Plan was agreed before the current Review had formulated its recommendations raises questions about the Secretariat's ability to integrate and learn the lessons identified.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Embedding reform

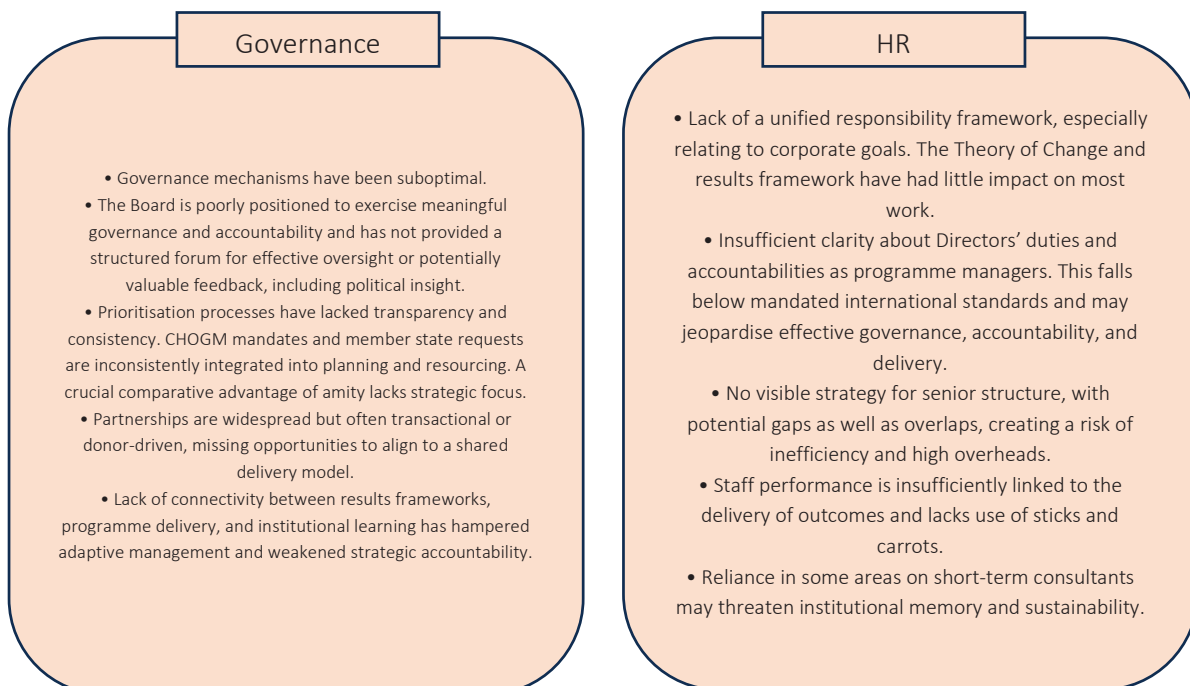
Aleph finds the Secretariat to be a unique and valuable organisation. It has something that others do not have – genuine amity, based on high-level trusting relationships and complete neutrality. By and large, it has been using that advantage to deliver real change, especially for member countries in difficulty and for its many small-sized and vulnerable members.

Yet, in its efforts to serve in the face of dwindling resources, the Secretariat has struggled at times to deliver across its broad portfolio. It now needs to reprioritise according to its strengths. This may include shifting the balance between what the Secretariat enables and what it implements itself. There is also considerable scope for organisational improvement and modernisation. Mounting pressures on funding, and on the multilateral approach generally, mean the Secretariat must be in the best possible shape if it is to serve the Commonwealth's needs.

Embedding the necessary reforms requires a change in the Secretariat's culture. This will demand no less inspiring and determined leadership than the Secretariat has enjoyed in the past. It will also demand that the impressive commitment to the Commonwealth vision, shown by staff at all levels, is applied just as passionately to the corporate push for best performance.

Aleph is aware that, immediately prior to its work, the new SG had set in motion a major work of reform, reflecting her agenda as well as calls for reform from the Secretariat Board and other stakeholders. The Review advanced in parallel with that work and aims as far as is possible to complement it. Aleph has formulated its recommendations and its statements of key challenges to target what is needed to drive the reforms and make them everyone's priority.

Figure 5.1: Key challenges



5.2 Recommendations

AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

1. Deepen strategic engagement with the Board

The Secretary-General should work with the Board to change the culture so funders have genuine oversight of the Secretariat's work and are meaningfully engaged in its development:

- a. Institutionalise programme prioritisation as an ongoing significant function for the Board, with a decision matrix targeting comparative advantage, strategic coherence and funding availability.
- b. Create a protocol for deferring or scaling initiatives lacking earmarked funds.
- c. Establish thematic 'touchpoint groups', or small ongoing thematic committees, including the relevant programme directors/owners, for dialogue between reporting cycles on challenges, opportunities and risks.
- d. Keep the new senior structure under careful review for gaps and overlaps.

2. Strengthen accountability and performance management

The Deputy Secretaries-General (DSGs) of Corporate Affairs and Programmes should work together to turbo charge the culture of accountability and corporate responsibility and to ensure financial decisions are faster and better informed by operational, contextual requirements:

- a. Clarify and unify the responsibilities and accountabilities of programme managers and directors in light of mandated international functional standards for programme management.
- b. Ensure this process pinpoints accountabilities for: delivery of intermediate outcomes, including corporate goals; monitoring risks and underperformance; steering delivery across projects; use of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) data in decision-making; and leadership in adaptive management; and performance review.

- c. Ensure as soon as practicable that programme leaders have devolved to them much greater financial and decision-making autonomy, in line with best practice.

3. Make M&E more adaptive and learning-oriented

DSG Corporate Affairs should, in liaison with DSG Programmes, help the Secretariat build a genuinely useful culture of learning so it can adapt, and improve continuously in a fast-changing global context.

- a. As a precursor to a new MEL strategy, reposition M&E as more adaptive and learning-oriented, e.g. by promoting reviews as opportunities for genuine reflection on progress and learning on standards and measurement (including the ToC and Results Framework) as well as opportunities for sharing lessons across teams and regions.
- b. Create guidance standardising how teams verify results across Verto and other platforms, stipulating what constitutes credible evidence for categorising outcomes.
- c. Enhance the ToC as a contribution-based model by further pinpointing how the Secretariat contributes to change and what external factors must align for success, reflecting the multilateral setting.

REQUIRING SUBSTANTIAL FURTHER PREPARATORY WORK

4. Increase transparency and incentivise performance

DSG Programmes and DSG Corporate should put in place the foundations of a much stronger performance-based management culture, boosting visibility, accountability and performance and facilitating a more productive relationship with Board members.

DSG Programmes should:

- a. Build on Verto to create a new and unified high-level performance dashboard or platform for Senior Management and the Board integrating programme, financial and risk data and aiming at active monitoring, learning and decision-making.

DSG Corporate should:

- b. Introduce pay-related performance agreements for Senior Directors and above, based on their portfolio performance and delivery against intermediate outcomes, and including Board oversight and, in tandem with b),
 - c. Roll out a performance management framework for all staff, based on the Generally Accepted Performance Principles approved by Commonwealth member countries and including annual objectives linked to Results Framework indicators; use of results evidence from Verto or enhanced system (when available); and wider feedback for associated developmental purposes, i.e. 360° feedback.²⁸
- b. Upgrade the accounting system to match or exceed standards in peer multilaterals: improve tracking of investments across years as well as integration with performance data (e.g., Verto) to facilitate real-time reporting and analysis of budget execution at portfolio level.
 - c. Set out for the Board the costs and consequences for effectiveness and accountability of the current disjunct between planning and budgeting cycles, together with appropriate recommendations for reform.

5. Modernise funding and financial systems

DSG Corporate Affairs should make the Secretariat's funding and financial systems fit for purpose and equal or better to those in peer multilaterals, e.g. the African Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, the Caribbean Community:

- a. Overhaul and rationalise funding arrangements. A possible approach could be to allocate the Secretariat a share of members' assessed contributions as core funding for Secretariat-wide functions plus strategic capabilities that the Board decides will sustain clear comparative advantages; Commonwealth Fund for Technical Co-operation (CFTC) and Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) funds would be progressively reformed so they comprise only earmarked, time-bound 'non-core' investments with clear 'price tags' and impact targets.

Appendix A: An Overview of the Strategic Plan

1. Key numbers

Between 2021/22 and 2024/25, total contributions amounted to GBP109.9 million, with the largest share coming from assessed the Secretariat’s contributions (GBP63.9 million, 58%), followed by CFTC pledges (GBP34.8 million, 32%) and assessed CYP contributions (GBP11.2 million, 10% – see Figure A1).

Over the four-year period, total income amounted to GBP144.6 million, with the majority derived from Assessed and Voluntary Contributions (GBP109.8m, 76% – see Figure A1). Other key sources included Extra-Budgetary Resources (EBRs) (GBP12.3m, 9%), Other Income (GBP13.8m, 10%) and Contributions for the CSSO (GBP7.0m, 5%).²⁹

Figure A1: Contributions (paid) received between 2021/22 and 2024/25 (GBP millions)⁸⁴

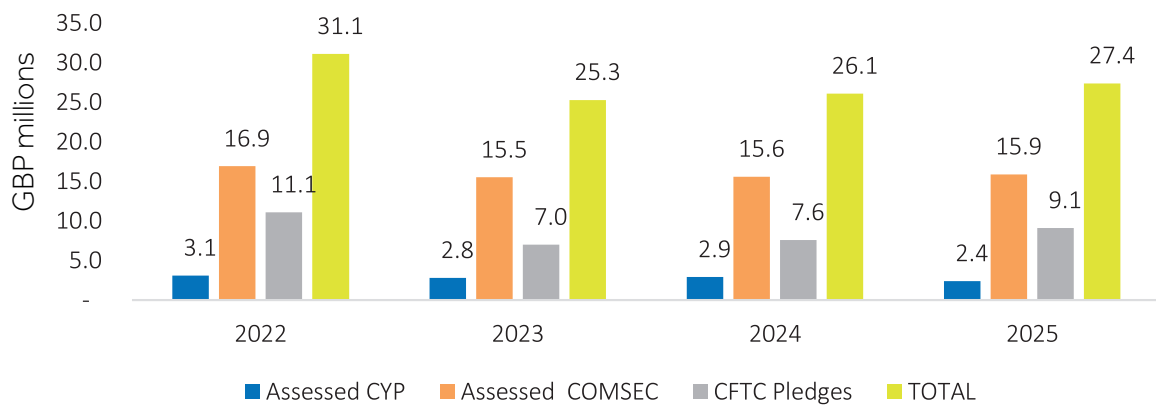


Figure A2: Year to date actual income breakdown between 2021/22 and 2024/25 (GBP millions)

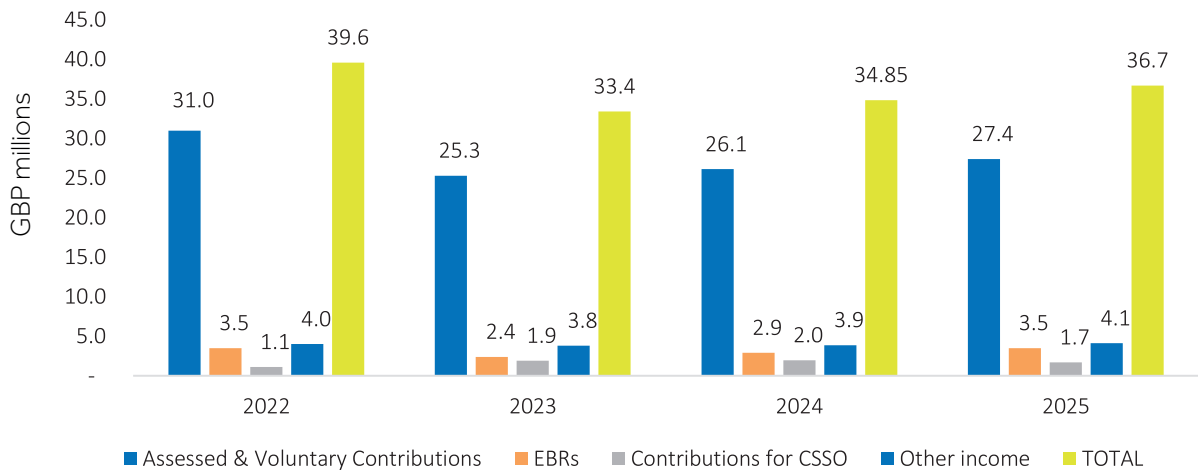
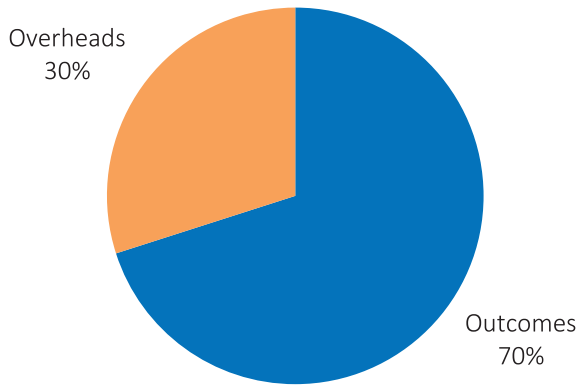


Figure A3: Year to date distribution of cumulative expenditure on programme outcomes vs general overheads



Out of the total expenditure of £155.3 million over the period, £108.8 million (70%) was allocated to programme outcomes, while £46.5 million (30%) was spent on general overheads, reflecting the Secretariat’s prioritisation of direct programme delivery alongside essential operational support (see Figure A3).

Within the total programme outcome expenditure of £108.8 million, the largest allocations were directed to Democracy and Governance (£30.6m, 28%) and Sustainable Development (£27.8m, 26% – see Figure A4). Significant investments were also made in Internal Outcomes (£21.5m, 20%), Resilience and Climate Action (£10.4m, 10%) and Cross-Cutting Outcomes (£9.4m, 9%). Smaller shares supported Small States (£2.7m, 2%) and Catalysts (£2.1m, 2%). This distribution reflects a

prioritisation of core governance and development mandates, while maintaining targeted support for climate action, institutional strengthening and niche strategic areas.

2. Human resources structure and accountability lines

The Secretariat is headed by the Secretary-General, supported by the Deputy Secretary-General, Senior Directors across programme divisions and the Chief of Staff. Accountability flows to the Board of Governors (‘the Board’), which oversees strategic plans, budgets and work programmes, and ultimately to the Commonwealth Heads of Government.³⁰ Additional oversight is provided by the Executive Committee and the Chair-in-Office, while Ministerial Meetings contribute to policy direction.

The current structure shows lines of authority and division of responsibilities between political oversight, strategic management and programme delivery (see Figure A5). Aleph heard concerns from some Board members about excessive management of costs. It notes that the Secretariat is currently undergoing a reform process aimed at restructuring its internal organisation, which includes recruitment of two Deputy Secretary General posts, to cover, respectively, corporate affairs and programme delivery, as well as replacement with a Senior Director of the Assistant Secretary-General (ASG) post, which has shared with the SG direct supervision of the Secretariat’s crucial Good Offices work. Yet Aleph was unable to locate any document setting out the cost-benefits or strategic purposes of this restructuring.

