A guide to evaluation

# What is evaluation all about

We believe evaluation is a process which uses monitoring information and other gathered evidence for learning and improvement. It helps 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 DAERA, 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 projects or organisation’s outputs, outcomes and activities.

**Self-evaluation:** in some CCF 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 of terms commonly used when speaking about evaluation visit [knowhownonprofit.org](https://knowhownonprofit.org/organisation/impact/about-impact-and-evaluation/understanding-the-language)

**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? For example, 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? For example, 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? For example, 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 of 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 commissioning 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.

## 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 (For example, those up to £50,000) may focus on a few key things they want to learn about. We would encourage 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 in DAERA

**We may ask for your help in evaluations that we carry out. For example, with:**

**Being a case study**

We 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**

We 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**

We 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 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.