

# Getting the best from external evaluations

## Principles for funders



## Introduction

This resource is about external evaluations (for example of a grant programme), that are commissioned from consultants, universities or others.

The resource is mainly for funders. But most of the resource is also relevant for anyone commissioning an evaluation including third sector organisations and public sector commissioners.

Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) wrote the resource with grant funding and input from The Robertson Trust. We also drew from the experience of a range of other funders and consultants listed in the annex.

### Why is the resource needed?

This resource comes out of the experiences of funders in Scotland. They told us they were not always getting the best from the external evaluations that they commissioned. A few evaluations had not gone as anticipated. Evaluators told us that undertaking a commissioned evaluation could be frustrating for them too.

The **headline message** is that a successful commissioned evaluation comes from a good relationship between the commissioner and the evaluator, a shared purpose and a commitment to learning.

This resource gives funders practical principles on what they can do to make sure this happens and to get the best from the external evaluation.

Please contact ESS if you have any feedback on the resource that could improve it (contact details on the back page).

# Principles for getting the best from external evaluations

## 1: Clear purpose

Know **why** you want an external evaluation. Write a **clear aim** for the evaluation and the questions you want to answer. Set out clearly who the **audience** is and how the findings will be used. Make sure the aim is agreed internally with colleagues and decision-makers within the funder, and externally if appropriate.

## 2: Right type of evaluation

“Evaluation” means many different things. You should always have self-evaluation systems in place for you and funded organisations and have confidence in self-evaluation where it is appropriate. You should then be clear about the **added value** an external evaluation will bring. Some things you might want an external evaluator to do could include (but not all at once!):

- Reviewing process: that could include the **approach** you have taken to running your funding programme, or your own evaluation **methods**.
- Specialist **evidence collection** about outcomes – evidence you and funded projects cannot collect yourselves.
- Expert **analysis** of the data collected by you or funded organisations, to help make sense of the data or draw it together into themes.
- Setting your **evidence in a wider context** or comparing with other people’s research.

You will note we have not used the word ‘objectivity’. That’s because in our experience there is no such thing (see the ‘objectivity myths’ in Annex A). In our experience it is better to look for and specify the concrete added value an external evaluator will bring.

## 3: Specification

Once you’ve agreed the evaluation aim and the questions you want to answer, write a clear **specification**. Don’t be prescriptive about methods but nail the evaluation questions. Make sure the specification is achievable and understood through two way conversations at tender interview and thereafter at inception and subsequent meetings.

*Please see guidance note 1 for a template specification you could adapt.*

## 4: Right resources

Be realistic about **budget and timescales** (including time you need to commit). Work out broadly how much time and how many days are needed to do the evaluation well and cost accordingly. *There’s a worked example in our [external evaluation guide](#) for third sector organisations and [guidance](#) on NCVO’s website and also [here](#).*

## 5: Person specification

Draw up a '**person specification**' of the skills, qualities, knowledge you need the evaluator(s) to have and probe for these at commissioning and interview.

*Please see guidance note 2 for a template person specification you could adapt.*

## 6: Right evaluator

Look at potential evaluator's (organisation or person) **previous reports** and seek **references**. Make sure you interview the person who will actually do the evaluation – not just the boss who presents at interview and is never seen again!

## 7: Right time

As a general rule, the earlier you commission the better. But be aware of the potential problems if you commission the evaluation before you've decided which projects to fund. In that case, you may need to work flexibly with the evaluator to revise the detail of the evaluation once you have the funded projects in place.

## 8: Involve funded organisations

Notwithstanding the point above, try as far as possible to involve people from **funded organisations** (and beneficiaries if appropriate) in commissioning and managing external evaluations. For example some of them could comment on the specification, be on the evaluator recruitment panel or be in a reference group for emerging findings.

## 9: Avoid procurement barriers

As far as you are allowed, ensure your **procurement** processes do not create unnecessary barriers to understanding the skills and qualities of your potential evaluator and to building a strong relationship. Remember you want the right evaluator, not simply to follow your rules.

## 10: Know your starting point

Consider the availability and quality of **existing data and evidence**. Let the evaluator know (or build in time to find out) what exists. You should also make a list of the key people (grant-holders, stakeholders) the evaluator needs to get to know or interview as part of the evaluation and brief them at the start.

## 11: Trusting relationship

Hold an **inception meeting** with the appointed evaluator. Have **regular contact** to ensure shared expectations, early spotting of problems, and agreed solutions. Try to take an iterative approach to the evaluation. Keep hold of the aim and any high level questions but be prepared to refine the detailed approach to get the best from the evaluation. Be open with each other about how you will handle any 'negative' findings.

