



PROJECT EVALUATION – A PRACTICAL GUIDE

Part Three: Commissioning an independent evaluation

There are many good reasons to commission an independent evaluation. If you get the right external evaluator for your project they can provide:

- skills and capacity to carry out evaluation – rather than you doing it all in addition to delivering the project;
- independence and a degree of objectivity - this can be important if you want to convince future funders that your evaluation findings are sound;
- expert knowledge not only on evaluation but very often, on the issues your project is working with;
- access to other networks and resources;
- a valuable sounding board, for the project to reflect and enhance learning and development;
- effective communication of your project's achievements – good evaluators are generally skilled at writing up and presenting information.

However, not all projects have these positive experiences. Sometimes the experience of external evaluation is disappointing, and occasionally relationships between projects and their evaluators turn sour. Very often when this happens it isn't any one person's fault – the disappointment

frequently stems from unclear expectations and miscommunication. This can usually be prevented through better commissioning of an external evaluator and ongoing management of the relationship.

The purpose of this guidance is to help you to get best value from external evaluation and avoid some of the common pitfalls of commissioning. It outlines the key stages in commissioning evaluations and identifies some issues for projects and/or partnerships to consider. It also looks at some of the processes you might want to put in place for managing your relationship with your evaluator once you've made your commissioning decisions.

Planning

Before you start commissioning there are some things it is important to think about and plan:

- **Management arrangements/lead responsibility:** You need to identify someone who will take overall responsibility for commissioning and managing your evaluation. If you're working in partnership, there may be several people who need to be involved, but it's helpful to have a named lead who acts as the main point of contact with prospective evaluators during the commissioning process, ensures that the issues in this section are considered and continues to be their main management link during the evaluation so that there are clear lines of communication between the project and evaluators. This person needs to be able to answer any questions prospective evaluators may have and have the authority to make day to day decisions about the conduct of the evaluation as it progresses.
- **An evaluation steering group:** You can commission and manage an external evaluation without a steering group, but you may wish to consider the benefits of having one. Setting up and then negotiating decisions through a steering group can slow down the commissioning process, but on the other hand, a well constituted steering group can provide support in developing the specification, participate in the recruitment of the evaluator and provide ongoing management and support. In the longer term your steering group members can help in the progress of the evaluation e.g. by facilitating access to data and/or

informants. A steering group can also help with 'buy in' to the evaluation and its findings. The role of a steering group is typically to:

- Feed into the development of the evaluation specification and be involved in the selection process
- Receive reports on the progress of the evaluation and consider issues arising
- Receive evaluation findings and work with partners to learn from the findings

Membership of a steering group will need to include the person with overall responsibility for commissioning and managing the evaluation, representatives of partner agencies (those involved in delivering your project and those you want to influence) and representatives of people using your project. It is also important to include people who have an understanding of research and evaluation and its practicalities. Having access to some independent advice on evaluation methods can help give you confidence that your evaluators are doing a good job – or provide you with an 'early warning' that things may be going awry.

- **Procurement rules/procedures:** Are there any rules or procedures that you need to comply with within your organisation or partnership? Does your funder have any procurement requirements? For example, some funders require you to put contracts over a certain amount of money out to competitive tender, and some have set procedures for doing so. Others may have guidance to help you. Some funders might want to approve or comment on your evaluation specification.
- **Clarity of expectations:** The single most important thing to consider before commissioning an evaluation is to be clear about what you want it to do. The majority of projects will want an external evaluation to assess the effectiveness of their project – to answer the core question 'has our project worked in making a positive difference to the lives of individuals/groups/communities?' For any evaluator to undertake this task they will need to know what the desired outcomes of your project are and the changes they are expected to measure. If you can't provide this clarity then your evaluators will have to spend a lot of time figuring it out for themselves. This is both expensive (it means they're spending time clarifying your outcomes rather than collecting data), time consuming for you (you will end up spending a lot of time trying to

explain your project to the evaluators) and risky (there's a real danger that if you're not clear, evaluators will explore the wrong questions and you won't get the evaluation you need). Fortunately, if you've spent a bit of time developing a project plan as set out in Part One of this Practical Guide, then your outcomes should be clear and your evaluation can get off to a flying start!

As well as an evaluation of your progress towards outcomes, you are also likely to want external evaluators to explore other questions of importance to your project. For example, if your project works then you will want evaluation to help you to understand how and why it works, does it work for everyone, or only for certain groups – what are the most and least effective things you do. You may also want the evaluators to provide insights to inform your project or partnership development and to generate data that can influence other people. It can be helpful to frame these requirements as questions you want the evaluators to explore e.g. what makes our partnership working effective?; what are the facilitators and barriers to people accessing our services? What do staff think about this new way of working?

