

Evaluation

Evidence for the world we want

2015 has been declared as the International Year of Evaluation, by a global movement of international partners, seeking to enhance the capacity of 'Civil Society Organisations' to influence policy makers, public opinion, to ensure public policies are based on evidence.

This research summary considers the role of evaluation; how it can influence public policy; the role of evaluation in programme planning; value for money; social return on investment; international experience; UK approaches and the ethics of evaluation.

1 The role of evaluation

The Department for Business Innovation and Skills, in its [Evaluation Strategy](#) describes the role of evaluation as an important input into government spending reviews. They are a vital strand in the evidence base to help governments and organisations to decide where investment will have the most impact. The primary purpose of evaluation is offering a way of determining whether a programme, project or initiative has been a worthwhile investment. It can also help shape and improve current initiatives, as a means of

reflection, correcting problems and finding what works.

The UK Treasury provides guidance in the form of the [Green Book](#), which helps public sector bodies to develop new proposals for projects and policies, and how past activities should be evaluated in this process. The Magenta Book provides guidance specifically on evaluation, setting out best practice for departments to follow. Both these documents emphasise the role of evaluation as an objective process, which improves public policy making and implementation, through setting priorities, objectives, demonstrating accountability

and providing defensible evidence for scrutiny processes. Evaluation should not be a retrospective activity but a continuous one, contributing valuable knowledge to the policy evidence base, feeding into future development.

The 2015 [EvalYear](#) is seen as an important catalyst for thinking about evaluation's role in good governance: how it can enable leaders and civil society to create better policies and implement them more effectively; and how it can be used to consider social, political, technical and financial factors. The programme for the year is looking at how evaluation influences through:

- > **Innovation** – at many levels, where developing new approaches or methods for both doing and using evaluation, adapting new technologies, challenging traditional thinking
- > **Inclusion** – where everyone has a roles to play, identifying and working with stakeholders, embracing diversity, being transparent and ethical, using participatory processes
- > **Impact** – by making a difference, discovering unintended consequences, supporting decision-making at all levels in society.



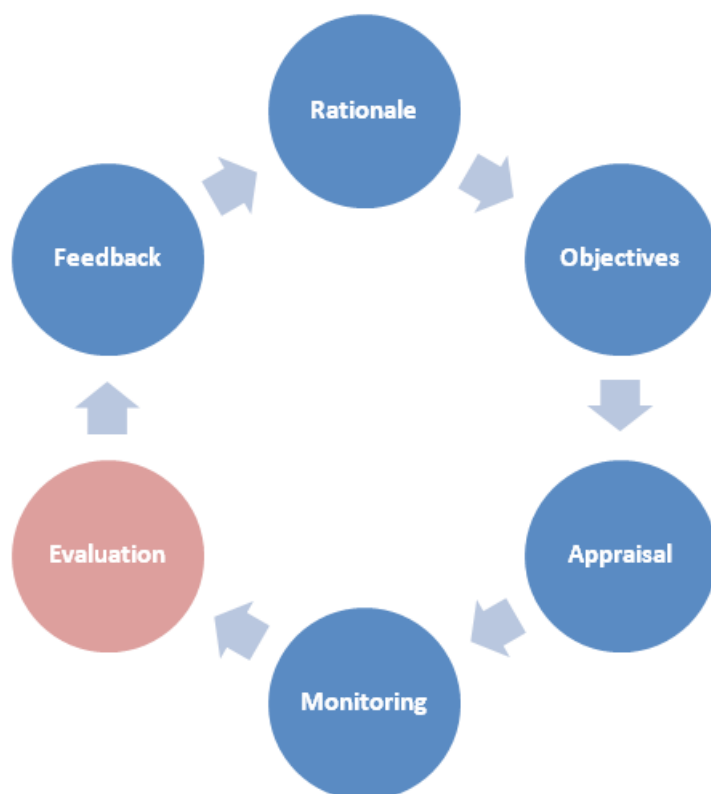
2 What is evaluation?

Evaluation can take many forms, it can be used to assess programmes, products, staff, policy, performance, proposals, research and theory, evaluation itself can even be evaluated. However most follow some guiding principles, with sectoral and institutional details and adaptations, such as health where there are stringent evaluation processes in place for the introduction of new policies or drugs as opposed to regeneration programmes where a whole range of local factors may necessitate a more innovative approach.

Evaluation can be carried out using a wide variety of research and analytical methods, and the choice of method depends on a wide range of factors. Therefore definition is often reflective of the purpose of the evaluation, and the policy area it is looking at. However evaluation generally seeks to answer objective questions such as:

- > What were the impacts?
- > How was it delivered?
- > Did it generate value for money?

And these questions sit within the context of the policy or programme cycle. There are numerous versions of this cycle, but they are consistent in their approach:



However evaluation can be both formative, taking part during concept or proposal development with a main aim of improving a future initiative and summative drawing from lessons when an initiative is completed to provide information on short term effectiveness or long term impact. Therefore although there is a formal point in the project or policy lifecycle for evaluation, the action of evaluation is constant and can take part at any point to check the desired outcomes are being achieved.