Figure A4: Cumulative direct expenditure per outcome between 2021/22 and 2024/25

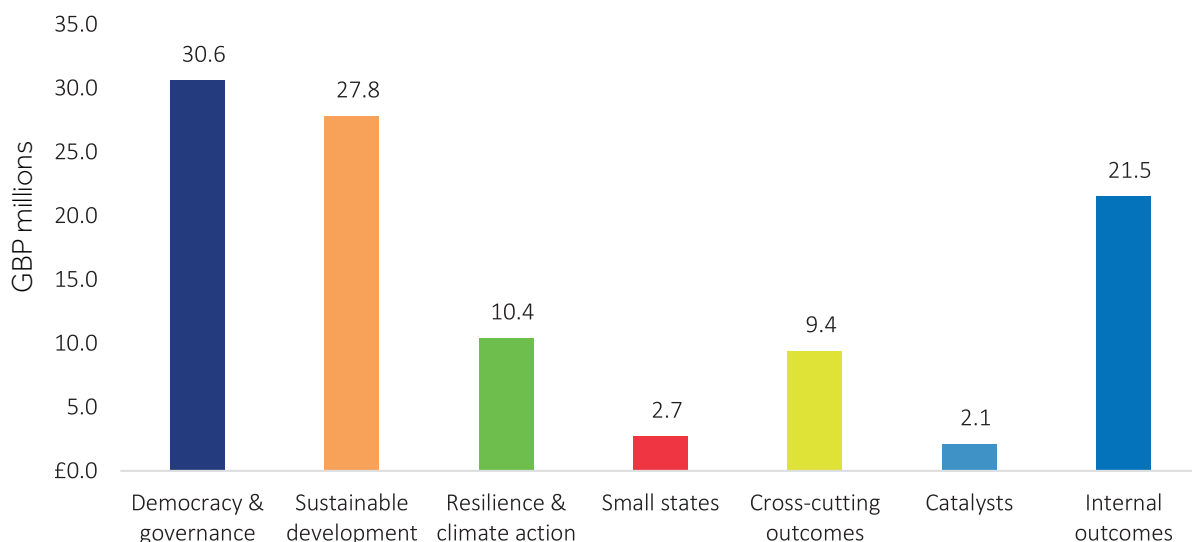
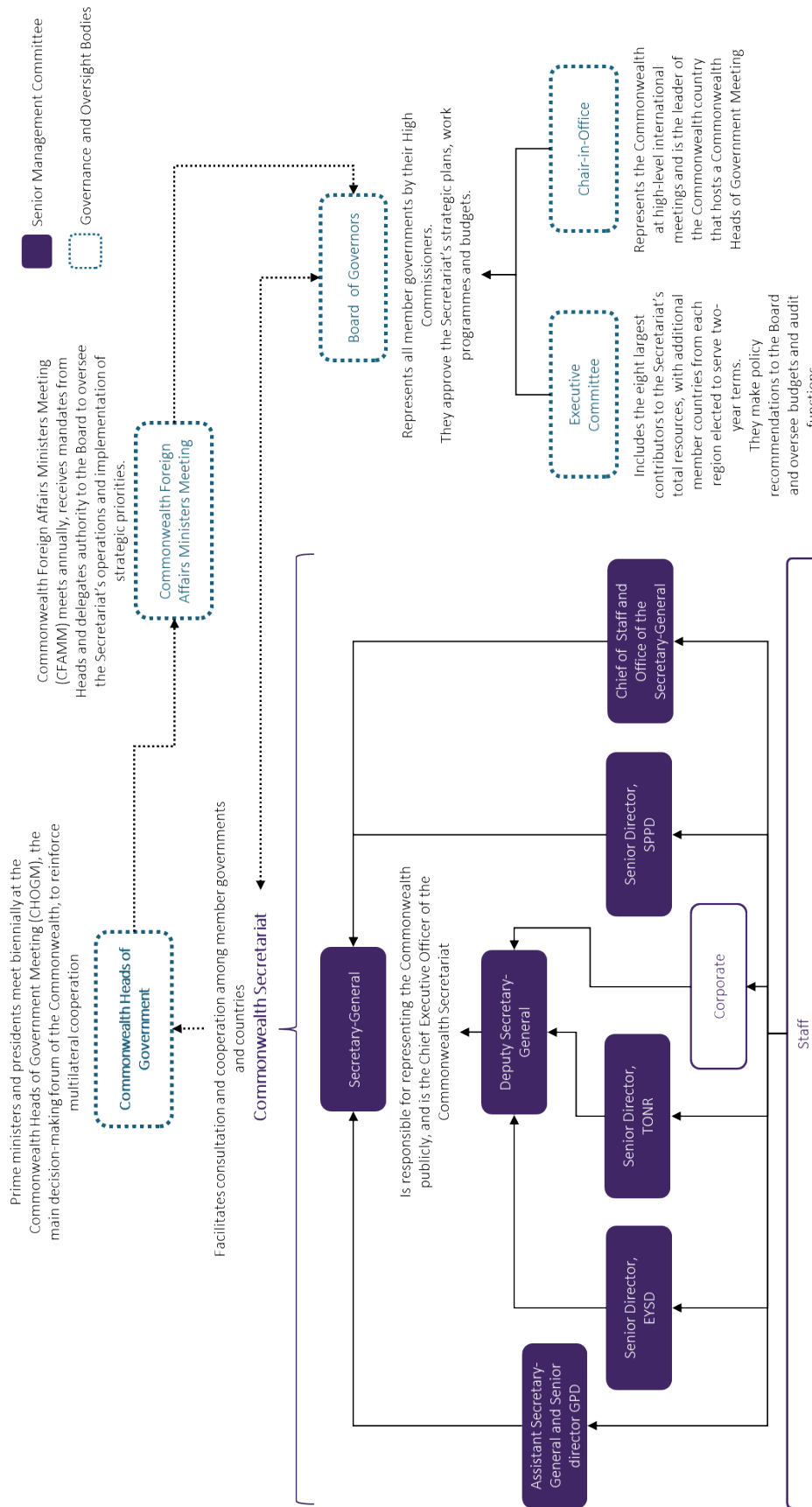


Figure A5: Human resources structure and accountability lines



Appendix B: Methodology

This review of the Commonwealth Secretariat Strategic Plan 2021/22–2024/25 employed a mixed-methods, utilisation-focused approach aligned with international evaluation standards. The methodology was designed to assess both developmental and diplomatic dimensions of the Secretariat's work, generate strategic learning for future programming and feed into the design of the next Strategic Plan (2025/26–2029/30).

1. Analytical framework

At the heart of the methodology was a bespoke Matrix structured around six analytical pillars, each mapped to evaluation questions derived from the Terms of Reference.

1. Strategic Relevance;
2. Effectiveness of Impact Pathways;
3. Operational Efficiency and Delivery;
4. Value Proposition and Stakeholder Engagement;
5. Adaptive Capacity and Strategic Readiness;
6. Contribution towards Strategic Outcomes.

Each pillar featured a set of indicators and sources of verification. While not exhaustive or prescriptive, the Matrix helped guide data collection, shape analysis and ensure consistency in synthesising evidence across diverse areas of inquiry.

2. Data collection methods

The Review drew upon multiple complementary sources of data.

- a. **Desk and literature review:** Over 117 internal and public documents were reviewed, including strategic plans, annual results reports, project evaluations, country engagement reviews and financial and governance documents. This Review established a baseline understanding and identified initial performance trends, strengths and evidence gaps.
- b. **Programme case studies:** Five case studies were conducted to provide a more granular perspective on strategic performance. These

were purposively selected to reflect the breadth of the Secretariat's work and included the following.

- The Elections Programme;
- The Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda (CCA);
- The Commonwealth Living Lands Charter;
- The Commonwealth Small States Office (CSSO);
- Good Offices and Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG)-related diplomacy.

Each case study was informed by internal documentation and complemented by interviews with Secretariat staff and relevant external stakeholders, where possible.

- c. **Key Informant Interviews.** A total of 84 semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse range of more than 100 stakeholders, including operational staff, senior management, high commissioners, government representatives, programme partners and external observers. Interviews explored both strategic and operational dimensions of performance and captured perceptions of value, effectiveness and organisational efficiency.
- d. **Participatory workshops and group interviews.** Workshops and group interviews were used to elicit shared reflections, explore the Secretariat's role and comparative advantage and gather insights into institutional learning. A participatory strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats analysis was conducted with staff focusing on the Good Offices function.
- e. **Observation.** Where possible, the team observed Secretariat-led events and diplomatic engagements to gain direct insights into the organisation's convening power and interaction with stakeholders. Limitations in access were noted but partially mitigated through interviews and documentation review.

3. Sampling and representation

The sampling approach was purposive rather than representative. Interviewees were selected for their knowledge of the Secretariat's work, with particular attention to geographic diversity, organisational roles and representation of small and vulnerable states. The review aimed to ensure a balance of internal and external perspectives.

4. Data analysis

Evidence gathered through the different methods was triangulated and analysed against the Matrix. Particular emphasis was placed on identifying replicable good practices, organisational bottlenecks and lessons learned. The analysis sought to distinguish between portfolio-wide trends and case-specific insights.

Appendix C: Table C1: The Matrix

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)			
Strategic Relevance	1.1 Alignment with CHOGM mandates	To what extent do the Secretariat's activities reflect the role and priorities agreed by the members (CHOGM, communiqués, declarations, etc.)? How are CHOGM mandates integrated into the Secretariat's work?	Activities are driven by ad hoc requests; there is no consistent link to CHOGM decisions or formal expressions of need.	Strategic outcomes are loosely mapped to CHOGM mandates, but some gaps or unclear rationales remain.	There is clear traceability between CHOGM mandates and programme portfolios; prioritisation mechanisms are in place.	<p>CHOGM mandates are referenced in the Commonwealth Secretariat's strategic documents, including the Strategic Plan and Annual Results Reports, and are listed among the criteria used to prioritise projects. While this signals political alignment at a high level, there is no clear or shared definition of what constitutes a CHOGM 'mandate,' nor is there an operational mechanism to integrate them systematically into programme or project planning. Mandates play an important political role, reaffirming priorities and providing clarity on how to pursue existing goals. However, CHOGMs occur after the Strategic Plan is already in place, meaning alignment tends to happen by design or by retrofitting, as these 'mandates' reinforce rather than reshape strategic direction.</p> <p>In practice, prioritisation linked to CHOGM mandates does not automatically come with allocated budgets, creating a disconnect between resourcing decisions and the priority areas identified by member countries. The only notable exception is in the area of EBRs, where dedicated funding has been secured. When CHOGM declarations introduce new areas of focus, they can create funding gaps, especially given declining contributions from member countries.</p> <p>The Secretariat performs at a satisfactory level: mandates are acknowledged and politically influential, but only partially integrated into implementation and delivery, with limited resourcing to support their operationalisation.</p>	2	2.17

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total	
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)				
Strategic Relevance (ctd)	1.2	Alignment with evolving national priorities (especially small states)	To what extent has the Secretariat demonstrated capacity to recognise and respond (where necessary) to emerging national priorities? What mechanisms/ systems exist to track these trends? How are these tools integrated within decision-making protocols?	Strategic outcomes and programme delivery do not reflect current national development needs; there is limited engagement with or understanding of small states' priorities.	Some efforts are made to consider national development priorities, with partial alignment in select areas or regions; small states are referenced but not systematically addressed.	Programmes are clearly aligned with member country development strategies, especially those of small and vulnerable states; there is proactive consultation and responsiveness to changing national priorities.	<p>There is insufficient evidence to assess the extent to which the Secretariat's work aligns consistently with national priorities across all 56 member countries, as comparable data are limited. However, the available information on alignment with regional and global trends is relatively complete, reflecting a reasonable degree of coherence. Interviews indicate that the Secretariat's work is firmly anchored in engagement with, and through, member countries, with much of the agenda driven by member country inputs. Dialogue between the Secretariat and member countries is reported as frequent, particularly in technical areas, though some Ambassadors appeared not to share that assessment.</p> <p>Consultations with the Board of Governors provide a formal avenue for engagement, but their potential is not fully realised. While the Board serves as a platform for member country representation, meetings are infrequent and discussions are often limited, suggesting a need for more sustained and meaningful dialogue at this level. The Secretariat performs particularly well in identifying and addressing the needs and priorities of small states, with the work of the CSSO cited as a strong example of targeted and effective support.</p> <p>The Secretariat demonstrates a reasonably good level of alignment with member country and regional priorities, particularly for small states, but engagement mechanisms at the governance level lack depth and continuity.</p>	2.5	

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total	
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)				
Strategic Relevance (ctd)	1.3	Responsiveness to global and regional trends (Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), climate, digital, etc.)	To what extent has the Secretariat demonstrated capacity to recognise and respond (where necessary) to emerging regional and global priorities? What mechanisms/systems exist to track these trends? How are these tools integrated within decision-making protocols?	Strategy and delivery models are outdated or disconnected from current global challenges; there is limited reference to the SDGs.	There is some evidence of external shifts in programming (e.g. COVID-19, climate), but no systematic adaptation.	There is proactive and structured incorporation of external drivers into strategic framing and delivery (e.g. energy transition, digital finance)	<p>The Commonwealth Secretariat demonstrates growing recognition of global and regional trends, with some integration of these issues into its programming – largely in response to CHOGM mandates, member country requests and Ministerial declarations. Key global priorities such as digital transformation, climate change, youth development and health have been reflected in programme areas, with initiatives like the Commonwealth Oceans Declaration and digital entrepreneurship support for women showing alignment with global development agendas. Tools such as the Vulnerability Index and the Youth Development Index have helped frame shared challenges across member countries and inform targeted support. These examples reflect a degree of responsiveness and a willingness to adapt to the evolving global context.</p> <p>However, this responsiveness remains largely reactive rather than proactive. While the Secretariat can pivot in response to formal requests or political declarations, there is no structured institutional mechanism to consistently anticipate and embed global and regional shifts into strategic planning, programme design or resource allocation. The absence of a clear prioritisation process, coupled with limited budgetary flexibility, constrains the Secretariat's ability to respond effectively. As a result, efforts risk being spread too thin, reducing the potential impact of initiatives.</p> <p>The Secretariat performs at a satisfactory level: it reflects global and regional trends in some areas of its work, but lacks the prioritisation, resourcing and institutional systems needed for proactive, structured adaptation in line with evolving global challenges.</p>	2	