In clarifying what you want from evaluation it is important to ensure that you have taken into account any expectations or requirements of your partners and/or funders. For example, are there aspects of your project which your funder has highlighted as particularly critical to evaluate? Are there reporting deadlines which the evaluation needs to fit with?

As well as being clear what you want an external evaluation to do it is worth clarifying what you don't want them to do. There may be some aspects of your project which you don't feel need to be externally evaluated, perhaps because there is sufficient evidence already or because you can generate and analyse the information you need in-house. Your decisions about priorities will be informed by the level of funding you can allocate to external evaluation.

Finally, you may want to think in advance about **how** you want the evaluators to work with you – not just in terms of what they do but how they do it. For example, if you're doing some data collection in-house you may want the external evaluators to work alongside you in designing monitoring systems that will work for you both. You may want external

evaluators to be participatory in their approach e.g. involving service users as peer researchers. By thinking about these requirements in advance, they can be built in to your specification so that you are more likely to get the style of evaluator you want.

- **Budget:** It is important to set your budget for evaluation. There is no fixed way of doing this. Many funders suggest that as a rule of thumb a reasonable amount to spend on evaluation is around 10% of your total project budget. However, you may wish to allocate more or less than this depending on what you need the evaluation to accomplish. If yours is an innovative pilot project you may want to spend considerably more in order to assess and demonstrate its effectiveness. If you are running a service which has already been tried and tested then your evaluation may be very light touch. The 10% rule of thumb is a useful place to start but should not be your only consideration. Clearly 10% of a very large project budget will result in a sizeable amount for evaluation. You need to consider whether spending that amount is justified and proportionate to your project's activities. On the other hand, 10% of a small project budget may not be enough to commission what you need. You need to consider whether the long term benefits of an evaluation may be worth some extra investment. And of course, you may not want to spend all your evaluation budget on external evaluation – you may want to retain some for in-house evaluation and learning activities.

In setting a budget for external evaluation, it is important to be clear about what you want to have evaluated and estimate the approximate size of the task. The biggest cost of almost all evaluations is the amount of evaluator time needed. Most evaluators will charge daily rates, usually with some variation in amount according to experience and seniority of staff. This means that, roughly speaking, for an evaluation budget of £10,000 you might get around 20-25 days of evaluator time, exclusive of any expenses, such as travel. Many evaluators will also have to add VAT at 20% and if that has to come out of the budget then the number of days you will get will be reduced accordingly. It is easy to see why a budget that initially appeared quite generous may not buy you all the evaluation you envisaged. It is therefore really important to be clear what you want from your evaluation so you make the very best use of the resource

When planning your budget, remember to cost in the processes of

commissioning (e.g. advertising, anyone helping with recruitment who needs to be paid) and set some aside for a steering group if you decide to have one (see below).

If you have limited experience of costing an evaluation it is worth getting some advice from someone who carries out evaluations themselves. Provided you are clear what you want, an evaluator will often be able to tell you approximately how much time they would expect to spend on such a commission.

- **Type of procurement you intend to use**

There are three main types of procurement for an external evaluation.

1. **Single tender:** This involves asking one supplier (or consortium) to provide a proposal for the work. If you intend to use this approach you will need to have a clear justification for doing so. It may be appropriate to use a single tender approach if your evaluation budget is very small and the costs of more open competition clearly outweigh any benefits. Another justification may be a longstanding relationship with an evaluator who knows your project very well and/or who has such a strong set of attributes (e.g. specialist knowledge, skills and prior engagement with your project) that you are unlikely to find another evaluator that can meet your needs as effectively. Some funders will require you to put tenders out to more open competition, particularly over a certain amount so do check this.

If a single tender action is pursued, it is good practice to record the reasons as to why the approach was appropriate. You also need to ensure that the evaluator still provides you with a proposal in line with the guidance below so that you can be sure that they are going to provide the evaluation you want.

2. **Closed tender:** This involves approaching selected evaluators and inviting them to supply a proposal. You would typically approach around five suppliers – with the aim of having at least three proposals submitted.

This approach can be an effective way of ensuring that there is some competition in the tendering process while avoiding the open

competition which risks you receiving lots of proposals from inappropriate suppliers. However, this approach does involve you doing some research to identify the selection of evaluators to invite.