3 Evaluation Guidelines

In many sectors there are guidelines for evaluations, and organisations themselves may follow internal guidelines which look at ethics of working with their clients or stakeholders. Internationally organisations such as [AEE](#), [Better Evaluation](#), [UK Evaluation Society](#), [Social Research Association](#) all provide guidelines. As a summary, evaluation should follow these principles:

- > **Ethical** – the work should not be swayed by personal or sectoral interests and be conducted so that information will be provided freely. It's vital that the evaluator has professional integrity, respecting the

rights of individuals, wider public and the institutions involved. They need to be sensitive to cultural and social norms of the groups they are working with;

- > **Independent** - evaluators must be free from influence, conflict of influence, management bias or restrictions. Cultural influence should be taken account of during the evaluation, this could include choosing the appropriate methodology, taking account of organisational requirements and targets; governance and power structures; and adopting appropriate language or behaviours;
- > **Impartial** – for evaluation to be credible the work has to be objective and seeking to remove bias. Essential to this is the need to be objective, systematic, data driven and accountable for the findings;
- > **Transparent** - with open and meaningful engagement, consultation and availability of findings to participants. Limitations of the evaluation should be clear and the methodology, assumptions, theories and analyses being used should be available and easy to interpret;
- > **Intentional** – the use and purpose of the work should be clear from the outset. The use of any outputs including data collected should be agreed at the start. Where possible data collection should be throughout the programme or policy to allow accurate measurement. Changes to the work should be agreed and their impact understood.
- > **Useable** – evaluation has to improve decision making, so findings and recommendations must be timely, accessible and relevant. Stakeholders should be engaged at every opportunity in the learning and best practice generated from evaluations. Learning should consider the wider implications, assumptions and side effects of what is being evaluated.

4 Choosing the right types of evaluation

Evaluation broadly fits into 3 themes, looking at:

- > How was the initiative/policy delivered?
- > What difference did it make?
- > Did the outcomes and benefits justify the costs?

5 Evaluating for best practice

Process evaluation looks at the activities involved in implementation and how it was delivered. This can vary considerably, so there is no generic approach. This type of evaluation seeks to spread best practice, across other initiatives.

It often covers governance; how beneficiaries were identified and recruited; how geography, technology, skills or other underlying factors played a part; what barriers were faced; what risks were identified and the mitigations used; and it may also look at the team and individual's performance in running or leading the initiative.

6 Evaluating for influence

Impact evaluation is seeking to find a definitive answer to what difference a policy or initiative has made, and involves a focus on its outcomes, the measurable achievements and the benefits they have generated. This type of evaluation seeks to change, or improve future initiatives; implementing the initiative wider, continuing it or asking for it to be stopped.

It recognises initiatives can be affected by a range of factors and may cover outcomes achieved and observed changes:

- > Did it achieve the stated objectives?
- > What was the size and scale of change? How did it compare with the expected change?
- > Was there any variation in the change and impact?
- > Were there any unintended outcomes and what were their impacts?

Vital to this type of evaluation is recognising to what extent the initiative was responsible for the change, often based on statistical analysis of data, and what would have happened with the absence of the initiative, referred to as the counterfactual. This is the hardest part of evaluation as it generally cannot be observed. Random control trials (RCTs) are often used to assess impact as you can observe the impact, and these are the most robust measure, but they can also be costly.

7 Evaluating for best value

Economic evaluations, take impact evaluations one step further, considering whether the cost of the initiative outweighs the benefits and measure the value of the initiative. They come in two types:

- > **Cost-effectiveness analysis (CEA)** which looks at all the costs of implementing and delivering the initiative against the quantity of outcomes; and
- > **Cost-benefit analysis (CBA)** which takes that one step further and looks at the wider social, environmental and economic impacts and benefits as possible. This type of evaluation measures 'value for money' but also benefits which cannot be monetised.

8 The challenges of evaluation – dilemmas and options

As well as meeting the guidelines above there are many challenges and pitfalls to be overcome when conducting an evaluation. Most mistakes are not made because of wrong answers, but as a result of the wrong questions being asked. Measuring the right things is the key to good evaluation. Asking the right thing often means shifting from measuring easy to measure outcomes to ones which are important but harder to measure, such as the impact of skills on people's lives, wellbeing or wider economy. The introduction of the Public Service (Social Value) Act has pushed evaluation more down this route to holistic measurement.

Evaluation should be embedded within the whole process of implementing initiatives, and seen as normal and essential part of delivery. This can be difficult, costly and create a training and skills issue but it is important to ensure initiatives achieve what they set out to achieve. So it is important to properly cost the evaluation into the required funds for the initiative.