## **12: Good conversations**

“Contract management” conversations and “learning” conversations are different. Be clear which one you are having.

## **13: Right type of report**

Does evaluation = **report**? Could you have a series of briefing papers or presentations or a think piece instead? Think about what you need to evaluator to do to help you disseminate your findings to your audience(s). Also think carefully if you really want recommendations. Findings are findings but recommendations are opinion. Do you need the latter? If you do, make sure you can action them so the evaluation is (and is seen to be) used and impactful.

## **14: Review the report**

If you do have a final report, have a process for **reviewing** it. Some key questions are:

- Does the report answer the questions?
- Does the evidence support the conclusions or findings?
- Is it easy to read?
- Can you use it?

## **15: Review your processes**

It can be very helpful to get feedback from evaluators on your processes for commissioning and managing evaluations. This should include gathering feedback from evaluators you have worked with **and** from those who were unsuccessful in the commissioning process. You can then use this learning to improve how you commission and manage external evaluations in the future.

## Guidance note 1: evaluation specification

The specification sets out what you want the evaluator to do and achieve.

Other words you might use:

- Brief
- Tender specification
- Invitation to tender (ITT)

This guidance note sets out what to include in your specification. You don't have to follow this order and you may have other things you want to include.

### Summary

The summary is a few sentences that explain in a nutshell what the evaluation is about. For example:

We invite tenders for an evaluation of the impact of Funding Programme X. The evaluation will find out what difference the programme made and give us learning for the future. The evaluation will involve an analysis of self-evaluation reports and data produced by grant-holders and some primary qualitative research with stakeholders, beneficiaries and grant-holders. The output will be a final report completed by DATE. The budget is £XXX. Tenders must be received by DATE.

### Evaluation aim and questions

This section is essential. If you can't write this section you are not ready to commission the evaluation. Set out as clearly as you can:

- The aim (why you want it, what it should achieve)
- The audience (who is it for, who will use and act on the findings?)
- The questions you want the evaluation to answer
- (possibly) the evaluation outcome(s) – the difference the evaluation itself will make. For example "our decision-making as a funder is improved".

### Context and background

A summary of the programme or project the evaluator will evaluate. You also could refer to public documents or your website.

### The work

This is what you expect the consultant to do. For example:

- Review existing data or reports
- Collect data or evidence themselves directly
- Interview specific stakeholders
- Attend specific meetings
- Write a report
- Speak at a launch event

Note: avoid being too specific about methods - the evaluator may have a better idea about how to answer your questions.

**Deliverables / outputs**

What you want the evaluator to produce, such as a report, a series of briefings or a presentation.

**Challenges**

It can be helpful to set out what you anticipate might be the evaluation challenges. These might include the availability or quality of existing data, political sensitivities, timescales or beneficiaries with special access needs.

**Budget**

Set out the evaluation budget and if this includes / excludes VAT. See tip 4.

**Evaluator skills and knowledge**

Set out the skills, qualities and knowledge you need the person or people conducting the evaluation to have (see guidance note 2 – person specification)

**What you want the potential evaluator to include in their tender:**

- Evidence that they understand your requirements
- Evidence of the skills, knowledge, experience and values you require (see above) – this could include short CVs of the person or people who will actually do the evaluation
- Evidence that they understand the evaluation aim and can answer the evaluation questions - for example a plan for what they will do
- Justification of costs (for example a broad budget including cost per day)
- Evidence of a commitment to equalities in the conduct of the evaluation
- Evidence of experience of overcoming any challenges you've set out
- A statement about how they will manage quality and risk in delivering the contract
- The names of two referees who can comment on previous work

Note: Give a page limit for tenders.

**Practical details**

- When and how you want the tender submitted and the deadline
- A name of who to contact if potential tenderers have questions
- Other dates such as when the interviews with tenderers will take place
- Who will manage the contract
- Whether there is a reference group for the evaluation and its remit

## Guidance note 2: Evaluator person specification

You should hire an evaluator in a similar way to how you would hire a member of staff. That means making sure you have a person or people with the skills, qualities and knowledge you need.

You should think carefully about the kind of person or people you, and others involved in the evaluation (such as funded organisations) will want to work with. Set down your requirements in the specification.

Ask for evidence in the written tender, and more importantly at the interview.

The following is a suggested person specification. You will want to adapt it for your own purposes and in line with your own organisational culture.