- 3. Open tender:** This involves opening the tender up to any organisation who wishes to submit a proposal. This is generally the preferred method for larger contracts. It has the advantage of complete transparency and opens up the field to evaluators who you may not know about but who may have the skills you need. The main disadvantage is that it can elicit a large number of inappropriate proposals which you will have to sift through.

One way of reducing the number of full proposals you have to review is to use a two stage process with an '**Expression of Interest**' (EOI) stage and a 'Full Tender' stage. Inviting initial Expressions of Interest involves requesting short submissions (usually only a couple of pages) which allows you to narrow down your prospective tenderers prior to full tender. So, the focus is usually on experience of the potential evaluators – and not details on methods, costs etc. If you use an EOI you need to have clear selection and scoring criteria, just as you would for a full tender – but it means you can then invite only the most promising evaluators to submit a full tender, thus saving their time as well as yours.

- **Where to advertise your tender**

If you have opted for an open tender approach you need to decide where to advertise the opportunity. As a minimum, you need to put information about the tender on your website and circulate information to partners involved in the project. It is also worth asking contacts in partner organisations, your local voluntary sector infrastructure organisation and research teams of national bodies if they can supply contact details for evaluators they have worked with in the past. Asking people in your networks to circulate the opportunity by email can often reach relevant organisations. If your project has a Facebook or LinkedIn page you might also use those.

To advertise more widely there are a number of options. You or your partner organisations may already use one or more procurement portals. It is worth asking whether your evaluation tender can be placed

on one of these. There are some national organisations which specialise in research and evaluation who will advertise your opportunity on their websites e.g. the Social Research Association and the UK Evaluation Society. Please note that there will be a cost involved with any of these options.

- **Timecales:** Commissioning an evaluation can take longer than you might expect. You will need to allow time to do the planning outlined in this section, for writing the specification and consulting on it with your partners and, if appropriate, your funders and steering group. If the commission is to go out to tender you will need to allow time for the placement of the advert and then to receive responses. It is reasonable to allow 3-4 weeks for potential evaluators to submit their proposals. If you have set an interview date in advance and have people lined up to review proposals, then you might get to selection 2 weeks after that giving you a total time of 6 weeks from signing off the specification to having selected an evaluator. To be on the safe side it's probably sensible to allow at least two months.

Once you have recruited your evaluators they will need some time to get to know your project before they start collecting data. For some evaluations you may find that the evaluation team, your organization or its partners requires ethical clearance before any data collection can start. This will involve your evaluators taking an ethical application to a research ethics committee. These applications often need to be very detailed and provide copies of the research instruments (e.g. questionnaires, interview schedules) to be used. The whole ethical clearance process generally takes around 3 months.

What all this means is that you may wish to start commissioning your external evaluation ahead of when you think you need it. There are real advantages to having your evaluators involved with your project at the early stages in any case – and if you leave it too long you may find that there is insufficient time for them to do the evaluation you want.

Drafting a specification/Invitation to Tender for your external evaluation

The Invitation to Tender (ITT) is the document which goes out to prospective evaluators so that they can provide you with a written proposal and quote. If

you have thought about all the elements in the above section, you should be well placed to provide the necessary information in your ITT. If you intend to have an Expression of Interest stage, evaluators will still need the information below in order to decide whether to submit an EOI.

Your ITT needs to include:

- **Background information about the project and what is to be evaluated:**
You can't assume that potential evaluators will know anything about your project so you need to provide all relevant information such as:
 - What your organization does
 - Which partner organisations you are working with
 - The overall aims of your project and what it will do
 - How it is funded and its overall budget
 - Your target groups/ communities
 - The scale of the work you will be doing e.g. numbers of beneficiaries you are likely to be engaging
 - The timescales for the project

Most of this information should be contained in your project plan – and you may choose to include your plan as a supporting document to accompany the ITT.

- **Objectives of the evaluation:**

Describe what you want the evaluation to do, to include the following:

- Assuming you want the evaluation to assess the outcomes of your project, state what those outcomes are.
- Provide a list of questions you would like an evaluation to address. Even if you don't have a complete list it's worth including some as examples of the kinds of things you want the evaluation to explore.
- Mention any specific aspects of your project which you are particularly interested in having evaluated
- Specify if you want the evaluators to support you in designing or analysing systems for internal data collection/monitoring
- Outline how you want the evaluation to contribute to project learning and development

- Be clear if you want the evaluation to support user participation/co-production

If your evaluation is over an extended period (e.g. 3 years) you will certainly want to re-negotiate its aims over that time. It is worth stating this in your ITT – and it is quite acceptable to be more specific about your requirements in year one and state that the aims for years 2 and 3 will be reviewed with the evaluation team.