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total	
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)				
Effectiveness of Impact Pathways	2.1	Operationalisation of impact pathways	How do 'impact pathways' inform the design/direction of the Secretariat's activities? To what extent are 'impact pathways' integrated into strategic and operational decision-making? Are they well recognised and understood by key stakeholders within the Secretariat? What are the strongest or weakest links in the Secretariat's impact pathways?	Pathways are not used beyond design documents, and not referenced in delivery, reporting or learning.	Pathways are mentioned in planning documents; they are inconsistently applied in practice.	Pathways are clearly integrated into design, reporting and learning processes; they are used as a framing tool for delivery and collaboration.	The Secretariat's Results Framework outlines the impact pathways that link activities and outputs to long-term outcomes. This reflects some degree of conceptual clarity at the strategic planning level. However, the operational use of these pathways is uneven. There is limited evidence that impact pathways consistently inform programme design, direction or decision-making across the Secretariat. While some divisions may draw on them during planning, there is no institutionalised mechanism ensuring their use in delivery, adaptation or performance tracking. Stakeholder understanding and recognition of impact pathways also appears to vary, with some internal teams unclear on how the pathways are meant to shape implementation. This suggests the Secretariat performs at a satisfactory level: the pathway exists and is broadly understood, but its practical application is inconsistent and lacks systematic integration.	2	1.5

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)			
Effectiveness of Impact Pathways (ctd)	2.2 Use of ToC	Does the Strategic Plan contain a robust ToC? Does it articulate an evidence-based case for change (including assumptions, clear causal pathways and realistic timeframes)? Is the ToC referenced in strategic and programmatic literature/reporting? How/when/ is the ToC the updated? How does the ToC inform the selection, prioritisation, design and execution of activities?	The ToC is generic, unclear, or not referenced in planning or reporting; staff are unfamiliar with it.	The ToC is referenced in Programme Strategy Documents and Draft Results Frameworks, but not consistently used for decision-making or learning.	The ToC is clearly articulated, tested and used to inform programme design, resource allocation and adaptive management.	<p>The Strategic Plan presents a ToC that intends to articulate the Secretariat's intended contribution to long-term change through layered causal pathways and assumptions. It provides a high-level approach on how the organisation seeks to create value as a convenor, technical adviser and normative actor.</p> <p>In practice, however, it is not used as a guiding document by most staff. Interviews indicate that teams do not refer to the ToC in their day-to-day work, and it is rarely cited in programme documents, project design or results reporting. While strategic-level assumptions are monitored by a dedicated risk function, there is no institutional process to revisit the ToC itself or assess whether its causal pathways remain valid. The lack of consistent application of the organisational ToC also reflects a broader absence of understanding and ownership of ToCs at the programme level.</p> <p>This gap is reinforced by an organisational culture in which the basis – and appetite – for asking difficult questions about strategic direction or results is weak. This tends to limit accountability. The Secretariat lacks the tools, processes and culture needed for self-reflection and self-critique, with no spelled-out thought process to guide such review.</p> <p>The Secretariat performs at a poor to satisfactory level: while the ToC is coherent on paper, it is disconnected from delivery, underpinned by weak accountability mechanisms and constrained by the absence of a reflective learning culture.</p>	1.5	

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total	
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)				
Effectiveness of Impact Pathways (ctd)	2.3	Internal coherence across outcome levels and cross-cutting areas (youth, gender)	Does the Secretariat implement a consolidated MEL framework, aggregating outputs, outcomes and impacts? Does the Secretariat collect and monitor data on cross-cutting areas? How are cross-cutting areas led/directed/managed/monitored within the Secretariat?	Strategies and results frameworks are fragmented; integration of youth and gender is weak or tokenistic.	There is partial coherence between strategic outcomes and delivery mechanisms; youth and gender are included in some areas.	Strategic, cross-cutting coherence is evident in programme logic, partnerships and monitoring frameworks.	<p>The Secretariat has a Results Framework that conceptually aggregates outputs, outcomes and impacts, but this framework is not consistently used across divisions to guide delivery or reporting. MEL practices are uneven and lack institutional coherence. There is no Secretariat-wide MEL system that ensures regular aggregation or adaptive decision-making based on results. While some divisions demonstrate good practices in data use, learning processes are largely ad hoc, undocumented or individually led, and there is no formal learning agenda or feedback loop in place. On cross-cutting areas such as gender, youth and inclusion, references exist at the strategic level, but there is limited evidence of consistent monitoring, leadership or accountability mechanisms. Disaggregated data are not systematically collected or used.</p> <p>There is evidence of improvement with the introduction of the new ToC, but significant data gaps remain. Efforts to validate progress against certain levels of the Results Framework often encounter incomplete or unavailable data, reflecting an inability at multiple levels to extract relevant evidence that demonstrates the Secretariat is making a measurable difference. The Secretariat has tools in place, but lacks the systems, processes and indicators needed to measure whether activities are contributing meaningfully to strategic objectives.</p> <p>The Secretariat performs at a poor level: while foundational MEL elements exist and recent improvements are noted, implementation remains fragmented, data gaps undermine measurement of strategic contribution and both MEL and cross-cutting area integration are weakly institutionalised.</p>	1	

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)			
Operational Efficiency and Delivery	3.1 Budget execution and resource utilisation	How cost-effective has the Secretariat's delivery been over the last period, and what insights can be drawn to improve value for money in the next programming period? What are the implications of increased reliance on extra-budgetary funding for organisational efficiency, autonomy and programme delivery?	There is low absorption, frequent reprogramming and high variation between planned and actual.	The budget is mostly utilised but with uneven absorption across programmes; there are some late-year spending pressures.	There is high, balanced execution aligned with programme priorities and implementation timelines; there is strong financial forecasting.	<p>The Commonwealth Secretariat's budget execution and resource utilisation demonstrate moderate effectiveness, with most budgets absorbed across programmes but significant challenges in efficiency, balance and predictability. Approximately 71% of total expenditure has been directed towards programme outcomes, indicating a reasonable prioritisation of delivery over overheads. However, actual budget execution has dropped over the years (from 95% in 2023 to 84% in 2024), reflecting emerging capacity constraints, including procurement delays, staffing limitations and absorptive challenges.</p> <p>The Secretariat's funding model – based on annual budgeting – sits uneasily alongside multi-year programming requirements, making it difficult to plan and sequence projects effectively. Over time, the overall budget envelope has gradually decreased, further constraining delivery. While the organisation is able to save money, these savings do not always represent good value for money; in some cases, they limit the ability to deliver, such as the Good Offices work being unable to fund essential face-to-face engagements. The approach to resource management remains focused on balancing the books rather than optimising the use of available resources, with limited strategic thinking on resource allocation.</p> <p>Systemic inefficiencies compound these constraints. Outdated finance systems, manual budgeting tools and slow bureaucratic procedures delay disbursements, harm the Secretariat's reputation with donors and – in some cases – lead to payment delays to staff and debtors beyond contractual limits. A reliance on short-term consultants embedded in programme budgets obscures true cost structures and raises questions about sustainability. Increased dependence on EBRs adds both flexibility and risk – introducing earmarked donor-driven priorities that may reduce strategic autonomy while straining already stretched administrative systems. Although value for money is demonstrable in select areas (mainly because staff deliver with limited resources), weak links between planning and budgeting, coupled with insufficient oversight mechanisms, undermine efficiency across the board.</p> <p>The Secretariat performs at a satisfactory level: budgets are largely utilised and delivery continues despite constraints, but outdated systems, short-term budgeting and weak strategic resource allocation limit efficiency and hinder the timely and effective use of funds.</p>	2	1.75

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)			
Operational Efficiency and Delivery (ctd)	3.2 Strategic use of partnerships and implementation efficiency	How effectively has the Secretariat leveraged partnerships to support delivery of its programme activities? Are partnerships contributing to timely, impactful and sustainable implementation?	Partnerships are inactive, ad hoc or duplicative; there is minimal contribution to delivery or impact; programme timelines are regularly delayed.	Some programme-aligned partnerships exist; contributions to implementation vary; delivery is mostly on time but with limited co-ordination or sustainability mechanisms.	Partnerships are strategically leveraged to support timely, co-ordinated delivery and scale impact; clear co-delivery arrangements and joint accountability mechanisms are in place.	<p>The Secretariat engages in a range of programme-aligned partnerships, with notable successes in areas such as health, youth development, climate finance and trade. Collaborations with organisations like the World Health Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund and private foundations have supported the delivery of key initiatives, while the Secretariat's convening power and trusted relationships enable access to high-level stakeholders and sensitive policy spaces.</p> <p>Overall, partnerships present a mixed picture. Some areas – such as health – demonstrate effective collaboration and tangible results, while others – such as elections – show limited engagement and underdeveloped partnership approaches. Evidence on outcomes is similarly mixed, with some partnerships leading to meaningful results and others suffering from delayed implementation, limited planning or unclear roles. Partnerships are often pursued in connection with securing funds rather than as part of a broader strategic vision, missing opportunities to leverage the Secretariat's recognised value and trust in the international arena to attract mission-aligned collaborators.</p> <p>The Secretariat lacks formal co-delivery frameworks or joint accountability mechanisms, reducing the potential to scale or sustain results. Implementation efficiency is also uneven: in some cases, such as technical assistance in trade or rapid responses during political crises, the Secretariat delivers faster than larger multilateral agencies; however, systemic issues – bureaucracy, outdated systems and procurement delays – frequently slow programme delivery. Long processing times for partnership funds (e.g. 18 months for the Gates Foundation) reflect these broader inefficiencies. Many projects are implemented by short-term consultants, raising concerns about continuity, sustainability and the development of internal capacity.</p> <p>The Secretariat performs at a satisfactory level: it maintains active partnerships and delivers in priority areas, but inconsistent co-ordination, weak strategic orientation and systemic delays limit the overall value, reach and timeliness of its collaborations.</p>	2	

Review Dimension	Indicator		Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total
				Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)			
Operational Efficiency and Delivery (ctd)	3.3	Governance and transparency in operations	What governance, decision-making and prioritisation processes should be put in place to enable more agile and impactful strategic delivery from 2025 onward?	Roles, responsibilities and decision-making processes are opaque or inconsistently applied; there is limited financial or operational transparency; member countries report low trust.	Some governance procedures are in place but are inconsistently followed or not well communicated; efforts are underway to improve transparency and oversight.	There are clear, consistently applied governance and decision-making frameworks; there is high transparency in financial, operational and strategic processes; regular reporting builds trust and supports continued member engagement and funding.	While the Secretariat's formal governance structure outlines roles and responsibilities at the programme and divisional levels, its practical application is inconsistent. The Senior Responsible Officer role is not institutionally embedded, leading to variable accountability across programmes. Performance expectations for Directors and Heads of Division are broadly understood, yet there is no formal framework for monitoring their performance or ensuring accountability for results. Moreover, the separation between strategic oversight and implementation roles is often blurred, with some individuals or teams managing both functions. This limits transparency and dilutes checks and balances within operational decision-making. Based on available evidence, this reflects a poor level of performance: basic structures exist, but accountability and transparency mechanisms are underdeveloped and unevenly applied.	1	

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total	
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)				
Operational Efficiency and Delivery (ctd)	3.4	Human resource capacity and deployment	To what extent have key roles been filled within the Secretariat over the Strategic Plan period? How has the Secretariat used internal staffing, consultants and other Commonwealth system resources to strengthen strategic delivery and cross-team collaboration?	Persistent vacancies remain; limited there is alignment of staff roles with strategic goals; there is an over-reliance on consultants without continuity or institutional learning; teams are siloed.	Most roles are filled but with some skill or leadership gaps; consultants and Commonwealth system partners are used inconsistently; there is emerging collaboration between units.	Staff, consultants and Commonwealth system resources are deployed strategically and aligned with delivery goals; cross-team collaboration is strong; consultants are used for targeted support and learning is retained institutionally.	Staff are described as capable but overstretched. There is limited clarity on roles, weak performance management and no organogram, creating confusion internally and externally. Key performance indicators are vague, and appraisals are not linked to results, undermining accountability. Several positions have remained vacant for extended periods, further straining delivery capacity. Siloed working is common, with limited genuine cross-team collaboration and with overlapping efforts reported in some countries. Senior leadership engagement is weak, and communication across levels is inconsistent. Human resources management shows a general lack of strategic thinking. It is unclear whether HR is providing effective, forward-looking solutions to address organisational challenges related to accountability, ownership and clarity of responsibility. The roles and responsibilities of Directors remain insufficiently defined, with limited understanding – internally and externally – of what they are accountable for or how they contribute to strategic objectives. The Secretariat has filled most roles and is undergoing restructuring, with two DSG positions appearing to take separate charge of programme delivery and corporate affairs. The analysis supporting this development is unclear, as is the proposed oversight of the Secretariat's core high-level political and diplomatic functions going forward. External consultants are widely used for delivery, offering flexibility but raising concerns around sustainability, cost and institutional memory. Member countries have questioned this reliance, particularly when in-house or Commonwealth expertise could be mobilised. While the Secretariat collaborates with Commonwealth bodies such as the CSSO and the Commonwealth Foundation, co-ordination remains fragmented, and valuable contributions from member countries are not always strategically integrated. The Secretariat performs at a satisfactory level: staff are committed and some structural reforms are underway, but unclear accountability, weak HR strategic leadership and an over-reliance on consultants undermine effective deployment and long-term organisational performance.	2	

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total	
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)				
Value Proposition and Stakeholder Engagement	4.1	Convening power and policy influence	How effectively has the Secretariat leveraged its convening power, across the Commonwealth system (including member countries, Commonwealth organisations, Accredited Organisations, youth and professional networks), to shape policy dialogue and advance shared priorities at national, regional or global levels? What evidence exists of its added value?	Convening efforts are limited, fragmented, or poorly attended; there is low influence on policy dialogue or outcomes. The broader Commonwealth system is not strategically engaged.	Convening functions are held with moderate engagement and selective outcomes; some system actors are involved, but their roles or contributions are not consistently mobilised.	Convening power is strategically deployed to bring together governments, networks and organisations across the Commonwealth system; forums shape consensus and policy at national, regional or global levels with demonstrated influence.	<p>The Secretariat's convening power is widely recognised as a core strength, underpinned by its trusted, informal relationships with member countries. Through Ministerial Meetings, policy forums and technical collaboration, it brings governments and stakeholders together on shared priorities such as trade, health, youth and climate. Its Good Offices function enables quiet diplomacy in politically sensitive contexts, with meaningful influence seen in cases such as Eswatini's uprising, Samoa's constitutional crisis and Sierra Leone's post-election crisis.</p> <p>CHOGM and thematic Ministerial Meetings (e.g. on health, youth, and trade) have shaped joint declarations and influenced national policies. Signature initiatives such as the Youth Development Index and the Climate Change Finance Access Hub demonstrate the Secretariat's ability to set norms and provide practical support. The Secretariat is also agile in delivering targeted technical assistance faster than other multilaterals in some areas.</p> <p>Interviews pointed out that Heads of Government were increasingly sending deputies to CHOGM and that participation at Ministerial Meetings may come from representatives of member countries who do not hold the decision-making authority needed to translate commitments into action. This is a cause for concern as gaps in top-level political engagement tend to prove infectious and may limit the weight of decisions taken and the follow-through at national level.</p> <p>Collaboration with system actors such as the Commonwealth Foundation and the CSSO remains fragmented. Siloed working, lack of role clarity and weak internal communication dilute collective impact. Some events risk being performative rather than policy-shaping, and reporting on influence is often anecdotal rather than evidence-based.</p> <p>The Secretariat performs at a satisfactory to good level: its convening power is genuine and can shape agendas and policy outcomes, but the absence of consistent high-level political participation, combined with co-ordination and tracking gaps, constrains its full potential.</p>	2.5	2