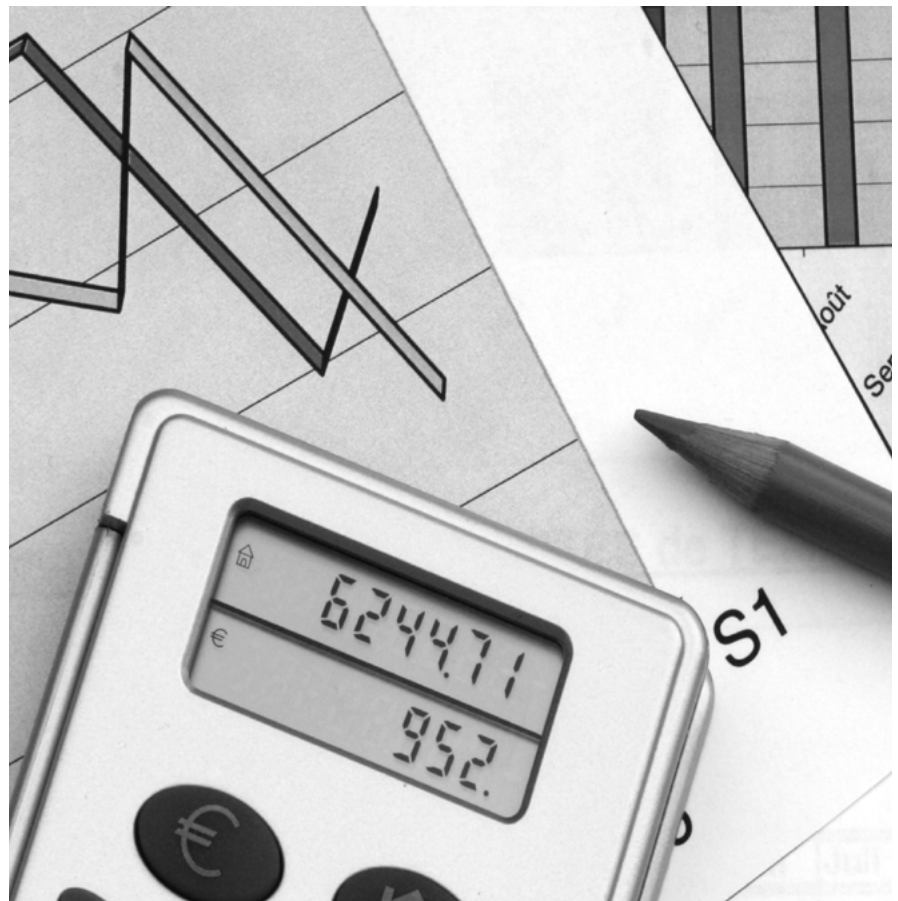
Methodologies for evaluation have changed very little however the vehicles for doing it have changed significantly, the introduction of technology creates



efficiencies and opportunities not available before. From collecting data and engaging beneficiaries, to running complex statistical analysis the evaluation field needs to embrace the opportunities but not at the expense of robust techniques.

The top challenges are:

- > Engaging potential service users or beneficiaries, how do you access their information, get feedback and ensure balance
- > Avoiding bias and prejudice related to status, position, careers or lives of those participating
- > Having realistic expectations of what can be achieved in evaluations, and really being able to determine the true impact
- > Having a clear purpose and audience
- > Overcoming constraints such as tight budgets, deadlines, timescales, accountability, whilst maintaining the integrity of the research
- > Maintaining the positive engagement of stakeholders, including the delivery partners so that learning can be acted upon
- > Lack of information and evidence on success or impact
- > Dealing with negative findings and outcomes in a meaningful way



Evaluation event links

<http://www.profbriefings.co.uk/ukes2015/>

http://mymande.org/evalyear/Declaring_2015_as_the_International_Year_of_Evaluation

Evaluation further reading and resources

UKES Guidelines for Good Practice Jan 2013 <http://www.evaluation.org.uk/assets/UKES%20Guidelines%20for%20Good%20Practice%20January%202013.pdf>

OECD evaluation criteria <http://www.oecd.org/dac/evaluation/>

UNICEF Evaluation guidelines http://www.unicef.org/evaluation/files/Evaluation_standards.pdf

United Nations Evaluation Group <http://www.uneval.org/document/detail/21>

UK: Prime Minister's Strategy Unit - Behaviour change. Personal Responsibility and Changing Behaviour: the state of knowledge and its implications for public policy <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/cabinetoffice/strategy/assets/pr2.pdf>

Are you up-to-date with the latest research, comment and opinion on economic and social policy? We are.

Subscribe to our Topic Updates – the latest developments by email every fortnight

Economic development
Business development

Email us to get a free trial: christine.eccleson@idoxgroup.com

The Idox Information Service specialises in resources in public and social policy.

We provide intelligence and current awareness services to local authorities, public sector bodies, universities, think tanks and private sector consultancies. We can also provide literature reviews, policy insights and briefings on request.

Website: theknowledgeexchange.co.uk
Contact: AskTheResearchTeam@idoxgroup.com
Twitter: [@IdoxInfoService](https://twitter.com/IdoxInfoService)
Blog: theknowledgeexchangeblog.com