



A guide to evaluation

What is evaluation all about at the Big Lottery Fund

We believe evaluation is a process which uses monitoring information and other gathered evidence for learning and improvement, to help us understand how and why we are making a difference and how lessons learnt can be incorporated into future plans.

One of our principles is to be a catalyst, helping our funded projects collect and use evidence to learn from what they and others have done and helping them to replicate success and avoid similar pitfalls. In turn, we use this evidence and learning to guide future funding decisions.

Introduction

At Big Lottery Fund, we work with the sector, those we fund, other funders and policy-makers to deliver high-quality projects and share best practice and learning.

Doing this together helps us to maximise the impact of our work. It also helps us to achieve our mission, to support people and communities most in need.

One way we do this is through evaluation. We believe evaluation is a key part of any project that is serious about making a real difference. This opinion is not just unique to us. Most funding agencies place an emphasis on understanding what impact projects may or may not make and understanding why.

This guide will help you think about the benefits of evaluating your project and how to get started. It is not meant to be a comprehensive 'how to' document.

At the end of this guide, we provide you with links to some organisations that provide more in-depth information about how to conduct an evaluation and potential tools you could use.

Introduction to evaluation

What is evaluation?

Evaluation typically involves collecting and using data to answer your own questions about the quality, value and direction of your work and to manage and improve what you do.

Evaluation answers questions such as:

- What difference did this project make, to who and why?
- What worked well, for whom, in what circumstances, at what time and why?
- Did anything happen that wasn't expected to happen?
- If you were to run this project again, what might you do differently?
- Is the project on track to meet its desired outcomes?
- Is the project demonstrating value for money?

Evaluation is an evolving process, and learning and findings can be built upon and used throughout the lifetime of a project to adapt and improve the project.

The language of evaluation

Monitoring: This process often involves numbers and is seen as an ongoing process involving the continuous and regular collection of key information about a project.

Outputs: products, services or facilities that result from an organisation's or project's activities.

Outcomes: the difference you make: changes, benefits, learning or other effects that result from what the project or organisation makes, offers or provides.

Impact: broader or longer-term effects of a project's or organisation's outputs, outcomes and activities.

Self-evaluation: in some Big Lottery Fund documents you will read about 'self-evaluation' which we take to mean 'a project evaluation that is carried out or commissioned by those running the project'.

To find more definitions to terms commonly used when speaking about evaluation visit jargonbusters.org.uk

Why evaluate?

Evaluation is for you, to help improve your project and to help you understand how and why you are making a difference.

It highlights achievements as well as areas for development by:

- exploring the reasons why things are (or are not) working well
- identifying any unintended outcomes (both positive and negative)
- helping you share your learning with others
- helping people involved in the project develop their skills and learn from their experiences
- building a culture of reflection and analysis within your organisation that helps people to improve the quality of their work and your services

- gathering information that will help you report to funders and others about the influence and impact of your project, what you've learned along the way and how you've adapted it to changing circumstances

Evidence gathered through the lifecycle of an evaluation can also be useful in supporting future funding applications prior to the end of project funding and help avoid the possibility of gaps between funding.

Some of our funding programmes require you to provide evaluation reports at application stage, especially if you are applying for continuation funding. Our programme guidance notes will clarify the process that relates to your project.

How does evaluation relate to monitoring?

Monitoring involves the routine collection of information agreed between you and the funder at the start of your grant. Monitoring at the Fund focuses on progress towards achieving your project outcomes. This progress is often marked by stages (called 'milestones' or 'indicators'), with projects having timescales for reaching each milestone. Data collected through routine monitoring also sets the context for any evaluation you do.

Evaluation goes further and deeper than monitoring. Evaluation captures the strengths and challenges of the project and explores how and why certain outcomes were achieved (or not). It also looks at issues of quality and worth, most importantly measuring the value and significance of the project to those it was intended to affect (and others who have been affected)?

Making the distinction between monitoring and evaluation – a case study

Let's take a community garden project for example.

Monitoring could collect information like how many people worked in the garden, the number of volunteer hours contributed, the number of community garden sessions held each week and the amount of money made from selling the garden produce.

Evaluation could look to measure the social value that the project set out to add. This could include whether the community garden decreased feelings of loneliness and isolation in the community, made the location more attractive to visitors, and identifying the activities beneficiaries enjoyed most and how the project may expand what it offers in the future.