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total	
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)				
Value Proposition and Stakeholder Engagement(ctd)	4.2	Value proposition and comparative advantage	What distinguishes the Secretariat from other intergovernmental or multilateral institutions, and how can it better position itself to meet emerging global challenges? How do member countries, especially small states, and partners perceive the Secretariat's value proposition? Which of its core comparative advantages are recognised and how can they be strengthened?	The Secretariat is perceived as duplicative or lacking a clear role compared to other regional and global actors; there is limited stakeholder confidence in its added value.	There is some recognition of the Secretariat's role and comparative advantage in specific areas, but it is not widely articulated or leveraged across the organisation.	There is a strong and consistent perception of the Secretariat's distinct value and comparative advantage; it is widely recognised for delivering technical support, convening and influencing in ways that complement or exceed those of peer institutions.	<p>The Secretariat holds a distinct position in the multilateral landscape, largely because of its trust-based relationships, convening power and niche expertise. Member countries and partners consistently highlight its informal, peer-based structure, political neutrality and access to leaders as key assets. These qualities foster openness, access, collaboration and responsiveness, features highly prized in overseas development but not always found in larger more formal institutions. The Secretariat's support to small states and its Good Offices function showcase its added value in specific technical and diplomatic areas.</p> <p>However, this value is not consistently communicated or fully leveraged across the organisation; it is generally diluted in work. While small states strongly affirm the Secretariat's relevance – especially as a platform for visibility and solidarity – larger and wealthier member countries express scepticism. Concerns about focus, transparency and results-based delivery have eroded confidence among key donors, with some questioning its comparative advantage. Internally, the absence of clear priorities, weak performance tracking and fragmented communications further obscure the Secretariat's unique contribution.</p> <p>This suggests the Secretariat performs at a satisfactory level: it has a clear and credible value proposition, particularly in areas like small states support, youth, trade and discreet diplomacy – but this is not yet backed by the strategic focus, institutional coherence or performance evidence needed to consistently reinforce and sustain its comparative advantage.</p>	2	

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total	
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)				
Value Proposition and Stakeholder Engagement (ctd)	4.3	Stakeholder voice in design and review	To what extent do member countries feel they have a voice within the Commonwealth? Do they consider this useful, when compared to other platforms for multilateral co-operation? How/why (not)?	There is limited consultation or participation by member countries or partners; feedback is not incorporated.	Stakeholders are engaged through consultations or reporting mechanisms, but feedback is not always clearly integrated into programme decisions.	Regular, structured engagement with diverse stakeholders informs planning, priorities and reform.	<p>The Secretariat provides avenues for stakeholder engagement, primarily through CHOGM, Ministerial Meetings and informal consultations. Member countries – particularly small states – strongly value the informal, peer-based environment, which offers a sense of equality, solidarity and discretion not always found in other multilaterals. Forums like CHOGM and CMAG are widely seen as effective spaces for discussion, with small states noting that the Commonwealth gives them a global platform and amplifies their voice in international fora.</p> <p>However, this sense of voice is not consistently matched by clear integration of feedback into programme design or review. High Commissioners report feeling disconnected from Secretariat activities, sometimes learning about projects or country visits after the fact. Internal silos and communication gaps mean feedback loops are weak, and engagement with technical ministries in capitals is uneven and often unco-ordinated. Board meetings, which could serve as an important link with member countries, were repeatedly described in interviews as infrequent and lacking substantive discussion, further contributing to a disconnect. While many member countries recognise that the Secretariat does good work, this is not communicated effectively, leaving valuable results under-acknowledged and reducing opportunities for shared learning or political buy-in.</p> <p>The lack of prioritisation, limited strategic focus and weak results reporting further undermine stakeholders' ability to influence meaningful change.</p> <p>The Secretariat performs at a poor to satisfactory level: member countries are consulted through different channels, but engagement is inconsistent, communication of results is weak and mechanisms to ensure that feedback shapes programme direction and reform are underdeveloped.</p>	1.5	

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)			
Adaptive Capacity and Strategic Readiness	5.1	Use of MEL to inform decisions and learning To what extent does the Secretariat employ MEL to guide programme development, reflect and adapt as necessary? How are MEL principles/ approaches integrated into programme design and delivery? Are there practical examples demonstrating the use of MEL to inform decisions and either programmatic or diplomatic levels?	MEL tools are complex or burdensome; data are not used for learning or decision-making.	Monitoring systems exist but are under-utilised; learning is ad hoc or siloed.	MEL is lean and learning-oriented and supports timely decision-making, accountability and strategic reflection.	While MEL is referenced in strategic documents and the Results Framework outlines expected outcomes, there is little evidence that MEL is actively used to guide programme development or inform strategic and operational decision-making. Learning is not institutionalised: there is no Secretariat-wide learning agenda, no formal reflection mechanisms and limited documentation of adaptation or course correction. Efforts to use MEL tend to be individual-driven and anecdotal rather than structured or embedded in programme cycles. MEL approaches are not consistently integrated into programme design or delivery, and the Results Framework is not functioning as a living document. There are almost no practical examples demonstrating the use of MEL to inform decisions at the programmatic level. Based on these observations, this indicator reflects a poor level of performance.	1	1.17
	5.2	Prioritisation and resource allocation mechanisms How well is the current operating and resourcing model aligned with the Secretariat's strategic objectives and the evolving needs of member countries?	Allocation is based on historical precedent; no prioritisation criteria are used.	Some internal guidelines exist, but these are not enforced or understood across teams.	A transparent prioritisation framework is used to allocate resources, sunset lower-priority areas and focus on impact.	There has been no clear institutional mechanism for prioritising between competing initiatives or responding to member country requests in a structured manner. Resource allocation decisions are only very broadly guided by evidence, demand or alignment with CHOGM mandates. Divisions and programmes appear to receive funding and attention based on historical precedent or availability of external funding, rather than through a Secretariat-wide prioritisation framework. There is also no documented process for assessing trade-offs, setting strategic priorities or adjusting allocations in response to performance or changing contexts. This unsatisfactory level of performance is especially unhelpful in an environment of declining resources: prioritisation is ad hoc, and resource distribution lacks transparency, consistency or alignment with strategic goals.	1	

Review Dimension	Indicator		Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total
				Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)			
Adaptive Capacity and Strategic Readiness(ctd)	5.3	Strategic learning and foresight from current plan	What good practices or approaches from the current Strategic Plan should be scaled or institutionalised in the new plan? Conversely, what approaches should be reconsidered or retired?	There are no clear learning processes or syntheses of experiences from the current Strategic Plan; there is limited reflection on what has worked or not.	Some informal or siloed learning is captured through reviews or evaluations, but there is limited synthesis across programmes; insights are not consistently used to inform future planning.	There is systematic collection and synthesis of learning from the current Strategic Plan; there is evidence of strategic reflection, institutional learning and application of insights to inform the next phase of planning.	The Secretariat regularly produces and/or commissions evaluations, programme reviews, country reports and case studies, which demonstrate a wide body of documentation from which learning could be drawn. However, there is little evidence that this material is synthesised or actively used to inform organisational decisions, adaptation or strategic planning. Learning tends to be equated with reporting, and, when it does occur, it is typically informal, decentralised and driven by individuals or teams. There are no formal structures or expectations to capture lessons and apply them at the institutional level. As confirmed by both the literature and interviews, there is also no established mechanism to ensure recommendations from one Strategic Plan evaluation feed into the development of the next. This gap contributes to the recurrence of similar issues across cycles. Furthermore, the fact that the next Strategic Plan is already being developed before the current evaluation is finalised raises concerns about the Secretariat's willingness or ability to meaningfully integrate the findings from this review. These observations support a poor to satisfactory rating; while 'evidence' is generated, the Secretariat lacks institutional mechanisms to transform	1.5	

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total	
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)				
Contribution towards Strategic Outcomes	6.1	Greater adherence to Commonwealth values and principles and advancement of good governance	What progress has the Secretariat made towards this outcome target? Are there tangible examples that demonstrate a direct contribution to these outcomes? What mechanisms or approaches were most effective in achieving these outcomes?	There are no tangible improvements in electoral integrity, rule of law or governance.	There have been partial achievements in key countries; there are some institutional gains.	There is demonstrated strengthening of elections, justice systems and governance norms across diverse settings.	<p>The Secretariat has made progress in advancing Commonwealth values and good governance across a diverse range of countries. Between 2021 and 2024, over 80% of performance indicators under its Democracy and Governance pillar were either met or showed good progress. Member countries value the Commonwealth's support for fair elections, rule of law and anti-corruption, often citing the Secretariat's ability to provide discreet, trusted assistance – especially through its Good Offices function and legal expertise.</p> <p>There are examples of contribution, including election observation missions, legislative drafting support and engagement with human rights mechanisms, particularly in small and vulnerable states. High-level declarations at CHOGM and consensus-building at Law Ministers' Meetings further reflect the Secretariat's role in upholding shared values. Countries like Brunei, Eswatini, Lesotho and Sierra Leone credited the Secretariat with playing critical roles in reducing acute tensions or driving reforms.</p> <p>However, progress is uneven. Targets related to youth participation and rule of law frameworks have lagged, and challenges persist in embedding results-based management and performance reporting. While member countries appreciate the Commonwealth's niche role and convening power, some – especially larger or donor countries – continue to raise concerns about prioritisation, transparency and impact measurement.</p> <p>This suggests the Secretariat performs at a satisfactory level: it demonstrates contributions to democratic governance and values-based reform in diverse contexts, but could benefit from stronger focus, improved impact reporting and more systematic learning to maximise its comparative advantage.</p>	2	2.25

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total	
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)				
Contribution towards Strategic Outcomes (ctd)	6.2	Sustainable and inclusive economic and social development	What progress has the Secretariat made towards this outcome target? Are there tangible examples that demonstrate a direct contribution to these outcomes? What mechanisms or approaches were most effective in achieving these outcomes?	There is a limited contribution to trade, education, health or finance outcomes.	Progress is evident in some domains, especially trade and finance.	There is broad and inclusive support across sectors, with clear progress on economic resilience and the SDGs and enabling policy frameworks	<p>The Secretariat demonstrates consistent and wide-ranging contributions to sustainable and inclusive economic and social development across member countries. Over 2021–2024, it met or made good progress on nearly all performance indicators in this area, with notable outcomes in trade policy, education leadership, public health reform and debt management systems. Concrete results include legislative reforms in health and finance, digital trade capacity in small states, expanded use of the Commonwealth Meridian debt system and targeted support to women entrepreneurs and micro, small and medium-sized. Ministerial Meetings and partnerships with agencies like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the International Trade Centre have further extended its reach.</p> <p>The CCA example further reinforces this contribution by tackling systemic trade barriers and enabling inclusive economic growth. Through clusters focused on digital, regulatory, supply-side and business connectivity issues, the CCA supports policy development, convenes technical working groups and delivers capacity-building for member countries. It has made clear contributions to regional co-operation, legal harmonisation and digital trade readiness, particularly in Fiji, Jamaica, Malawi and Samoa.</p> <p>While some initiatives remain small in scale or pilot in nature, the Secretariat's ability to offer tailored assistance and policy tools – particularly for small and vulnerable states – is frequently cited as a comparative strength. Its work enables key SDG-related reforms in areas that often lack other sources of multilateral support. This suggests performance at a satisfactory to good level: the Secretariat provides inclusive, cross-sectoral support that advances sustainable development and economic resilience in diverse settings, though scalability and long-term impact tracking remain areas for continued focus.</p>	2.5	

Review Dimension	Indicator	Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total	
			Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)				
Contribution towards Strategic Outcomes (ctd)	6.3	Climate-resilient and low-carbon development to respond to climate and ocean emergencies	What progress has the Secretariat made towards this outcome target? Are there tangible examples that demonstrate a direct contribution to these outcomes? What mechanisms or approaches were most effective in achieving these outcomes?	Climate programming is small-scale or disconnected from policy.	Support is provided but uneven across member countries.	There is scaled-up programming, policy impact and access to climate finance, especially for small states, and increased influence in global climate policy or financing mechanisms.	<p>The Secretariat has made steady progress towards climate-resilient and low-carbon development, with all performance indicators under this pillar showing 'met' or 'good progress' by 2024. Through the Blue Charter, the Commonwealth Sustainable Energy Transition Agenda and the Climate Finance Access Hub, it has supported policy reform and capacity-building, and mobilised over US\$335 million in climate finance, particularly benefiting small and vulnerable states.</p> <p>The Living Lands Charter, adopted by all member countries in 2022, is recognised for promoting integrated action across the Rio Conventions. It has helped shift thinking on biodiversity, land and climate synergies and contributed to promising initiatives, such as securing climate funding for the Zambezi Basin. However, delivery has been uneven and under-resourced, with limited visibility and concerns from stakeholders about the gap between ambition and implementation.</p> <p>Overall, performance sits at a satisfactory level. The Secretariat has delivered meaningful support, especially through technical assistance and global advocacy, but limited operational capacity and fragmented follow-through constrain deeper, more sustained impact on the ground.</p>	2	

Review Dimension	Indicator		Questions	Desired State			Analysis	Score	Total
				Poor (1)	Satisfactory (2)	Good (3)			
Contribution towards Strategic Outcomes (ctd)	6.4	Small and other vulnerable states' needs and concerns addressed in global governance	What progress has the Secretariat made towards this outcome target? Are there tangible examples that demonstrate a direct contribution to these outcomes? What mechanisms or approaches were most effective in achieving these outcomes?	There is limited visibility or participation of small and vulnerable states in international policy spaces; there is no evidence of influence on global outcomes.	There is some advocacy on behalf of small states, but influence on global forums or negotiations remains limited; resilience needs are acknowledged but not addressed systematically.	There is clear and consistent elevation of small and vulnerable states' priorities in multilateral settings; there is a demonstrable influence on policy agendas, and there are tangible outcomes, such as increased access to finance or climate support.	<p>The Secretariat has made strong strides in elevating small and vulnerable states' concerns in global governance, meeting or exceeding most related performance indicators between 2021 and 2024. Initiatives like the Commonwealth Universal Vulnerability Index and the Joint Advocacy Strategy with the United Nations reflect a growing influence in global policy discussions. Active participation in COPs, debt relief advocacy at Finance Ministers' Meetings and support for the Fourth International Conference on Small Island Developing States underline its role as a platform for amplifying small states' voices. Concrete results include over US\$335 million mobilised through the Climate Finance Access Hub, expanded use of the Meridian debt management system in 39 countries and adoption of model laws for climate, energy and ocean governance. Tailored technical support has helped small states advance reforms in public finance, energy and maritime policy.</p> <p>However, progress is not uniform. While policy influence is clear, follow-through on implementation and systematic tracking of outcomes remains limited. Stakeholders value the Secretariat's convening power and neutrality, but some raise concerns about visibility, co-ordination and the scale of engagement.</p> <p>This suggests performance is between satisfactory and good: the Secretariat is increasingly effective in advocating for and supporting small states, with growing global influence and credible technical delivery. To fully realise this potential, stronger systems for implementation, communications and monitoring will be key.</p>	2.5	

