Managing Evaluation Challenges
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Purpose of the Evidence into Policy Guidance Notes

The Evidence into Policy Guidance Notes series is a dedicated resource to support DCEDiY policy units in driving the research-to-policy cycle. The guidance notes provide advice and information on key stages of the research to policy process, in support of evidence-informed policy making.

Building on Guidance Note #3 titled: Evaluating Government-Funded Human Services”, and Guidance Note #7 titled: Frameworks for Policy, Planning and Evaluation, this guidance note examines some of the key challenges faced when conducting an evaluation, as well as strategies to anticipate and mitigate problems.

A variety of potential challenges can arise at any stage of the evaluation process. This guidance note will present some of the common challenges faced at three distinct points in the evaluation process, along with ideas for addressing these challenges:

1. Challenges encountered when designing an evaluation, with a case study of the UK’s National Programme for IT which illustrates the potential consequences of poor planning
2. Challenges that may arise during the evaluation process, and
3. Challenges observed post-evaluation, with a case study of the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme National Evaluation

Key Messages

• It is important to anticipate and overcome issues relating to clarity of purpose, planning and resources, stakeholder involvement, and ethical considerations, when designing an evaluation.

• The evaluation process itself can be affected by problems with population sampling, sourcing data, using multiple methods, analysing the data and completing the write-up.

• There may also be challenges relating to the quality of the evaluation outputs, communicating the results to differing stakeholder groups, and disseminating the findings. However, these challenges can also be overcome through good planning and active engagement.
The challenges and solutions presented below are not intended to be exhaustive, but are instead a useful starting point for those conducting or commissioning a programme or policy evaluation.

**Designing an Evaluation: Challenges and Solutions**

**Lack of Clarity**

When planning an evaluation, there may be an initial lack of clarity around the key evaluation aims and objectives, such as what aspect of a policy or programme you wish to evaluate, and what the specific evaluation objectives are. These include whether you wish to evaluate policy implementation processes, or policy outcomes. It will also include agreement on who the target evaluation audience will be, such as policymakers, stakeholders, and/or service users. See *Guidance Note #3: ‘Evaluating Government-Funded Human Services’* for an overview of evaluation design, including key evaluation approaches. See also, *Guidance Note #7: ‘Frameworks for Policy Planning and Evaluation’* which identifies a number of tools, or frameworks, which can be used to guide the planning and implementation process. For example, completing a Logic Model enables an evaluator to work with policymakers to specifically identify the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes of the project or programme. A Theory of Change requires an evaluator to agree a series of ‘if’ and ‘then’ statements with policymakers, which describe how policy or programme inputs are expected to result in a target outcome. Explicitly describing the rationale behind a policy or programme, and its components, provides solid foundations for the evaluation design process. If an evaluation lacks clarity, then its findings may not be relevant or useful, and so important resources may have been wasted. Lack of clarity may also lead to evaluation drift, where an evaluation is not completed according to the agreed project scope, or is not completed within an agreeable timeframe.

When conducting an in-house evaluation, lack of clarity can result from insufficient support or ‘buy in’ from senior stakeholders, or a lack of agreement on the evaluation specification. For externally commissioned evaluations, a lack clarity can lead to a poorly specified Request for Tender (RFT), and/or selecting a low quality tender. Lack
of clarity may also lead to protracted contract negotiations or may result in an
evaluation that does not address the core evaluation questions.

To ensure clarity, it is important to decide on the specifics of the evaluation, such as
the key evaluation questions and objectives, as early as possible in the planning
process. It is also important to communicate this information across key evaluation
stakeholders, in order to ensure that all are on the same page and there are not any
surprises during the evaluation. When commissioning an evaluation, create a well-
detailed RFT that outlines the key policy or programme questions you are looking to
address, underpinned by clear aims and objectives, in order to ensure a shared
understanding of scope. This will help to ensure a clear project direction, and support
high quality evaluation results. It is also useful to identify the likely risks relating to
your project aims and objectives, and agree strategies with the evaluation team, to
address and mitigate these risks.

**Poor Planning & Inadequate Resources**

An unclear project scope, resulting from poor planning, can lead to considerable
issues later on in the evaluation project. These may arise where insufficient time or
resources have been dedicated to the planning process, to the development of an
evaluation RFT, or to the evaluation itself. Failing to establish a system to plan and
manage the evaluation process increases the likelihood that evaluation drift will
occur. It is crucial to assess, early on, the resources that will be required for the
project, with reference to the evaluation scope, design, and timeline.

When planning an evaluation, keep the following topics in mind:

- **Methods and data**
  - What evaluation method is best suited to answering the question at
    hand?
  - What data is required and how will it be sourced?
  - Will it be necessary to conduct a primary data collection exercise?
  - If conducting a primary data collection, how will the output of interest
    be measured/quantified?

- **Duration and dates**
  - How long can we spend on the evaluation?
• What key dates/timelines need to be met?