Planning your project evaluation

Evaluate from the start

Evaluation should be part of your planning from the very beginning so you can learn from it to deliver your project more effectively. If you only capture data and information towards the end of the project you might miss major learning points. Also the full impact of the project might not be understood because you don't have data from the beginning of the project to compare to.

Doing it from the start will help you obtain staff and stakeholder buy-in as they will hopefully see it as part of the project not just additional work. It will also give your users the chance to feed into and develop the project from the beginning.

Be clear about the basics

The why, the what, the who and the when

- Why are you conducting this evaluation?
- What are you hoping to get out of it? Eg using it to gather learning for project improvement and/or to monitor project impact
- What questions will the evaluation answer? Will the evaluation build on or link in with other research?
- Who else might you need to involve in the evaluation? Eg key stakeholders, the community, and the people who use your project and services
- Who else might be interested in the results of your evaluation?
- When do you need to have results? Do you need to learn as you go? Do you need to know about final impact? Are there key dates when you need to have some evaluation findings?

Make a plan

In addition to the basics listed above, here are a few things we think you should consider as you start to develop an evaluation plan:

- How will you conduct your evaluation? Eg what methods might you use?
- How will you feed emerging lessons back in to the work and direction of the project?
- How much will you spend on the evaluation, and how will you know if this is appropriate? Is the scale of the evaluation proportionate to the size for the project?
- How will reports or other results of the evaluation be communicated and acted upon?

Decide who should carry out your evaluation

Will the project team carry out the evaluation or will you commission external evaluators?

When deciding who should carry out your evaluation, it is important to think about:

- whether staff have the necessary skills and if/how additional training and support will be provided
- the trade-off between the cost of commissioning an external evaluator versus the cost to the project in terms of staff time and skills

Advantages of doing an evaluation yourself:

- You and your staff have in-depth knowledge of how your organisation works
- You are sensitive to the needs of your project and its users
- It allows your staff to learn new skills
- It encourages reflection and learning by those involved, which is more likely to lead to change in your organisation

Advantages of commission an external agency to do your evaluation:

- The evaluation will take up less staff time
- People might talk more freely about the project to independent evaluators
- Independent evaluators may find it easier to identify areas of weakness
- It avoids conflicts of interest as the evaluators are independent
- Independent evaluators will bring specialist skills
- Some, but not all, funders look more favourably on external evaluations

Involve beneficiaries

Whoever carries out your evaluation should involve your beneficiaries as much as possible. Evaluation is a good way of engaging people in your project. It allows them to see your project from a different perspective. It helps users gain new skills, enables them to shape services and can facilitate additional buy-in to the project.

To find out more about involving beneficiaries in your projects and evaluation visit biglotteryfund.org.uk/research/making-the-most-of-funding/involving-beneficiaries

Dedicate resources

It is important that you have sufficient money and staff time dedicated to support and undertake the evaluation.

This may include time and resources needed for:

- planning and managing the evaluation
- attending training to up-skill staff in evaluation methods
- collecting data and other information about the project and its outcomes
- communicating the findings

Projects with more resources should be able to carry out a more extensive piece of work. Smaller grants (eg those up to £10,000) may focus on a few key things they want to learn about. The Big Lottery Fund encourages projects to allocate up to 10 per cent of their budget towards monitoring and evaluation. We encourage applicants to consider this in advance of their application.

Evaluations commissioned by Big Lottery Fund

We often commission evaluations of our funding programmes. These evaluations should not replace your own project evaluation.

Our programme-level evaluations are usually carried out by independent contractors and look across multiple projects. We use the findings from these evaluations to improve the way we fund and to share learning with others.

We may ask for your help in these evaluations. For example, with:

- **Being a case study**
Our evaluators may wish to speak to you about your project to gather learning for the wider programme. The benefits of being involved as a case study include an independent view about the outcome, impact and quality of your project and understanding how it compares to other projects.
- **Collecting specific data**
Our evaluators may ask you to capture specific data at the start and throughout the life of your project. Collecting standard or common data in this way allows you to compare your work against others doing similar activities or aiming for similar outcomes, and helps us to build up a picture of impact across our funding.

- **Contributing your project evaluation**

Our evaluators may ask to see your project evaluation findings in order to analyse particular issues or to share your learning more widely.