Appendix D: Table D1: Case studies

Name:	The Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda
Overview	A strategically aligned, demand-driven mechanism that delivers quality, cost-efficient policy tools, capacity-building and convening platforms valued by member countries for addressing pressing trade and investment challenges. Its ability to translate achievements into sustained country-level change is constrained by limited funding, follow-up and impact measurement.
Activity and origins	<p>The CCA aims to support the development of national economies and facilitate increased Commonwealth trade and investment for inclusive and participatory economic growth. It operates through five clusters: Digital Connectivity, Physical Connectivity, Regulatory Connectivity, Supply-Side Connectivity, Business to Business Connectivity.</p> <p>The CCA's approach is structured around three pillars:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convening members through a cluster approach and facilitating high-level meetings; • Equipping policy-makers with evidence and tools, including technical papers, and modular digital policy-making tools; • Advising members through institutional capacity-building trainings and direct policy advice. <p>Launched at CHOGM 2018 with the explicit objective of boosting intra-Commonwealth trade to US\$2 trillion by 2030.</p>
Budget	Approx. £100,000 annually, with some clusters working exclusively with staff budget.
Staffing	The CCA head and one lead per cluster (six staff in total). The work was overseen by the then-Senior Director(s) of Trade, Oceans and Natural Resources (Economic, Development, Trade and Investment Directorate).
Relevance and Coherence	<p>1.1 Is this work really needed?</p> <p>Yes. The work of the CCA is clearly needed by member countries. It addresses pressing global trade challenges (e.g. digital transformation, regulatory reform, climate-smart value chain development) by supporting countries through practical tools, legal guidance, capacity-building and convening power. Each cluster targets a critical dimension of trade and investment, from digital connectivity and agriculture to enabling business environments.³¹</p> <p>The programme responds to direct, ongoing demand from member countries, with technical assistance requests initiated formally and regularly outpacing available resources. Member countries and partners value its outputs and platforms, especially its ability to bridge public-private divides and create space for multi-stakeholder dialogue.³²</p> <p>1.2 What's the strategic fit?</p> <p>Good. The CCA is strategically aligned with the broader Commonwealth mandate and functions as a core vehicle for delivering the Commonwealth's economic vision. It is rooted in high-level political commitment, launched at CHOGM 2018 with the explicit objective of boosting intra-Commonwealth trade to US\$2 trillion by 2030.³³ Its activities are guided by demand-driven planning, endorsed by the Development Assistance Committee, and aligned with the Secretariat's Strategic Plan.</p> <p>The CCA's unique position within a network of 'like-minded countries' sharing legal and institutional frameworks, combined with its role in shaping model laws and regulatory standards, amplifies its value in the global trade system.³⁴ While there are limitations in long-term impact tracking and country-level implementation owing to funding constraints, its policy relevance and demand responsiveness affirm that the CCA is essential to the Commonwealth's approach to inclusive, sustainable trade and economic co-operation.³⁵</p>

Name:	The Commonwealth Connectivity Agenda
<p>2. Effectiveness and Impact</p>	<p>2.1 Is this work achieving its objectives?</p> <p>Yes. The CCA is making good progress towards its objectives, particularly in policy influence, convening and capacity development.³⁶</p> <p>Internal dashboards show 'good progress' or 'target met' across areas like policy development, capacity-building and member country engagement.</p> <p>High-quality outputs, such as sectoral state-of-play reports, regulatory manuals and a forthcoming Model Law on Digital Trade, support evidence-based policy-making.</p> <p>The CCA has for example delivered regional training and technical assistance such as in Fiji, Malawi and Samoa, but also in the Caribbean, with Barbados and Jamaica, and soon with Saint Lucia and St Kitts, contributing to enhanced institutional and policy capacity across regions.</p> <p>The programme has done very well in mobilising EBRs (e.g. \$300,000 from the Open Society Foundation (OSF)) and leveraging partners (e.g. universities, Asian Development Bank (ADB), Caribbean Telecommunications Union (CTU)) to deliver activities despite declining Secretariat budgets.</p> <p>Regular cluster meetings and summits and ad hoc technical advice reinforce the CCA's role as a facilitator and enabler.</p> <p>2.2 Is it making a real difference on the ground?</p> <p>Partially. The CCA's work is laying important foundations, such as policy frameworks, training modules and regional co-operation, but its ability to drive deep, sustained change at the country level is limited:³⁷</p> <p>Many initiatives stop at the point of policy dialogue or training. There is no dedicated funding for project implementation or follow-up in member countries, making it difficult to assess or sustain long-term changes in practice.</p> <p>While the CCA has supported multiple countries, resource constraints mean engagement is often surface-level, without the scale or continuity needed to shift systems or institutions.</p> <p>Without a budget for impact measurement, the programme relies on anecdotal evidence and informal feedback, making it hard to robustly demonstrate outcomes beyond outputs.</p> <p>Annual budgeting has limited internal capacity, and lack of a coherent ToC hinders the translation of regional and policy-level work into country-specific results.</p> <p>2.3 How confident can we be about that?</p> <p>Our overall confidence in the CCA making a real difference is mixed. Confidence is high when it comes to the delivery of outputs and short- to medium-term outcomes (such as knowledge products, capacity-building and convening) but lower regarding its ability to achieve deep, sustained and measurable long-term impact across member countries, mainly given the lack of evidence.</p> <p>2.4 Can these results be validated by external stakeholders?</p> <p>Partially. The CCA's achievements can be partially validated by external stakeholders, particularly in relation to its delivery of knowledge products, convening power and capacity-building efforts. External partners such as OSF, ADB, CTU and universities have not only contributed resources but also collaborated directly in implementation, which can be interpreted as a proxy of validation for the CCA's outputs and approach. Member countries have also reportedly expressed strong appreciation for CCA support: some considered it more valuable than engagement with other multilateral organisations. However, it is important to note that most of this feedback was reported by Secretariat staff, and the Review team had limited direct access to external stakeholders during data collection. As such, these accounts (while consistent and plausible) rely largely on internal reporting and should be interpreted with caution.</p>
<p>3. Efficiency and Sustainability</p>	<p>3.1 Are the results value for money?</p> <p>Yes, although at the expense of the Secretariat staff. The CCA operates with limited core funding from the Commonwealth Secretariat and relies heavily on external partnerships and EBRs.³⁸ Clusters manage to deliver activities on very modest budgets, often just £10,000–£30,000 per year, demonstrating cost discipline, e.g. the Digital Cluster delivered a full regional workshop for £15,000 through partnerships. The CCA leverages strong partnerships and in-kind support to stretch limited resources. Examples include \$300,000 from OSF and support from institutions like universities. Yet concerns remain about recruitment inefficiencies and the consequences for institutional memory of over-reliance on consultants without building internal capacity.</p> <p>While activities are delivered, limited resources for follow-up and impact measurement constrain the ability to demonstrate longer-term results. Discontinued tools such as peer learning grants have reduced the programme's ability to deepen engagement. Clusters have proactively focused on small countries, but capacity and funding gaps hinder more consistent, equitable delivery across regions and clusters. This is especially because clusters have only one staff member to manage the requests of all 56 member countries.</p> <p>3.2 What continues if the programme funding stops?</p> <p>The CCA would likely transform into a network facilitating externally funded projects and leveraging existing relationships and expertise, rather than driving initiatives directly from a central Secretariat budget. The depth and breadth of its interventions would significantly contract, focusing on what can be achieved through partnerships. Such an approach would not be inconsistent with the Secretariat's value proposition.</p>

Name:	Commonwealth Small States Office, Geneva
Overview	A notable success: valued practical help needed by smaller states in the priority areas of human rights and trade is provided efficiently and effectively, leveraging the Commonwealth's strengths and boosting visibility.
Activity and Origins	Niche technical assistance covering human rights and trade issues to resident and non-resident smaller states (as well as countries without permanent missions in Geneva) with particular reference to the effectiveness of their interactions with international bodies. Also, provision of office accommodation and facilities, logistical, protocol and other support for related purposes to members and to the Secretariat. Mandated by CHOGM, Kampala 2007, and officially launched in 2011. The present human rights and trade advisers project was announced at CHOGM in 2018 and commenced in January 2019.
Budget	Approx. £1.2m annually (2024/25 prices). ³⁹ For the expert advisers, EBRs are mainly from the UK. For human rights, additional EBRs are secured from Australia for 2023–2025. The existing finding arrangements are somewhat hand-to-mouth.
Staffing	An office manager and an administrative assistant, with four technical advisers (two for human rights and two for trade). The office is overseen by the DSG.
1. Relevance and Coherence	<p>1.1 Is this work really needed?</p> <p>Yes. The work addresses the disproportionately weak engagement with United Nations and World Trade Organization bodies manifested by smaller states and helps ensure their voices are heard in the relevant discourse and decision-making processes.⁴⁰ Relevant UN and other bodies collaborate and provide assistance but cannot in practice deliver such hands-on technical help and capacity-building, nor can regional organisations fill the gap.⁴¹ All beneficiaries interviewed stressed that the CSSO made a real difference to their ability to engage meaningfully with the relevant international human rights mechanisms and trade organisations.⁴² They greatly appreciate the impartial and trusted support made available as well as the solidarity and peer-to-peer contact catalysed, formally and informally, by the Secretariat's convening power.^{43 44} UN and other interlocutors emphasised the Secretariat's ability to develop and harness trusting relationships, thus enabling human rights-related technical assistance⁴⁵ and capacity development training that might not otherwise have occurred – though this is apparently not invariably the case⁴⁶</p> <p>1.2 What's the strategic fit?</p> <p>Good. In line with overall Secretariat strategies, the work targets the Commonwealth priorities of human rights and economic prosperity as well as assisting smaller and relatively disadvantaged member countries. It leverages key Secretariat strategic advantages in terms of access and trust. Enhanced Commonwealth visibility in Geneva and New York UN mechanisms also adds diplomatic weight to the Secretariat's global role.</p>
2. Effectiveness and Impact	<p>2.1 Is this work achieving its objectives?</p> <p>Yes, evidenced reporting indicates that capacity-building and technical assistance targets are typically met or exceeded at the output levels.⁴⁷ Interviewees evinced high levels of satisfaction with knowledge products and with training and capacity-building: one donor described CSSO 's performance as 'amazing'; another said it was 'really, really good.'^{48 49 50} Tellingly, donors have provided additional resources to allow the CSSO to occupy an additional floor of its existing building and to accommodate perhaps seven new missions.⁵¹</p> <p>(It was noted that several beneficiaries interviewed want to see objectives (and funding) enlarged to include further technical support and advice on e.g. climate change and regarding e.g. agreements covering the protection of traditional knowledge.⁵² At least two donors appeared open to a needs-based bid for necessary further funding to support such expansion.)</p> <p>2.2 Is it making a real difference on the ground?</p> <p>Not possible to say in 'big picture' terms as outcome indicators are focused on capacity-building, institutional strengthening and effective engagement with UN and multilateral human rights and trade mechanisms rather than e.g. levels of violence against women or custody standards or e.g. mitigation of food insecurity/ sustainable economic development. Nevertheless, there is evidence of strengthening of some national human rights mechanisms/frameworks, which could reasonably be expected at the least to boost awareness of norms and increase engagement with the United Nations human rights architecture.⁵³ Moreover, Secretariat engagement, especially in the human rights field, is 'on request' and is not supported by treaty or detailed mandate (e.g. there is no Commonwealth position on the death penalty or on LGBTQIA+ issues). Yet, though it will not normally be appropriate to seek particular political reforms in member countries, several interlocutors saw scope for member countries to work more collaboratively and formulate common positions on human rights and believed that these, in conjunction with the CSSO-based human rights work, could help drive more change on the ground.⁵⁴</p> <p>2.3 How confident can we be about results?</p> <p>Confidence appears fully justified in the delivery of outputs and short- to medium-term outcomes, e.g. day to day engagement with the Human Rights Committee mechanisms, capacity-building, knowledge products and in-country and Geneva-based capacity-building and trainings, as evidence of the wide variety of technical trade support delivered and beneficiary country feedback. We lack the concrete and granular outcome and impact indicators required to provide evidence to stiffen confidence in higher-level impact of the CSSO's work.⁵⁵ This consideration applies to cross-cutting and catalytic outcomes and generally across Secretariat outcome and impact indicators.⁵⁶</p> <p>2.4 Can these results be validated by external stakeholders?</p> <p>Yes, in general terms – and with relatively high levels of triangulation in relation to the quality of outputs.</p>

Name:	Commonwealth Small States Office, Geneva
3. Efficiency and Sustainability	<p>3.1 Are the results value for money? Yes. This is a small unit (six staff) that can show a wide range of activities providing highly valued support to a significantly disadvantaged group of member countries as well as to visiting staff from the Secretariat itself. At least one other rival (theoretically) provider and a principal donor spoke admiringly of the high rate of quality output by both the human rights and trade sections. The office facilities deal also seems highly competitive.⁵⁷</p> <p>3.2 What continues if the programme funding stops? Not much. Likely some virtual support would be attempted based on such support as the United Nations and regional bodies might be able to provide. Some missions would probably not be able to continue their presence in Geneva. It seems clear that the limitations on engagement by small and other vulnerable states are likely to endure.⁵⁸ Yet some national capacities have plainly been enlarged, and these should continue to bear fruit, if nurtured by governments.</p>

Name:	The Commonwealth Living Lands Charter
Overview	A significant Commonwealth initiative to enhance some climate policy and biodiversity frameworks. These are relatively early days, yet there is a perceived lack of clarity on the Charter's tangible goals and its affordability.
Activity and origins	Under the framework of its Charter, the Secretariat acts as a facilitator and platform for its member countries collectively to implement and strengthen the goals and commitments outlined in the Rio Conventions, fostering a more co-ordinated and effective global response to environmental challenges. ⁵⁹ There are three primary workstreams (building technical capacity, improved financing and better knowledge exchange) and five focus areas (agriculture, biodiversity, livestock, indigenous peoples and local communities). Policy analysis and support to institutional governance is also provided. Launched at CHOGM Kigali in 2022. Built on evidence from a Special Report in 2019 and a history of Commonwealth concern for greater climate action, from 1989. ⁶⁰
Budget	Approx. £180,000 annually (based on figures for 2024/25). ⁶¹
Staffing	Total of three staff: one adviser, an officer and a young professional, plus researchers and interns. The work is overseen by the Senior Director of the Economic, Development, Trade and Investment Directorate.
1. Relevance and Coherence	<p>1.1 Is this work really needed? Yes, this is relevant and helpful support for global climate policy, pursuing integrated actions needed to get impact across the three Rio Conventions through delivery of National Determined Contributions, land degradation neutrality targets and contributions to the National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans. Stakeholders interviewed were broadly positive about encouraging synergy between the Rio Conventions. One said that the Commonwealth added greater credibility to the climate agenda, as it is not discounted as 'hair-shirted, tree-hugging lefties.' The Secretariat has shown that it can contribute value, despite this being a somewhat crowded field: with the United Nations conventions on Climate Change and on Biodiversity providing the framework for international cooperation, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change assessing the science of climate change and the Green Climate Fund helping developing countries mitigate and adapt to climate change. There are very many other bodies and non-governmental organisations active in the field, with overlapping agenda.⁶²</p> <p>1.2 What's the strategic fit? Good. Climate and environmental resilience are a key priority for the new SG and set to feature prominently in the new Strategic Plan. The Charter also leverages existing Secretariat financial instruments (Climate Finance Access Hub). Yet, though this Charter appears to have contributed to a shift in thinking about integrated approaches across the Rio Conventions, it creates high expectations for further action and follow-through which Secretariat may struggle to pursue effectively.</p>

Name:	The Commonwealth Living Lands Charter
<p>2. Effectiveness and Impact</p>	<p>2.1 Is this work achieving its objectives?</p> <p>Yes. The reporting framework records achievements at output level across most (not all) targets. This is a relatively new programme of work, so successes include the creation of the Charter itself together with an Advisory Group (attended at the first meeting by 18 partners) and lead countries for associated thematic working groups. It has also developed a communications plan and produced two publications (Forest Carbon Toolkit, Financing for Climate Health Nexus).</p> <p>2.2 Is it making a real difference on the ground?</p> <p>This is new work and actions so far are consistent with getting implementation mechanisms in place. Though it is difficult to piece together a coherent impact narrative – and even harder to attribute impacts to the Charter specifically or the Commonwealth in general – the Charter seems already to have generated some positive results, e.g. collaboration with the Iwokrama International Centre for Rain Forest Conservation and Development at COP29 in Azerbaijan resulted in a successful film production that helped raise the latter’s profile and promoted the importance of including indigenous voices within land conservation programmes. According to another external stakeholder, the Secretariat was instrumental in establishing the Great Green Wall initiative in South Africa. Evidence provided show further important successes, e.g. support provided to countries in the Zambezi Basin, which helped secure funding of \$60.35 million from the Climate Investment Funds.</p> <p>2.3 How confident can we be about results?</p> <p>Mixed. The initiative lacks a clear reporting and results framework. That plus the absence of a clear ToC makes it hard to be confident about progress or impact and confounds the distinction between attribution and contribution to results. Documents shared with the review team as evidence for impact tended to be more descriptive than analytical, or simply event summaries/communiqués. The Secretariat team recognises these shortcomings and is prioritising the development of a ToC/Results Framework.</p> <p>2.4 Can these results be validated by external stakeholders?</p> <p>Somewhat. There is an ‘expectation gap’ between what the Charter promises and what it can deliver on the ground. The launch plainly generated some interest and publicity, particularly among those working on the Rio Conventions, and external stakeholders interviewed asked ‘what next?’ Similarly, an influential non-governmental organisation working on forest management suggested that little or no follow up had resulted from an initial collaboration with the Commonwealth. Yet the Secretariat team indicates that further work is in hand to operationalise the Charter in such areas.</p>
<p>3. Efficiency and Sustainability</p>	<p>3.1 Are the results value for money?</p> <p>The project achieved good visibility for the Secretariat when the Charter was ratified by members. Some important achievements have been made since then, for a modest annual investment of less than £200,000. Measured against the scale of ambition, resources are inadequate.</p> <p>3.2 What continues if the programme funding stops?</p> <p>Likely many elements will continue in one form or another, though without a specific Commonwealth focus, or any synergies. While the Charter itself may lose momentum without funding, interviews suggest it has precipitated a new way of thinking about synergies across the Rio Conventions that may endure irrespective of the Secretariat.</p>

Name:	Electoral Support Section																														
Overview	The distinctive Commonwealth elections observation model remains valid but has been underperforming, mainly because of resource constraints. This is a flagship running out of steam.																														
Activity and Origins	Election observation, reporting; follow-up technical support; capacity-building through knowledge publications as well as training workshops; assistance to election management bodies, etc. Electoral observation goes back at least to 1967 and has covered more than 200 elections. It has long been regarded as part of the Commonwealth brand and close to the raison d'être of the Secretariat. The role is identified in the Commonwealth Charter (paragraph 1) and features prominently in many high-level documents. ⁶³																														
Budget	<p>There is a disconnect between priority-setting and budget as, despite the importance of this activity, core funding has decreased and was nil for the 2024/25 year – making it wholly reliant on EBRs plus such internal virements as could be procured later in the financial year.⁶⁴ This hand-to-mouth existence, inimical to effective planning and budgeting, likely explains some of the performance issues identified below.</p> <p>The following table shows the funding for the four-year period: COMSEC direct funding has varied between zero and £1 million; Australia and the UK together gave £260,000 for an observation mission to Zimbabwe; £467,000 was made available from Secretariat reserves as part of a designated fund (but was exhausted by 2022/23).⁶⁵ Donations from Australia totalling £900,000 over the four-year period have included EBRs specifically for the Commonwealth Election Professionals (CEP) initiative.</p> <p>Table D1: Funding for electoral support between 2021/22 and 2024/25</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Financial year</th> <th>COMSEC</th> <th>CFTC</th> <th>DDF*</th> <th>UK EBRs</th> <th>Australia EBRs**</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>2021/22</td> <td>£279,000</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£467,000</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£283,751</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2022/23</td> <td>£1,000,583</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£284,787</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2023/24</td> <td>£600,000</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£195,000†</td> <td>£225,651 (+£65,000†)</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2024/25</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£1,023,802§</td> <td>£51,813</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>* Democracy Designated Fund. Established in 2020 by the Board of Governors from Secretariat reserves, now depleted. ** This 4.5-year EBR funds the CEP initiative. It totals £900,000 and ends in June 2025. † The UK and Australia funded the Zimbabwe observation mission via two EBRs of £195,000 and £65,000, respectively. § UK EBRs, ended in March 2025.</p>	Financial year	COMSEC	CFTC	DDF*	UK EBRs	Australia EBRs**	2021/22	£279,000	£0	£467,000	£0	£283,751	2022/23	£1,000,583	£0	£0	£0	£284,787	2023/24	£600,000	£0	£0	£195,000†	£225,651 (+£65,000†)	2024/25	£0	£0	£0	£1,023,802§	£51,813
Financial year	COMSEC	CFTC	DDF*	UK EBRs	Australia EBRs**																										
2021/22	£279,000	£0	£467,000	£0	£283,751																										
2022/23	£1,000,583	£0	£0	£0	£284,787																										
2023/24	£600,000	£0	£0	£195,000†	£225,651 (+£65,000†)																										
2024/25	£0	£0	£0	£1,023,802§	£51,813																										
Staffing	The section has three established posts, two vacancies and two posts serving the CEP initiative. This work is directed by the Head of Electoral Support Section, who reports to the ASG.																														
1. Relevance and Coherence	<p>1.1 Is this work really needed?</p> <p>The EU, the United Nations Development Programme and area-based multilaterals have differing terms of reference but would be likely broadly to cover much of the gap left if COMSEC ceased elections support work. Yet the COMSEC model, with the engagement of trusted former senior, politically experienced figures plus the associated potential for constructive engagement throughout the electoral cycle, is distinctive. Also, COMSEC is uniquely well positioned to build and leverage high-level relationships of trust, crucial to effecting political will. The work is thus 'really needed' – but only if it is done well.⁶⁶</p> <p>1.2 What's the strategic fit?</p> <p>Good. Addresses a core strategic concern of the Commonwealth. Leverages key COMSEC strategic advantages in terms of access and trust. Symbiotic with Good Offices work.</p>																														

Name:	Electoral Support Section
<p>2. Effectiveness and Impact</p>	<p>2.1 Is this work achieving its objectives?</p> <p>Mainly no. Over 80% of the 23 observation missions reviewed failed to come close to the target of three months for publication of a report.⁶⁷ Nearly half of those missing the target took over a year or jettisoned altogether the aim of publishing any report. Follow-up in country is correspondingly weak. Also, with the exception of Caribbean COVID-19 papers in 2022, no knowledge products were published during the Strategic Plan period. Handbooks for staff and observers are out of date. The Commonwealth Electoral Network (CEN) is largely moribund and has had no biennial conference since 2016.^{68 69 70}</p> <p>More positively, the funded CEP initiative achieved its aims, conducting 16 training events reaching 300 targets across four Commonwealth regions. Tellingly, Australia committed to funding a fourth phase of the CEP, wishing to capitalise on its success.</p> <p>Despite resource constraints, the team reports that it supported delivery of technical assistance and capacity-building to Cameroon, Guyana and Jamaica.</p> <p>2.2 Is it making a real difference on the ground?</p> <p>Somewhat. The team point to some possible successes (e.g. regarding the participation of women) yet repeatedly reported that some member countries showed persistent disregard for recommendations regarding key aspects of their electoral processes. All interviewees stressed the importance of strategic engagement with key government stakeholders with a holistic programme based on targeted recommendations from observation missions. Unfortunately, targeted recommendations are being published much too late, or are released in silence, or do not see the light of day. Thus, the observation missions are punching below their weight. Neither is it clear that the team has yet been in a position to achieve the co-ordination and coherence within and beyond COMSEC that managers recognise as crucial to the strategic and holistic approaches to which they are committed.^{71 72}</p> <p>2.3 How confident can we be about results?</p> <p>A mixed picture. There is good clarity about results at the output level. Beyond that, there are some significant attribution difficulties.⁷³ The ToC identifies the major risk of insufficient political will, but it is not clear how this is to be mitigated. Management impact indicators seem generally sound so far as they go, though they require populating and quantifying.⁷⁴</p> <p>2.4 Can these results be validated by external stakeholders?</p> <p>Up to a point. The donors spoken to expressed views about results that were largely reflected in the preceding analysis. Recipient member countries spoken to expressed appreciation for the involvement of the Commonwealth and said that they preferred it.</p>
<p>3. Efficiency and Sustainability</p>	<p>3.1 Are the results value for money?</p> <p>A mixed picture. Yes, in the sense that a wide range of important activities are being undertaken on the ground using comparatively few resources.⁷⁵ No, if we consider missed outcomes and the delivery failures of the majority of observer missions. Plainly, a review of funding and performance reporting is required plus realistic – and strategic – prioritisation.</p> <p>3.2 What continues if the programme funding stops?</p> <p>Other multilaterals may fill the gap to some degree. Yet the Commonwealth will likely lose engagement and traction in a key area of ambition – and member countries will lose significant opportunities to make progress towards democratic goals on the basis of amity and respect.</p>

Name	Secretary-General's Good Offices																									
Overview	Arguably the goose that lays COMSEC's golden egg. Yet even more strategic and targeted contributions could be considered, reflecting resource constraints.																									
Activity and Origins	<p>Quiet diplomacy, focused on building and leveraging trust and amity to de-escalate political tensions within member countries and to foster viable and sustainable solutions. Key elements include dialogue, the SG's moral authority and charisma, empathy, patience, support for vulnerable populations and collaboration with partners. The activity is often accompanied by COMSEC technical assistance to support the sustainability of conflict resolution efforts.</p> <p>Since 1995, the Good Offices work has been underpinned by CMAG, which can also gauge violations of Commonwealth values and recommend measures to restore democracy and constitutional rule. The work of CMAG and Good Offices differs in character and visibility but is in principle complementary.⁷⁶</p> <p>The notion of a Good Offices role associated with the head of an international organisation is usually linked to Dag Hammarskjöld, United Nations SG in the late 1950s. It has been recognised as part of the Commonwealth SG's role since it was created in 1965.</p>																									
Budget	<p>The Good Offices budget shows significant year-on-year volatility. Over the four-year period (to date), expenditure has fluctuated from a high of £2.08 million in 2021/22 to a low of £747,000 in 2023/24 and a provisional £1.69 million in 2024/25 YTD.⁷⁷ The table below outlines the year to date expenditure per fund, adding up to a total of approximately £5.3 million over the past four years.</p> <p>Table D2: Funding of the Good Offices work between 2021/22 and 2024/25</p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Financial Year</th> <th>COMSEC</th> <th>CFTC</th> <th>CYP</th> <th>EBRs</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>2021/22</td> <td>£1,293,000</td> <td>£791,000</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2022/23</td> <td>£515,000</td> <td>£262,000</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2023/24</td> <td>£747,000</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£0</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2024/25</td> <td>£1,681,000</td> <td>£10,000</td> <td>£0</td> <td>£0</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Financial Year	COMSEC	CFTC	CYP	EBRs	2021/22	£1,293,000	£791,000	£0	£0	2022/23	£515,000	£262,000	£0	£0	2023/24	£747,000	£0	£0	£0	2024/25	£1,681,000	£10,000	£0	£0
Financial Year	COMSEC	CFTC	CYP	EBRs																						
2021/22	£1,293,000	£791,000	£0	£0																						
2022/23	£515,000	£262,000	£0	£0																						
2023/24	£747,000	£0	£0	£0																						
2024/25	£1,681,000	£10,000	£0	£0																						
Staffing	The work falls under the direct supervision of the SG in coordination with the ASG and a senior programme leader/head, plus supporting staff members. Occasionally, the SG may entrust a Special Envoy to pursue her functions. COMSEC's regional advisers and heads as well as officials from within the ASG's command, and elsewhere within COMSEC, may be drawn into preparatory and follow-up work.																									
1. Relevance and Coherence	<p>1.1 Is this work really needed?</p> <p>Yes. Though 'Good Offices' are deployed by other global leaders, this form of personal diplomacy appears uniquely well suited to the trust and amity that underlie Commonwealth relations. It was highly appreciated by all observers sampled for this study.⁷⁸ Our sampling showed that, unsurprisingly, the effectiveness of a Commonwealth Good Offices intervention is likely to vary according to the particular political circumstances as well as the skills and charisma of the principal actors.</p> <p>1.2 What's the strategic fit?</p> <p>Ubiquitous. The work is both a source and a consequence of continuing COMSEC access, goodwill and leverage at top levels of government. This review has found those factors to be crucial to COMSEC's successes and to its comparative advantage as a multilateral.⁷⁹ It does not follow that the interventions are themselves necessarily the most strategic in terms of the value they add behind the scenes.</p>																									

