



Evaluation can help you to work out what difference you are making through your services or activities. **Evaluation Support Guide 1.1** helps you to clarify your aims, outcomes and activities and **Support Guide 2.1** helps you to use indicators to measure your progress. These can help you decide what you need an external evaluator to do.

This guide covers how you can get the best from using external consultants. It considers **the need for an external consultant; hiring an external consultant; the evaluation budget; managing the external evaluation and learning the lessons.**

Evaluation often works best when you can integrate evaluation activities into your day to day work. You should aim to build evaluation into what you do, rather than adding it on at the end. If you do that, then external evaluation can build on your existing self evaluation and draw conclusions. Alternatively you can use an external evaluator to help you develop monitoring and evaluation systems in the first place. However, the more common scenario is that an external evaluator is brought in once a project has been running for some time to collect and analyse information **and** form conclusions about any difference the project has made.

The need for an external consultant

You may decide to use an external consultant for some of the following:

- bring specialist information collection skills or policy expertise
- obtain feedback from service users or other stakeholders
- provide a fresh eye on your work and suggestions on ways to improve what you do or how you do it
- draw conclusions from information you've gathered
- set your work in the context of wider research

Example: A local organisation running self-help groups was having difficulty attracting and sustaining members' participation in groups. Their self-evaluation had been helpful but they wanted a fresh eye on what could be affecting participation. They decided to commission an external evaluator to investigate the issues, look at wider group-work/self-help group trends and make practical recommendations on how to get things working better.

Getting an external consultant

It is best practice to tender for an external evaluation. You need either to advertise, draw up a preferred list of potential consultants or invite notes of interest. You need to prepare **an evaluation brief** to send to potential consultants. Even if you don't go out to tender, the evaluation brief will make it clear what you need and help you keep things on track.

A poorly thought out or vague brief is one of the major reasons why organisations fail to get the best from an external consultant.

An evaluation brief should cover:

Context

- Why you need the evaluation
- What you need the evaluation consultant to do

Background

- What your organisation or project does
- Website details if you have one, so they can find out more

Aim

- The questions you need the evaluation to answer

The work

- The work you expect to be done
- Any deadlines that need to be met
- Any specific stakeholders who need to be involved
- What you want them to produce such as a final report, progress updates, presentations
- Other requirements such as speaking at a launch event or helping with action planning on recommendations

Managing the tender

- Who at your end will manage the contract with the consultant and whether there is a steering group or other relevant stakeholders to work with
- Any resources or data that you will make available

Consultant skills and knowledge

- What skills, knowledge, experience and values you expect the consultant to have. Ask them to tell you about all the people who will do the work - not just the person in charge

Budget

- How much money you have to pay for the evaluation (and say if this includes travel expenses and VAT)

Practical details

- How do you want the tender submitted (by email?)
- Who should it go to and by when
- What needs to be covered in the tender, for example:
 - An outline of how they would go about the work
 - A summary of their skills, knowledge and experience
- - A budget breakdown

Example: A charity was asked by a key funder to undertake an external evaluation. They quickly pulled together an initial draft evaluation brief. The first draft of the brief was circulated for comments and feedback indicated a number of things that were not clear:

- Why did the funder need the evaluation?
- What key questions did the evaluation need to address?
- How extensive should the scope of the evaluation actually be?

The charity discussed this with staff, service users and the funder. They established that the funder wanted to know whether the project represented value for money for their own audit purposes. The funder also agreed with the charity's suggestion that service users' own experiences should contribute to the definition of value for money.

The brief was redrafted so that it was clear the evaluation was about setting a definition of value for money including economic and quality of life benefits, cost savings and social return on investment and then assessing the project's achievements in relation to this definition.

You should circulate the brief with details of the short-listing and interview process. Even if you have only one tender, you need to interview the potential consultants. That way you can make sure they are right for the job. The interview should always involve the person who will manage the relationship with the consultant.