Any data that you give us for our evaluators will be anonymous and held separately from the information requested by us for grant monitoring and management. While not all our funding programmes regularly commission larger evaluations, it may be a programme requirement to undertake your own evaluation as a term of the grant. In these cases, it will be stated in the application process guidance, and you will be provided with more information as to what is expected.

How we can help you

The Big Lottery Fund has a number of resources available on our website which provide further information on evaluation.

If you apply for a grant, you will receive guidance from our staff on evaluation, for example through programme briefing events or programme guidance notes, or you will be directed to other sources of advice and assistance.

For some of our programmes, we use consultants to support our grantees with their evaluations.

This support may include:

- email or telephone help lines
- tailored resources on dedicated websites
- written guidance
- workshops and seminars
- one-to-one assistance

Want more information?

Listed below are other resources available to help you plan and develop your evaluation in more details. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and we have focused on resources that are applicable to the breadth of projects we support with our funding.

Charity Evaluation Services

ces-vol.org.uk

Charity Evaluation Services (CES) has a number of publications that provide in depth details on planning and implementing an evaluation. Three good publications to start with are:

[First Steps in Monitoring and Evaluation](#) is aimed at small voluntary organisations and projects with limited experience of monitoring and evaluation. It introduces a step-by-step approach to setting up simple monitoring and evaluation processes.

[Next Steps: Monitoring and evaluation on a shoestring](#) builds on the First Steps guidance and provides more in depth details. This resource is aimed at organisations who are looking to further develop their monitoring and evaluation practices.

[The CES resource guide: evaluating outcomes and impact](#) provides a comprehensive catalogue of resources and guides on evaluation from a variety of organisations. This guide was last updated in 2013, so is fairly update-to-date.

BBC Children in need

downloads.bbc.co.uk/tv/pudsey/grants/evaluation.pdf
How are you doing? is a self-evaluation produced by The Children in Need appeal. It provides eight basic steps on evaluation, from planning the initial evaluation to writing the final report and is applicable to all organisation, not just those working with children. You'll find this guide in their Grants section under Sharing Our Learning.

BetterEvaluation

betterevaluation.org

BetterEvaluation is an international collaboration working to improve evaluation practice and theory. Their website provides information on evaluation including approaches (such as beneficiary assessments and outcome mapping) and themes (such as evaluation and children).

A good place to start is with their Rainbow Framework: betterevaluation.org/sites/default/files/Rainbow%20Framework.pdf which organises evaluation tasks and questions into seven colour coded clusters to help you plan your evaluation.

Inspiring Impact

inspiringimpact.org

Inspiring Impact provides tools and resources for individuals and organisations looking to start down the path of impact measurement. Their Measuring Up! tool is an easy-to-use method for understanding and assessing the impact of your project or organisation, and their Impact Hub is a searchable database of impact measurement tools and resources. They also have produced a Code of Good Impact Practice and The Funders' principles and drivers of good impact practice.

NCVO

ncvo.org.uk

NCVO provides advice and support on a wider range of topics relating to the voluntary sector. It operates KnowHow Nonprofit (knowhownonprofit.org) – a support website for social learning in the voluntary sector. This site has a community of people who share knowledge, best practice and experience. It provides top tips and bite-sized how to guides, along with a number of other support tools.

Evaluation Support Scotland

evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk

This organisation has a series of ESS Support Guides which break evaluation down into single topic briefings. You can easily pick and chose specific guides to find out more about your topic of interest from how to clarify your aims and objectives to information about budgeting for an evaluation. They also highlight a variety of tools which might come in handy when conducting your evaluation.

Theory of Change

A Theory of Change is a good starting point when thinking about your evaluation. Below are a few organisations which provide guidance on and can help you undertake a Theory of Change.

NPC

thinknpc.org/publications/creating-your-theory-of-change

thinknpc.org/publications/npcs-four-pillar-approach/

NPC provides some excellent guidance to help organisations think through the theory of change process. These guides are aimed at organisations of all shapes and sizes. There are also a number of other useful documents on NPC's website, so it's well worth a visit.

Nesta

nesta.org.uk/sites/default/files/theory_of_change_guidance_for_applicants.pdf

Nesta's guidance of Theory of Change provides visual example of a Theory of Change and a handy checklist.