Name	Secretary-General's Good Offices
<p>2. Effectiveness and Impact</p>	<p>2.1 Is this work achieving its objectives?</p> <p>Yes. Though written reports are necessarily bland, interviewees with first-hand knowledge of the instances sampled by Aleph were mostly highly complementary about the quality and effects of the interventions.⁸⁰ There was unanimous praise for the abilities of the then-SG (Baroness Scotland) to achieve the trust and confidence of differing factions and to catalyse peaceful and constructive ways forward. Respondents were understandably cautious about declaring progress to be permanent; two suggested that COMSEC's subsequent work in-country would be more effective if better co-ordinated.</p> <p>2.2 Is it making a real difference on the ground?</p> <p>Yes. Respondents seemed clear that it had 'moved the dial' in most of the instances sampled. Yet it was clear that the impact of the COMSEC contribution in-country varied. Though Good Offices work will likely have additional positive value for the Commonwealth in any case (because of the high-level relationships and access it fosters), the need for follow-through and resource constraints makes it prudent to consider the scope for even greater strategic targeting, perhaps involving more shared intelligence from partners.</p> <p>2.3 How confident can we be about results?</p> <p>Confident up to a point. The ToC being developed by the team gives a plausible account of the logic and articulation of the change pathways, especially at the output level. Beyond that there are some significant attribution difficulties.⁸¹</p> <p>2.4 Can these results be validated by external stakeholders?</p> <p>Yes. Broadly speaking, interviewees confirmed or provided the picture painted above. Two considered that results would be even better if interventions were more prioritised and targeted, with regard to intelligence from partners.</p>
<p>3. Efficiency and Sustainability</p>	<p>3.1 Are the results value for money?</p> <p>Yes. Travel costs are necessarily high. Considering the relatively small size of the operating team, the inherent value of the evidenced results and the wider benefits to COMSEC arising from the work, the results suggest good value for money. Consideration could be given to the suggestions at 2.4 in case these could deliver even greater value for the investment.</p> <p>3.2 What continues if the programme funding stops?</p> <p>Other multilaterals may attempt to fill the gap to some degree, though their efforts may be slower and more formulaic. Yet the Commonwealth will lose goodwill and leverage, which would likely diminish its effectiveness generally as well as its value to other international actors.</p>

Endnotes

- ¹ The details of all 15 recommendations are in 5.2 Recommendations.
- ² An international association of member countries that emerged from the British Empire and that is connected through shared values, cultural and historical ties and, for the most part, members' use of the English language.
- ³ Appointed by the Commonwealth Heads of Government for a maximum of two four-year terms.
- ⁴ See here.
- ⁵ See here.
- ⁶ See Appendix A.
- ⁷ See here.
- ⁸ See here.
- ⁹ There is a fifth pillar, covering cross-cutting outcomes targeting gender equality and youth.
- ¹⁰ As generated through the 2024 Mid-Term Review (MTR), 13 country reviews, programme strategy reviews and other evaluations completed during the current strategic period.
- ¹¹ These were chosen purposively to help shed light on the issues identified for review.
- ¹² All references to performance indicators are to COMSEC management data.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Energise, Empower, Envision, and Engage.
- ¹⁸ See Appendix D.
- ¹⁹ 'Friendship with a purpose' has also been used to describe this comparative advantage, though arguably this may carry an unwanted suggestion of ulterior motives.
- ²⁰ See also Appendix C and Appendix D.
- ²¹ See above, last sentence of Section 4.1 Added value of the Secretariat.
- ²² See Section 4.1 Added value of the Secretariat.
- ²³ These difficulties reflect in part chronic shortage of available human resources, though this in turn suggests greater prioritisation was required.
- ²⁴ See Appendix D.
- ²⁵ See Appendix A.
- ²⁶ Perhaps because technical consultations took place with the capital direct.

- ²⁷ Aleph respondents gave multiple accounts of Secretariat missions treading on each other's toes in uncoordinated visits to the same country, reinforcing unfortunate impressions of wasted opportunity as well as lack of consideration for the host country.
- ²⁸ See here.
- ²⁹ Other income includes the notional rent as well, approximately GBP2 083 000 per year (year to date).
- ³⁰ All member governments are represented on the Board of Governors by their High Commissioners, which normally meets annually. There is an Executive Committee that meets more frequently.
- ³¹ CHOGM 2018 Communiqué 'Towards a Common Future'.
- ³² As explained in the interviews with staff, the co-chairs of the CCA clusters and a few key stakeholders having benefited from the work of the CCA.
- ³³ As presented in the CCA programme documents, including the CCA primer and presentations, triangulated with interviews with staff members and the programme Head.
- ³⁴ Per external stakeholders and member countries, having interacted with the CCA through its different clusters.
- ³⁵ As explained in the interviews with staff, the co-chairs of the CCA clusters and a few key stakeholders having benefited from the work of the CCA.
- ³⁶ This assessment is the result of the triangulation of multiple sources, including core programme documents, M&E tools, reports and toolkits produced, and interviews with key stakeholders.
- ³⁷ As explained by staff members.
- ³⁸ Based on the interviews with staff members and the available management accounts.
- ³⁹ Per Annual Report 2023/
- ⁴⁰ Based on interviews with the United Nations Office for the High Commission for Human Rights, two funders and nine beneficiaries as well as on evidence of outputs and outcomes in COMSEC annual and other reports.
- ⁴¹ Evidenced by interviews with partners and beneficiaries and consideration of defined roles and priorities.
- ⁴² Some residents mentioned that the Geneva platform was also crucial for other international work in Rome, Paris, Vienna and Brussels.
- ⁴³ Based on interviews with 10 interlocutors, plus Secretariat evidence of feedback provided at annual meetings.
- ⁴⁴ Noted that the New York office reportedly does not appear to have developed a similar informal culture of 'kitchen solidarity' in which views can be shared and personal confidence built.
- ⁴⁵ This includes drafting statements, a form of support which no other international organisation/United Nations agency in Geneva provides.

- ⁴⁶ Multiple examples given of where Secretariat made the difference on engagement, such as Dominica, though recent re-engagement of Guyana with the Human Rights Committee in late 2024 was reportedly achieved without any Secretariat participation.
- ⁴⁷ Per Secretariat annual report 2023/24; Indicators Report 2022; CSSO human rights activity reports 2023/24 and 2024/25.
- ⁴⁸ E.g. trade briefings on the Fisheries Subsidies Agreement and regarding the Joint Statement on Investment Facilitation.
- ⁴⁹ Some interlocutors gave particular weight to the role of informal contact with other member countries in building confidence. One said: 'I honestly think being close to these small states is what has given me the confidence to express my country's views in the committee room.'
- ⁵⁰ Welcome and reportedly effective use was being made of webinars as well as in-country and regional training delivery (human rights).
- ⁵¹ Per interviews with CSSO administration, triangulated with two donors.
- ⁵² Evidence was seen of some general briefing provided by CSSO on the latter topic, plus some capacity-building and technical support in relation to both topics from a trade policy perspective.
- ⁵³ E.g. Barbados ratification of the Convention against Torture; Malawi acceptance of recommendations on domestic violence (and membership of the Human Rights Committee).
- ⁵⁴ Exploring this hypothesis is beyond the scope of the Review but it appears logical and to warrant further consideration. It was noted that some common statements had been made in 2020 on capacity building.
- ⁵⁵ E.g. if gender-based violence had decreased in targeted countries, or if a trade negotiation appeared to be bearing any tangible economic fruit.
- ⁵⁶ Sourced from management documents (TONR PSD 2.1 and 2.2).
- ⁵⁷ Per interviews with tenants.
- ⁵⁸ Primarily limitations of resources at every level compounded by the range and complexity of issues. See also external evaluation of CSSO human rights work from 2021.
- ⁵⁹ The Rio Conventions are the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. All share common goals regarding environmental protection and sustainable development.
- ⁶⁰ The Langkawi Declaration.
- ⁶¹ The current budget is plainly insufficient to generate much activity. Management explained that a highly targeted approach has been pursued towards operational opportunities and that it is currently developing a resource mobilisation plan to secure necessary additional funds. Yet the Implementation Plan itself appears not to have been costed.
- ⁶² In addition to Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth there is, e.g., the Worldwide Fund for Nature, Al Gore's Climate Reality Project, the International Institute for Sustainable Development, Carbon Market Watch, The Nature Conservancy and the US-based Sierra Club.

- ⁶³ E.g. see headline CHOGM reports during the period.
- ⁶⁴ EBRs are not necessarily apt as they come with official development aid eligibility criteria; moreover, they tend to be aligned with a single donor's priorities, and this may raise sensitivities for election work.
- ⁶⁵ Financial data supplied by project management.
- ⁶⁶ This comment paraphrases similar remarks made two donors.
- ⁶⁷ Management reports a variety of reasons for these delays, including resourcing problems; inefficiencies connected with staff in or supporting the team and/or members of the mission; changes in methodology; and concerns at senior level about the basis for some findings. It is for senior management to address these issues, so as to reduce the severe risk they present to the aims of the work and to the reputation of COMSEC.
- ⁶⁸ E.g. a promised guide on the participation of women was shelved, as was guidance on treatment of vulnerable groups.
- ⁶⁹ Management informed Aleph of its intention to update such handbooks in the forthcoming financial year, subject to available funding. Aleph was also informed of the need to include new guidance, e.g. on threats of manipulation from social media.
- ⁷⁰ Per information from project staff, engagement with the CEN is currently limited to engaging national election management bodies virtually about the development of knowledge products.
- ⁷¹ Colleagues from political regional sections, Good Offices, Rule of Law, Human Rights, Youth, Gender and Communications.
- ⁷² Partner institutions such as the African Union, the European Union and the Organization of American States.
- ⁷³ Because there are often other bodies and individuals effecting political will.
- ⁷⁴ 1. Member countries engaged through the Secretariat's election programme who implement substantive Commonwealth Observer Recommendations or engage in substantive reform processes. 2. Countries whose elections have been observed that demonstrate legislative, regulatory or policy reforms that contribute to improved electoral practices. 3. National stakeholders provided with technical assistance who have demonstrated strengthened capacity to contribute to improved electoral practices. 4. New, enhanced or reformed internal practices in observation and technical assistance developed through collaborations and partnerships.
- ⁷⁵ E.g. Aleph noted that European Union observer missions typically appeared to be larger and supported by more substantially resources – the team suggested the European Union operated at around 10 times the resources per observation team.
- ⁷⁶ Member country anxiety about the greater public attention likely from CMAG, plus its record in suspending or cancelling Commonwealth membership, provides a spur to constructive engagement via Good Offices. CMAG appears to have potential to be more than merely a 'big stick' or a ratifier of past events, but the infrequency of its meetings is currently a limiting factor.
- ⁷⁷ Based on the figures from the management accounts from June 2022, June 2023, June 2024 and May 2025.

- ⁷⁸ See sample reports at footnote 89 below.
- ⁷⁹ See section 4.1 Added value of COMSEC.
- ⁸⁰ Eswatini: This case illustrates the value of COMSEC's Good Offices agility, allowing it to engage early and influentially to help calm an unprecedentedly volatile, dangerous situation. COMSEC's intervention reportedly prevented the intended assassination of the Head of State by mercenaries. The then-SG followed through with contact described by one respondent as 'totally charismatic: she could talk to the King, and he would listen.' Ultimately, Southern African Development Community (SADC) heads met and assumed a co-ordinating role, yet all failed to procure the desired national dialogue – 'SADC's efforts went nowhere' – and the existential political crisis died down as attention turned to the periodic election. COMSEC followed up with technical support on the national elections but was unable to tackle underlying issues of fairness and participation, at least some of which were allegedly compatible with the national constitution that COMSEC itself had helped draft. Though serious violence subsided, as one interviewee put it: 'This is not over.' The intervention also illustrates the dangers when unbalanced support is given to governments thought to offend against Commonwealth values: respondents mentioned maladroit public declarations by a senior COMSEC staff member (outside the Good Offices team), which set back diplomatic bridge-building and COMSEC's credibility. Sierra Leone: Here, the intervention and relationship-building were more premeditated. COMSEC helped defuse a political situation that could have led to civil strife and violence. The Economic Community of West African States was reportedly not regarded as a sufficiently trusted partner by some opposition figures, nor did the United Nations have the access and amity required to influence behaviour. US and other multilaterals, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), engaged, but the personal involvement of SG was key in facilitating one-to-one and backchannel meetings with the key players and, ultimately, in bringing the President and the Leader of Opposition together. Follow-up technical support on human rights was provided, e.g. via the CSSO and via the Clerks of the Parliament. Respondents emphasised the need for continuing technical support, especially regarding the forthcoming national election. Lesotho: This case illustrates the use of a Special Envoy (senior politician and Lesotho expert Dr Rajen Prasad – 2016–2018) working in a semi-public but unformulaic way to develop and advance a major programme of reform covering the public service, parliament, constitution, judicial system and security. This won support but political will faltered and COMSEC technical support lacked the resources to follow through across the range of Dr Prasad's efforts. Yet it is clear that the programme proposals remain at the core of efforts now led by other multilaterals, e.g. the European Union and UNDP, to breathe political life into reform. The Special Envoy model plainly permits sustained senior attention to complex issues though may be less able to foster special relationships at the highest levels. Bangladesh: The unrest in 2024 and 2025 saw goodwill visits by the SG and ASG and various associated initiatives, including an imaginative partnership with UNDP to facilitate reconciliation training, dialogue and peaceful resolution of disputes. Respondents said that these initiatives had enhanced the multi-faceted approach to support pursued by COMSEC over the longer term, including monitoring elections and promoting dialogue; addressing human rights and rule of law concerns (targeting youth especially); supporting initiatives to counter violent extremism; and facilitating dialogue for constitutional order. However, though the COMSEC contribution is welcomed, the political situation in Bangladesh remains complex and fluid, and political

traction is difficult to find. One respondent expressed some disappointment that COMSEC had not been able to follow through on an initiative at the same high level and emphasised the value of high-level access and rapport.

⁸¹ Because there are usually other bodies and individuals effecting political will.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Figures extracted from the management accounts from June 2022, June 2023, June 2024 and May 2025 (most recent numbers available at the time of this review according to the Secretariat).

⁸⁴ The numbers from this and the figures to come are the result of a compilation of management accounts' data from 2021/22 and 2024/25.

End-Term Review of the Strategic Plan
2021/22 – 2024/25

Management Response and Action Plan

Preparation coordinated by	SPPD Directorate
Name	Katherine Marshall Kissoon Head, Strategy, Evaluation and Learning
Date	14 January 2026
Reviewed and approved by	Senior Management Committee
Through	Deputy Secretary-General
Date	21 January 2026

Overall Comments

The Secretariat's Senior Management Committee (SMC) appreciates the comprehensive end-term review (ETR) of the 2021–2025 Strategic Plan and commends the evaluators for the high quality and rigor of the process and the Final Report. The Review delivered valuable insights on the strategic performance of the past strategic plan, highlighting good practices, success factors, and lessons learned. Importantly, the evaluation helped clarify the Secretariat's specific contributions across the four strategic pillars -Democracy and Governance; Sustainable Development; Resilience and Climate Action; and Small and Other Vulnerable States - using case studies to illustrate the main findings. Senior Management is supportive of the directions set out in the Report and finds the forward-looking analysis well aligned with the organisation's current strategic direction.