The Evaluation Budget

Before you circulate your brief, you need to work out how much the work you want done is likely to cost - especially if you only have a small amount of money. This is a useful check to see whether you are being realistic about what can be done with the amount available. To draw up a draft evaluation budget look at your brief and consider:

- How many days work could be involved? For example, two days desk research, three days speaking to service users and so on. When you have estimated the number of days involved, multiply this by a daily rate for a consultant. Most consultants charge a fixed amount per day although they may charge less for longer term pieces of work. Pick an amount that reflects normal rates locally.
- What other costs might there be in carrying out the evaluation? For example, room hire for focus groups or steering group meetings, phone costs, administration or travel costs.
- Are there any other costs to you that you need to build in such as staff or volunteer costs, report publication or dissemination costs?
- You may need to decide whether to include the costs the consultant incurs during the tendering process, such travel to interview.

If your draft budget exceeds the amount you have available you may need to either renegotiate your budget or cut down your brief to prioritise how to get best value from an external consultant.

Example: A peer education project wanted to engage an external evaluator to write a report on the difference their project was making. They wanted a good weighty report that set the project in the context of current research and understanding of the benefits of peer education. Their budget was £5,000.

However they could only find one consultant to do the work. He would do a major literature review but only spend minimal time getting feedback from peer educators by questionnaire. The project felt this would not give enough information about the quality of their work and they felt some peer educators would struggle to fill in questionnaires. But the consultant said he couldn't do any more for the budget available.

The project tried to work out why. They very roughly worked out how long it would take to do what they really wanted:

- Literature review of peer education – roughly 2-3 days
- 1 hour interviews with 20-30 peer educators including travel time and transcribing the interviews – around 6-8 days
- Focus groups with peer education beneficiaries – couple of days
- Interviews with stakeholders – couple of days
- Writing the report – several days
- Meetings with project staff – couple of days worth

This meant the evaluation would take more than 20 days. Most consultants in their field charged between £300 and £600 a day. So a quick bit of arithmetic showed that nobody could do all the work they wanted for the budget they had.

They revised the evaluation brief and reissued it. They said that the most important element of the evaluation was feedback from peer educators but they would welcome innovative ways to do this for the budget available. They decided not to include a literature review of the topic.

The tenders they received included a number of different suggestions for getting feedback including video diaries, telephone interviews and random sampling for in-depth interviews.

Managing the external consultant

When you have chosen your evaluator, you should draw up a contract for the work. This should set out the terms and conditions and may include issues such as who owns the material that is produced, confidentiality, conflicts of interest, sanctions and termination.

Your role in the evaluation process does not end when you have engaged the external evaluator. You have an ongoing responsibility to manage the work. You need to ensure that you get what you want and need from the evaluation, and that your organisation owns and acts on any learning. You should designate a member of staff to manage the consultant and the evaluation process and to be responsible for:

- communicating with the consultant
- making sure the consultant has access to the information required
- troubleshooting, where sensitive issues arise
- checking that deadlines are met, payments made and outputs delivered as required.

Building an effective relationship with the consultant will reduce risk, enabling unforeseen events to be dealt with promptly.

Learning the lessons

An external evaluation can present both opportunities and challenges. If the consultant questions long held assumptions, the report fails to live up to expectations or recommendations suggest widespread changes, you may be tempted to bury the report. Don't! In fact if the evaluation report only tells you how great you are, you've wasted your money!

If you write the brief properly, appoint a good consultant and keep in touch with the consultant throughout the evaluation, the findings should be useful and indeed there should be no great surprises. But build in time afterwards to think how you will use the findings to improve your work and promote the lessons. You might even use the consultant to help you do this if you have more funds. It's also worth reflecting on the external evaluation process itself and what you might do differently in the future.

You can find out more about learning from evaluation in **Evaluation Support Guide 4.1** *Learning from Evaluation*.

If you need advice about evaluation, or would like a copy of this guide in large print, Braille or audio, please contact Evaluation Support Scotland on info@evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk or 0131 243 2770. For other Evaluation Support Guides please visit our website: www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk.