

The National Lottery Community Fund

Learning support contract



From 2017-21, Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) ran an evaluation and learning support contract for grantholders of The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF) in Scotland.

This report has headline lessons about

- **Providing grantholder support**
- **What is good (enough) grantholder evaluation**

This report will be of **most interest** to

- ✓ Funders who want to support grantholder learning
- ✓ Others who support third sector evaluation and learning



www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk

Lessons about providing grantholder evaluation support

1. Focus on evaluation for learning

This evaluation support contract was successful because support was directed at helping grantholders improve and act on their learning, and to tell their stories externally.

It wasn't about improving reports to funders (although this was part of the value for some).

Support helped the whole organisation, not just the lottery-funded project.

2. Relationships are more important than formal training

Successful evaluation support builds technical evaluation skills.

But it was trusting personal relationships with their ESS contact, with their Funding Officer and with their peers in the programme that allowed grantholders to feel engaged, ready to learn and confident to share their new skills within their work.

So quality relationships are key to the design and marketing of support. The work and skill required of a contractor to develop good relationships in a funder-referred support programme should not be under-estimated.

3. Put grantholders in the lead

Grantholders who benefited from evaluation support felt fully in the lead once they accessed support. The support was strengths-led and tailored to their needs.

Support was also used to respond to emerging need - notably using evaluation to adapt to and learn from Covid-19.

Grantholder suggestions for improvement all involved **more** – longer referrals, more peer support, more sessions. So a good support programme could have more flexible referral periods and deeper support. However that needs to be balanced with available resources and avoiding dependency. Grantholders need to leave support able to use learning to improve their evaluation practice and deliver better projects as a result.

4. A referral model has benefits and limitations

Referral into the evaluation support programme was mostly by Funding Officers (though some grantholders did ask to be referred).

The referral model meant that some grantholders that would never have chosen evaluation support got valuable help.

But funding officers did not have equal confidence or time to make referrals so access was unequal. It was also a top down model.

5. Have multiple access points and promote widely

So a strong evaluation support programme should include Funding Officer referral. But **also**

- Extensive and repeat promotional activities (tailored to manage demand)
- Actively encouraging grantholders to request referral
- Multiple entry points including taster sessions
- Using grantholders who have benefitted from support as champions to encourage their peers
- Simple examples that show the benefits of taking part (for grantholders and for Funding Officers)
- Regularly updated menu of what's on offer
- Referral midway through a grant not just at the start.

6. Successful evaluation support may have wider benefits

The benefits of good evaluation support include

- demystifying evaluation,
- building technical skills and simple evaluation tools
- making it easy to engage colleagues as part of an organisation's day to day activities.

Some grantholders identified other benefits such as increased confidence

- to share their learning with others in the sector
- to challenge funders' practice and offer their own solutions.

Evaluation support programmes could capture and communicate the value of such wider benefits to the sector.

Lessons about what is good evaluation

1. Good evaluation is for learning

Grantholders are motivated to evaluate when they use it to:

- **celebrate** success
- support **improvement and consistency**
- **share** what works with others

“We now understand the power of evaluation... We involve everyone in the process and we are seeing real results ... helping us to make real improvements in our service to our service users.”
Grantholder

What can funders do?

- Encourage grantholders to use evaluation to tell their impact and learning story.
- Explain how you use grantholder learning in your own work
- Allow grantholders to change their plans based on what they learn from evaluation rather than sticking rigidly to the original plan in the application.

Relevant resources:

- [Case studies](#) on why evaluation matters to 3rd sector
- [Crisis to Recovery](#) case studies
- [Resetting after Covid-19](#) resource

2. Outcomes matter

Outcomes are a **route map**.

Grantholders find it helpful to write down the realistic changes (outcomes) they hope to make with their service users.

This helps them focus on demonstrating the **difference** they make, not just how many activities they deliver.

“[your support] helped a great deal in focusing our thinking towards what's important ... improving our evaluation gathering, trying to focus on real meaningful changes”
Grantholder

What can funders do?

- Don't use outcomes as targets
- But encourage grantholders to set realistic outcomes to aim towards and to report and reflect on.

Relevant resources:

- [Guides and videos](#) on setting outcomes
- Outcomes everywhere but which are mine – [webinar](#)
- [Logic modelling online course](#)

3. Good evaluation is **simple** – little and often

Grantholders find that evaluation works best when it's part of the day-to-day.

If grantholders think evaluation has to be a fancy tool, they might not do it at all. Evaluation should be about routinely collecting simple stats and stories to show examples of change.

“We now complete a short questionnaire with those who join our groups; then at the end of each activity/session as staff we chat over any important conversations or observations that we [...] record on a ‘heard it seen it’ document. We also ask participants to complete evaluations at regular intervals”
Grantholder

What can funders do?

- Don't require grantees to use cumbersome or unfriendly evaluation tools
- Match your reporting requirements to what will be useful for the grantee

Relevant resources:

- Tips on [planning your self-evaluation](#)
- Fit for Purpose [webinar](#)
- [Messages](#) about evaluation **from** grantees **for** other grantees



4. Good evaluation **involves service-users**

Grantholders shouldn't be scared to involve service users in evaluation.

This can mean asking service users how they want to give feedback on the service.

But it can also mean giving service users control to design a method, collect data or even write the report.

Grantholders find that service-user involvement in evaluation leads to more authentic evidence and different insights and learning.

"Designing our own evaluations makes us feel good" young person

"We were surprised that the young people embraced evaluation. Staff have been really inspired by this and as a result we have revamped our young leaders programme."
Grantholder

What can funders do?

- Ask for the voice of service-users to be central to evaluation.
- Encourage grantholders to involve service-users in some aspect of evaluation (not all of it all at once!). This might take more time but the results could be better.

Relevant resources:

- [Why Bother involving people in evaluation workbook](#) (with case studies from disability organisations)
- [Case studies and videos](#) showcasing how young people can lead evaluation

The content of these slides comes from:

- Ongoing self-evaluation by ESS and TNLCF throughout the 4 years of the contract
- A process review by external consultant Philippa Bonella at the end of the contract. She facilitated a workshop (and preworkshop questionnaire) with a small group of ESS and TNLCF staff with a dozen grantholders who had used the support. Her longer report was provided to ESS and TNLCF.

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