- **Methodology and any specific requirements**

Most ITTs do not specify the methodology to be used in the evaluation – instead you invite prospective evaluators to propose the methods they would use to meet your requirements. However, if you have clear views about how you would like the evaluation to be carried out (e.g. you particularly want an emphasis on qualitative methods or you would really like the methodology to be as participatory as possible) then you should say so in this section.

This section is also where you specify any other requirements such as the evaluators needing to be able to communicate with people who use a particular language or to have an ability to engage with people with particular experiences.

This section should also note whether evaluators are required to have enhanced DBS clearance.

- **Outputs and dissemination**

The main output of an evaluation is usually a written evaluation report or for an extended evaluation, a series of interim reports culminating in a final report. You need to specify your expectations for reporting e.g. if you have annual reports to provide to your funder it makes sense to ask the evaluators to deliver their reports in advance of that.

However, reports are not the only way of communicating findings to people who need to learn from the evaluation, so you may wish to specify what else you want the evaluators to provide. This could include:

- ‘Plain English’ summaries of evaluation findings
- Case study write-ups
- Presentations at events or conferences
- Workshops and seminars
- Videos, blogs or contributions to newsletters

It is important to give the evaluators a clear steer on the outputs you want so that they cost in sufficient time for dissemination activities.

- **Deliverables**

Specify to prospective tenderers what deliverables are required throughout the duration of the project. These may include

- Project inception and scoping meeting at the start of the evaluation
- A detailed evaluation plan
- Attendance and participation at evaluation steering group meetings, and production of progress reports
- Verbal reporting – expectations of how often the evaluators will be required to communicate progress with the project’s evaluation lead
- Written reporting – requirements regarding number and timing of interim and final reports

- **Timescales**

Provide dates for:

- Deadline for questions about the tender
- If using a 2 stage process, deadline for submission of Expressions of Interest and the date when prospective evaluators can expect to be invited to submit a full tender
- Deadline for submission of tenders (including exact time)
- Date of interviews with shortlisted tenderers
- When you expect the work to start
- Any reporting deadlines you know about

- **Budget**

Procurement professionals often disagree on whether a budget should be given in a tender document. If you give a budget, most tenderers will supply a proposal based on the budget figure – so you may be missing an opportunity to procure something more cheaply. However, evaluation budgets vary enormously and if you don’t give a budget it is very difficult for evaluators to make a judgement as to the scale and depth you require.

Therefore, when commissioning evaluation it is generally best to give a budget, or an indicative range. The exception would be in cases where you have been very specific as to the work you want the evaluators to do – then it may be possible for the evaluators to provide a realistic quote without a budget for guidance.

If you want to retain some flexibility in what is commissioned, you may ask for the prospective evaluators to cost a range of options.

Be clear whether the budget you quote includes or excludes VAT.

Depending on the size of the evaluation budget and timescale you may wish to also set out staged payment arrangements e.g. x% on appointment; x% on satisfactory delivery of interim report; and x% once the final report is completed.

- **The tendering process**

Set out what you want submissions to cover. It is useful to request that tenderers provide the following in their proposals:

- Contact details for the organisation(s)
- Name and contact details of the lead evaluator
- A 2 page summary of their proposal, team, method, and how they meet the tender requirements
- Understanding of the brief
- Knowledge and understanding of the sector/area of work
- The evaluation team (with CVs / biographies in an annex) and their role in the evaluation
- Track record in evaluating similar projects and research in this field
- Proposed methodology
- Plans for reporting and dissemination
- Management arrangements for the evaluation
- A detailed timetable for carrying out the work, highlighting key milestones, deadlines, suggested meetings and progress reports.
- Quality assurance and approach to risk management
- Ethical considerations
- Costings (asking for a clear structure of charges broken down by days, member of staff and activity).

You may also wish to request:

- Contact details for two referees for whom tenderers have done similar work
- Evidence of professional indemnity and public liability insurance

It is sensible to set a 20 page limit for the proposal (minimum of .12pt font),

with specified material (e.g. CVs) being allowed in the form of annexes.

If you are using a 2 stage process, you should request Expressions of Interest of no more than 2 pages and ask them to provide information which will allow you to assess their suitability i.e.