1. Experience of undertaking the specific kind of evaluation you need ([see tip 2](#)).
2. Research and analytical skills.
3. Experience of working with the third sector / community organisations.
4. An understanding of the particular area of work your funding programme is about – or the ability to pick that up quickly.
5. Good client relationship building skills. For example they will:
  - Do what they said they would do and stick to the brief
  - Listen and understand their audience
  - Be adaptable, personable and thorough
  - Raise any challenges or issues early on
6. The skills to share learning in a way that works for you. For example (if this is what you want):
  - Able to share emerging findings along the way
  - Able to write in succinct plain English

### Guidance note 3: the commissioning process

"I'm always concerned about a funder who commissions an evaluation without meeting me first" Evaluation consultant

1. Write the specification (*tips 1-3 and guidance note 1*) – remember to leave time to get clearance/buy in from the key audiences within your funder.
2. Advertise the specification. Depending on your own procurement rules you might have 2 options:
  - Write to a 'closed list' of say 4-6 evaluators inviting them to tender. Potential evaluators might be more likely to put in the time to tender if they know they have a smaller group of competitors. However you have to have a list of names to start with and you might exclude a potentially excellent evaluator you just didn't know about.  
  
Evaluation Support Scotland's [website](#) has a database of evaluators although we do not 'quality control' this list.
  - Advertise widely. For example you could circulate your specification through the Scottish Evaluation Network's email bulletin service.  
[http://www.scotevalnet.org/wp/?page\\_id=21](http://www.scotevalnet.org/wp/?page_id=21)

Whichever approach you take, give evaluators **enough time** to prepare a good tender – a 3 week deadline should be a minimum. Explain your process for **answering questions**.

3. **Score the tenders** you receive against your criteria, just as you would for job applications (*see the "What you want the potential evaluator to include in their tender" section of guidance note 1*).
4. **Interview tenderers:** Normally interviewing no more than 3 evaluators should be enough. Even if you only have one tender, or one good enough tender, **always interview** that evaluator. That is the only way to check out if they have the skills and qualities you need (*tips 5 and 6*) and to start building the relationship (*tips 11 and 12*).

Ask prepared questions linked to your specification requirements to probe their skills and qualities. You can ask tenderers to give a presentation but if you don't need the evaluator to have presentation skills to conduct the evaluation then good questions may be enough and avoid hassles with equipment.

5. **Get references** and look at past reports to check they can write in the way you want them to (*tip 6*).
6. **Issue the contract.** Your procurement processes might determine what that looks like. But remember it's you who manages the evaluator, not the contract (*tips 11 and 12*). You won't avoid problems and build a good relationship with your evaluator simply by issuing a 65 page contract!

It might be helpful to hold the **inception meeting** (*tip 11*) before you issue the contract so both sides have a chance to agree exactly what is going to happen and when, in the evaluation.

## **ANNEX A: THE OBJECTIVITY MYTHS**

Funders and others may commission an external evaluation because they believe it will be 'more objective'. But the bad news is that the following 'objectivity myths' have all proven to be inaccurate in some funders' experience:

### **? Stakeholders are always more honest with external evaluators**

Not if they don't trust the evaluator or think the evaluation will lead to negative funding decisions in future.

### **? External evaluators give a balanced picture**

Evaluators can only ever get a snapshot in the time available. And sometimes interviewees use an external evaluation to push a particular agenda. A skilled evaluator can spot this but may not entirely avoid presenting a skewed perspective.

### **? External evaluators are prepared to give bad news**

Evaluators can be scared to present negative findings or they do so in vague terms. If you build a good relationship and are clear what you want you can get round this. But it doesn't happen automatically.

### **? People working for the funder are more likely to listen to the external evaluation results**

In our experience that is not always true. You need to take time to get buy in from across your organisation before and during the evaluation and signal emerging findings early.

### **? External evaluators can get a broad range of data**

The evaluator can only collect the data that is available at the time they are collecting it. And the range will also be determined by the methods they use.

### **? External evaluators do not bring their own opinion**

Evaluators are human beings with their own opinion and values. And that can be a good thing and add real value. But first you need to recruit the right evaluator for your needs and build a good relationship.

## WHERE THIS RESOURCE CAME FROM

This resource was written by Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS). We work with the third sector and funders so that they can measure and report on their impact and use learning to improve practice and influence policy.

ESS does not undertake external evaluations but we provide a wide range of support and resources to help third sector and funders undertake (or commission) evaluations for themselves. Please see this page on our website specifically for our resources on external evaluation:

[www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/resources/using-external-consultants](http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/resources/using-external-consultants)

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