SMC acknowledges the relevance of the five headline recommendations—deepening strategic engagement with the Board; strengthening accountability and performance management; making monitoring and evaluation (M&E) more adaptive and learning-oriented; increasing transparency and incentivising performance; and modernising funding and financial systems. It is notable that the end-term review was underway in parallel with the new strategic plan development process. Many of the actions recommended under the five broad themes are being addressed through reforms initiated as part of the 2025-2030 strategic planning process. Overall, the ETR recommendations reinforced and validated the priorities for a modern Secretariat. The evaluation has provided additional evidence and perspectives for sharpening the design and sequencing of reforms.

Overall, senior management broadly accepts the findings of the End-Term Review and considers the recommendations constructive, timely, and supportive of our future direction. We welcome the Report as a valuable contribution that will support strategic decision-making and continuous improvement over the new Strategic period.

Recommendation 1. Deepen strategic engagement with the Board of Governors

The Secretary-General should work with the Board to change the culture so that funders have genuine oversight of the Secretariat's work and are meaningfully engaged in its development.

- (i) Institutionalise programme prioritisation as an ongoing significant function for the Board, with a decision matrix targeting comparative advantage, strategic coherence, and funding availability.
- (ii) Create a protocol for deferring or scaling initiatives lacking earmarked funds.
- (iii) Establish thematic "touchpoint groups" small ongoing thematic committees, including the relevant Programme directors/owners, for dialogue between reporting cycles on challenges, opportunities and risks.
- (iv) Keep the new senior structure under careful review for gaps and overlaps.

Management Response

ACCEPTED

The Secretariat fully accepts this recommendation and is taking steps to address the suggested sub-actions.

The Secretary-General has made the revitalisation of relations with the Board of Governors and member countries a central tenant of her leadership and an enabler of the new Strategic Plan 2025-30. This is being delivered through informal briefings to the Board, improved quality of reports and communications and increased engagement bilaterally.

Member countries have indicated their priorities for strategic action by the Secretariat through the priority outcomes set out in the Strategic Plan. The responsibility for programme prioritisation within that strategic framework sits with the Secretariat. To this end, a new Prioritisation Committee and process was implemented for delivery planning 25/26. This process incorporates criteria on strategic alignment, mainstreaming for cross cutting outcomes on small states, gender and youth. The Secretariat will build on lessons from its implementation to continually improve its use and effectiveness of the prioritisation process in 25/26.

Further initiatives underway include the following.

- Embedding improved Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) practise in the organisation – the Secretariat will aim to make MEL data more accessible to senior leaders and the Board of Governors to enhance transparency, accountability and decision-making at all levels. This will be through improved reporting, dashboards and briefings.
- Strengthening the Evaluation Function - The Secretariat will strengthen the quality of independent reviews and evaluation practices, enhancing transparency of outcome progress and impact.
- Discussions are ongoing with the Board on modalities for ensuring timely briefings and information sharing to support its oversight role including those related to reforms, partnerships, and programmes.

Key actions		Timeframe	Responsibility Status	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
1.1	Enhance the Portfolio Prioritisation Process through embedding criteria on strategic alignment, coherence, resourcing feasibility and comparative advantage.	June 2026	Deputy Secretary-General	Initiated and on-going	<p>The Secretariat will revisit its internal governance framework to ensure a seamless process from planning and prioritisation to delivery and reporting. This will include the protocol for deferring or scaling initiatives lacking earmarked funds.</p> <p>This action will address the proposed recommendations at 1(i) and 1(ii) above.</p>
1.2	Agree with the Board on mechanism for thematic/technical discussions on programme progress and strategic adaption.	June 2026	Deputy Secretary-General	Initiated and on-going	<p>The Board has sought to deepen engagement on areas of strategic interests including portfolio design, resource utilisation and organisational reforms. A proposal for updating the Board on programmes was agreed with EXCO in November 2025 and will be actioned through an updated agenda for EXCO in February 2026.</p> <p>This action addresses the proposed recommendations at 1(iii) above.</p>
1.3	Embed a review mechanism for assessing the organisation's structure alignment with the delivery of the Strategic Plan.	June 2026	Deputy Secretary-General	Initiated and on-going	<p>The review and adjustments to organisation structure is ongoing and gradual following the leadership transition and is being aligned to the new strategic plan.</p> <p>This action will address the proposed recommendations at 1(iv) above.</p>

Recommendation 2: Strengthen accountability and performance management.

DSG Corporate Affairs and DSG Programmes should work together to turbo charge the culture of accountability and corporate responsibility and to ensure that financial decisions are faster and better informed by operational and contextual requirements.

- (i) Clarify and unify the responsibilities and accountabilities of programme managers and directors in light of mandated international functional standards for programme management.
- (ii) Ensure that this process pinpoints accountabilities for: delivery of intermediate outcomes including corporate goals; monitoring risks and underperformance; steering delivery across projects; use of M&E data in decision-making; leadership in adaptive management; and performance review.
- (iii) Ensure as soon as practicable that Programme leaders have devolved to them much greater financial and decision-making autonomy, in line with best practice.

Management response | **ACCEPTED**

New DSGs for Corporate and Programmes are expected in post in 2026 and will lead on actions to realise enhanced culture of accountability and programme performance management.

The Secretariat understands performance management in this recommendation addresses the performance of programmes. This incorporates all processes from design through delivery, reporting and resource management. These processes have various layers of accountabilities involved in the responsibilities of Senior Directors, Directors, and Section Heads.

The Secretariat’s current **Programme Management Guidelines** (PMG) provide details on the roles and responsibilities, processes and tools for programme design, management (including of risks), monitoring, evaluation and reporting. The Guidelines are updated periodically to incorporate changes in practices or policies. As we continuously improve to implement the strategic plan, the PMG will be updated to ensure documented standards and clarity on roles and responsibilities, as well as accountabilities in line with the recommendation. The improved clarity on standards established by the PMG will also improve management and decision-making efficiencies.

The Strategic Results Framework establishes SMART indicators for outcome monitoring – these clarify KPIs and expectations for programme performance. There will also be six-monthly validation sessions to promote learning and adaptation across programmes.

The new MEL Strategy also addresses this recommendation. It aims to enhance accountability for results by improving delivery performance tracking, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and making better use of MEL data for decisions and program adjustments. The new approach includes regular monthly reports to quickly spot issues and prompt action from the functional Head of Directorates. Quarterly reviews are designed to solve problems, support decision-making, and enable timely adaptations.

Key Actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
2.1	Update Programme Guidelines with amended roles, responsibilities and standards for good practice including in MEL, risk management and adaptive programme management.	September 2026	DSG Programmes	Not initiated	This action will address the proposed recommendations at 2(i) and 2(ii) above.

Recommendation 3: Make M&E more adaptive and learning oriented.

DSG Corporate Affairs should, in liaison with DSG Programmes, help the Secretariat build a genuinely useful culture of learning so that it can adapt, and improve continuously in a fast-changing global context.

- (i) as a precursor of a new MEL strategy, re-position monitoring and evaluation as more adaptive and learning-oriented, e.g. by promoting reviews as opportunities for genuine reflection on progress and learning on standards and measurement (including the theory of change and results framework) as well as opportunities for sharing lessons across teams and regions.
- (ii) create guidance standardising how teams verify results across Verto and other platforms, stipulating what constitutes credible evidence for categorising outcomes
- (iii) enhance the Theory of Change as a contribution-based model by further pinpointing how the Secretariat contributes to change and what external factors must align for success, reflecting the multilateral setting.

Management Response		ACCEPTED			
		<p>The Secretariat has introduced a new MEL Strategy that prioritises creating a stronger culture of evaluation and learning to make the MEL system more effective and valuable. This strategy encourages greater emphasis on using monitoring and evaluation insights to influence management practices and decision making within the Secretariat.</p> <p>The new MEL is informed by a thorough needs assessment and targets key barriers to improved MEL practice. This includes addressing capability gaps, incentives and opportunities for staff to invest in producing and using MEL information. The Strategy identifies these opportunities in the planning, budgeting, prioritisation, monitoring and reporting phases of projects - for management and governance to be informed by lessons and evidence. It also highlights how reflection can be embedded in support of adaptation and reporting on projects and programmes.</p> <p>The MEL Strategy is built upon the Strategic Plan Theory of Change and the Strategic Results Framework. The Strategic Plan Theory of Change (SP TOC) will be periodically reviewed and updated based on evidence, lessons learned, and thematic horizon scans. The Strategic Plan Strategic Results Framework outlines how progress and achievements will be measured, and together with the SP TOC, forms the foundation for setting learning goals as well as evaluating and reporting on the Secretariat's impact.</p> <p>As noted, the Secretariat's Programme Management Guidelines includes directions on evidence standards at various results levels. It also guides staff on utilising the programme management information system, Verto, in addressing their MEL tasks. These guidelines will be updated to incorporate new tools or processes as provided for under the MEL Strategy.</p>			
Key Actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
3.1	Approve and implement MEL Strategy 2025-30	February 2026	DSG	Initiating and on going	<p>The Draft MEL Strategy will be discussed and finalised through SMC and at Board deliberations at the February 2026 EXCO.</p> <p>This action will address the proposed recommendations above.</p>

3.2	Revise the Programme Management Guideline to update standards for 'good evidence' at each result level.	April 2026	DSG	Not initiated	Revise and update by April 2026 and review annually thereafter. This action will address the proposed recommendations at 3(ii) above.
3.3	Establish at least semi-annual programme-level pause and reflect sessions, to document lessons and inform adaptive planning, prioritisation and management.	June 2026	DSG	Initiated and on-going	Six-monthly monitoring and results reporting practices will be reviewed and revised to better support learning and adaptation. This action will address the proposed recommendations at 3(iii) above.

Recommendation 4: Increase transparency and incentivise performance.

DSG Programmes and DSG Corporate should put in place the foundations of a much stronger performance-based management culture, boosting visibility, accountability and performance and facilitating a more productive relationship with Board members.

DSG Programmes should:

- i. (i) build on Verto to create a new and unified high-level performance dashboard or platform for Senior Management and the Board integrating programme, financial, and risk data and aiming at active monitoring, learning and decision-making.

DSG Corporate should:

- ii. (ii) introduce pay-related performance agreements for Senior Directors and above, based on their portfolio performance and delivery against intermediate outcomes, and including Board oversight.

and, in tandem with (ii),

- iii. (iii) roll out a performance management framework for all staff, based on the Generally Accepted Performance Principles (GAPP) approved by Commonwealth Member countries and including annual objectives linked to Results Framework indicators; use of results evidence from Verto or enhanced system (when available); plus, wider feedback for associated developmental purposes, i.e. 360° feedback.

Management Response

ACCEPTED

The Secretariat fully agrees with the evaluation findings and this recommendation on the need for a stronger performance-based management culture and enhanced relationship with Board Members, as set out in its Strategic Plan 25-26. Ongoing initiatives are progressing for improving the efficiency and effectiveness of decision-making and governance through improved quality, accessibility and visibility of data across corporate, finance and programmes.

The Secretariat in FY 25-26 will continue to review the organisation structure to align delivery of the Strategic Plan. This recommendation will be reviewed and responded to in this regard. The Secretariat will then consider the most appropriate framework, principles and approach fitting with the Commonwealth and Secretariat context and capabilities.

The Secretary-General's proposal on revising the compensation packages for staff is to be discussed with member countries.

Key Actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
4.1	Portfolio Dashboard developed and linked with Verto planning and monitoring data.	April 2026	DSG Programmes	Initiated and on-going	A prototype dashboard for Verto has been created and will be developed and reviewed periodically to ensure quality data aligns with user needs. This action will address the proposed recommendations at 4 (a) above.
4.2	Revised Performance Management Framework developed and applied.	June 2027	DSG Corporate	Not initiated	Response action will be aligned to ERP Implementation of HR module.

Recommendation 5: Modernise funding and financial systems

DSG Corporate Affairs should make COMSEC's funding and financial systems fit for purpose and equal or better to those in peer multilaterals e.g. AfDB, UNDP, CARICOM:

- (i) overhaul and rationalise funding arrangements. A possible approach could be to allocate COMSEC share of Members' assessed contributions as core funding for Secretariat-wide functions plus strategic capabilities which the Board decides will sustain clear comparative advantages; CFTC and CYP funds would be progressively reformed so that they comprise only earmarked, time-bound 'non-core' investments with clear 'price tags' and impact targets.
- (ii) upgrade the accounting system to match or exceed standards in peer multilaterals: improve tracking of investments across years as well as integration with performance data (e.g. Verto) to facilitate real-time reporting and analysis of budget execution at portfolio level.
- (iii) set out for the Board the costs and consequences for effectiveness and accountability of the current disjunct between planning and budgeting cycles, together with appropriate recommendations for reform.

Management Response		PARTIALLY ACCEPTED			
		<p>Overall, the Secretariat agrees with the headline recommendation in principle. The subject of the funding arrangements of the Secretariat has engaged the attention of leadership and the Board in recent years and particularly through the work of the Informal Working Group.</p> <p>Notwithstanding, the Secretariat considers the feasibility of the proposed actions to be limited at current funding levels. COMSEC assessed contributions at present is unable to sustain all Secretariat-wide functions in addition to core priority programmes. The demands on CFTC fund are also disproportionate against the collection of CFTC fund.</p> <p>The Secretariat will develop options to inform Board discussions and review on the Secretariat's planning and budgeting approach and funding model.</p> <p>In the interim, member countries have identified their strategic priorities in the new Strategic Plan. A new prioritisation process has been introduced to sharpen the focus on two available resources are being utilised in line with the strategic priorities. As part of the Strategic Plan, the Secretariat is developing fund management initiatives within the Strategic Plan 25-26 to manage the significant funding gaps:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proposed grant mechanism for Strategic priorities whereby grants are issued only when funds are secured. Enhanced organisational capacity for resource mobilisation and managing extra-budgetary resources as part of the financial strategy for the new mandate. <p>The procurement of a fit for purpose ERP system to modernise the accounting system and tracking performance is also underway and on-going.</p>			
Key Actions		Timeframe	Responsibility	Tracking	
				Status	Comments
5.1	Table proposal to the Board on optional approaches to multi-year planning.	June 2026	DSG Corporate	Not initiated	This action takes forward an outstanding action from the Mid-Term Review Management Responses. To be proposed in the 2026/27 budget proposal.
5.2	Table proposal to the Board on options to increase assessed contributions.	June 2026	DSG Corporate	Not initiated	This action will take forward discussions and recommendation within the Informal Working Group.

Commonwealth Secretariat

Marlborough House, Pall Mall
London SW1Y 5HX
United Kingdom

Thecommonwealth.org