- Knowledge and understanding of the sector/area of work
- Track record in evaluating similar projects and research in this field
- Brief details of the evaluation team and their likely role in the evaluation

You need to provide clear instructions on how the EOI or tender should be submitted. It is sensible to allow submissions by email to arrive at an appointed date and time. You need to specify an email address for tenders to be sent to.

- **Assessment criteria**

It is good practice to specify in your tender how proposals will be assessed and any weighting you intend to give to particular criteria. For example, you might choose to allocate 100 points to your criteria and break them down as follows:

Understanding of the brief (20)

Evaluators' knowledge of the project's area of work (20)

Experience and track record of the team (20)

Suitability of proposed methodology (40)

Selecting your external evaluator

Once you have received your full tenders, you will need to shortlist prospective evaluators and invite them to interview. Interviewing your external evaluators is really important - even if you find you have only shortlisted one evaluation team, you need to make sure they are right for you.

Prior to shortlisting, decide who will be on the selection panel and ensure everyone is clear about the criteria they should use to assess tenders. It can help to have a scoring system for proposals. For example: Give each proposal a score under each criterion where:

- 0 – does not meet criterion
- 1 – very limited evidence that the tenderer meets the criterion
- 2 – partial evidence that the tenderer meets the criterion
- 3 – good evidence that the tenderer meets the criterion

- 4 – excellent evidence that the tenderer meets the criterion

Multiply the score by the weighting for each criterion and add up to get a total score. All those shortlisting should record their scores and you should retain copies of the scoring sheets in case there are any queries about your process.

When inviting evaluators to interview, bear in mind that you and/or they may wish to bring two or three members of the team. This is to be encouraged because it gives you the opportunity to meet the key people you will be working with. In fact, you may wish to specify that the lead evaluator attends the interview with anyone who will be giving substantial input to the evaluation. This avoids you interviewing someone who you later find is not the person actually doing most of the work.

When interviewing potential evaluators, as with job interviews it is good practice to ask all tenderers the same questions and record your assessments of their suitability. However, it is acceptable to ask for clarification or more details about particular aspects of their proposal.

It is common to ask tenderers to do a short presentation to the selection panel. This could be a fairly generic presentation of their proposal or on a specific question which you feel to be critical to the evaluation.

It is worth asking some questions which enable you to assess the style of the evaluators. This will be an important relationship for you – if the evaluators' style doesn't fit with your ethos, it's not likely to work, however technically skilled they may be.

Make sure you record how you arrived at your decision and be prepared to give feedback to unsuccessful tenderers.

The evaluation contract

Having made your decision you will need to draw up a contract with your evaluator. This does not need to be a complicated document. Most evaluation contracts include the standard terms and conditions that your organisation has with any supplier as Schedule 1 with the evaluator's proposal attached as Schedule 2. If you do not have any standard contracts to use as a template, then it is worth asking partner organisations or your local voluntary sector infrastructure organisation for relevant examples.

The only significant addition usually included in evaluation contracts is an agreement about intellectual property and publication rights. Many evaluators will want to publish their work in academic journals etc and you may well want

to encourage this. However, if your evaluation is sensitive you may want to include a clause in the contract to require evaluators to obtain permission prior to publication.

Ongoing management and communication

Once you have appointed your evaluator you may want to sigh with relief and let them get on with it. However, to avoid further pitfalls you do need to make sure you have some processes for ongoing management and communication.

It is helpful to start with an **inception meeting** to cover:

- A reiteration of the aims and objectives of the evaluation
- Reviewing the proposal submitted and discussing any areas where you would wish to see a change in the approach
- Reviewing timescales for the evaluation and ensuring they are realistic
- Providing information needed by the evaluators such as key contacts in partner organisations, beneficiary data and management information
- Agreeing on communication protocols and management arrangements – such as asking for a phone/email progress update from the evaluators fortnightly
- Agreeing a schedule of deliverables (such as evaluation reports)
- Agreeing an invoicing schedule
- Making the evaluator aware of any sensitivities, concerns and risks that could have an impact on the successful delivery of the evaluation
- Agreeing the contact

As the evaluation progresses maintaining a named lead for regular communication with the evaluators is important. It is also extremely helpful to identify someone (possibly a project administrator) who can be the evaluators' main link on a day to day basis – the person who provides them with the monitoring information they need, liaises with people they need to interview and so forth.

You may also find it helpful to maintain an evaluation steering group as the main vehicle for receiving progress reports from the evaluators on a quarterly or six monthly basis.