  • Estimated budget
    • What is the budget for the evaluation? Is this adequate to answer the core question(s) at hand, and cover the costs associated with our evaluation method(s)?
    • Is there any flexibility and if so, to what degree?

Involving the ‘right people’

Closely linked to the need for adequate planning and resourcing is ensuring that the ‘right’ people conduct the evaluation. Appointing expert evaluators helps to ensure that an evaluation is completed to a high standard, and that the findings are credible. Conversely, the use of inexperienced evaluators may lead to a poorer quality evaluation. Similarly, it is important to ensure that the independence of the evaluation is maintained throughout, to guarantee credibility.

It is therefore important to identify your evaluation team at the planning stage. If the evaluation is to be conducted internally, staff should be provided with training if necessary, to ensure that they have the required technical and project management skills to carry out the evaluation to a high standard. When commissioning an evaluation, ensure that you have a project management team in place who can provide consistent project oversight throughout the evaluation project. Also, establish a steering group of key evaluation stakeholders and experts to provide advice, and to oversee the project. It is important to consider which stakeholders should be involved, with the aim of ensuring that all relevant viewpoints are represented, while also ensuring the independence of the evaluation findings.

Ethical considerations

When designing an evaluation, due consideration should be given to any potential ethical issues that may arise during, or as a result of, the evaluation. In cases in which an evaluation includes consultation with vulnerable groups, it is particularly important to ensure that individuals give their informed consent prior to gathering any personal data. Additionally, evaluators may be required to undergo Garda clearance prior to working with children or other vulnerable groups.
It is important to ensure that groups dependent on a service will not be denied access to that service due to disruptions caused by evaluation activities. In respect of data protection it is crucial to ensure that the evaluation is GDPR compliant, with evaluation data stored correctly and destroyed.¹

Accounts of poorly planned evaluations don’t tend to be published, therefore we have included a policy example which demonstrates examples of the pitfalls which can arise when projects are not well planned prior to commencement.

**Case Study: The importance of planning**

**Project Title:** UK National Programme for IT (NPfIT)

**Launch:** 2002, **Dismantled:** 2011 - 2013

**Original Budget:** £6.2 billion, **Actual Cost:** £10 - £11.4 billion

The UK’s National Programme for IT (NPfIT) was to be the ‘world’s largest civil IT programme’, and the UK public service's largest ever IT project. The core aim of the project was to integrate electronic patient records, to improve access to information across the NHS and thereby improve health services and patient care. However, the project was launched in 2002 and dismantled in 2011 after having gone far above its £6.2 billion budget and not having achieved its goals. The majority of NHS organisations continued to use their own IT systems, rather than transitioning to the centralised system.

The failure of this 'mega project' has been attributed to a number of planning-related factors including:

- The scale and initial speed of the project
- The absence of a change management process
- A hasty procurement process in which contract terms (scope and deliverables etc.) were not fully outlined prior to being awarded
- A lack of consultation with or buy-in from stakeholders, such as platform users (primarily medical personnel)
- An excess of top-down and centralised decision making
- Data security concerns

• Unrealistic timelines
• An inadequate monitoring and evaluation plan and process
• Inadequate risk analysis and mitigation.

The planning shortfalls listed above created ongoing implementation problems which the programme coordinators were unable to overcome, despite initially strong political support and investment. These issues ultimately proved insurmountable and the project was dismantled in 2011, following a review by the Major Projects Authority.

End users (primarily doctors and other medical personnel) found the system complex, slow and ultimately unfit for purpose. 79 staff members from the Milton Keynes Foundation Trust signed a letter to The Times in which they stated: ‘The software is so clunky, awkward and unaccommodating that we cannot foresee the system working adequately in a clinical context’. This lack of support from a key stakeholder group, coupled with mounting costs at a time of financial crisis contributed to the loss of political support and the eventual decision to dismantle the programme.

However, dismantling the NPfIT proved a costly and extended process; costs associated with exiting NPfIT contracts and other transition costs continued to accrue until 2014. The total cost of the largely failed programme has been estimated at between £10 and £11.4 billion, between £3.8 and £5.2 billion over the original £6.2 billion budget. In 2013 the Department of Health repurposed the failed NPfIT and announced its new aim of connecting, rather than replacing NHS IT systems2.

**During an Evaluation: Challenges and Solutions**

**Data sources**

The identification of data requirements is an important component of evaluation design. If it is deemed necessary to gather primary data in order to answer the


evaluation questions, then appropriate instruments must be identified, designed and implemented.

It is advisable to pilot any data collection methods in small groups, to ensure that problems can be identified and resolved prior to scaling up. For example, in advance of the rollout of a large, detailed survey, it is helpful to test the survey questions on a small sample of participants. Furthermore, it may be necessary to provide staff with initial and/or ongoing training in how to appropriately collect the data, including how to address any potential data collection issues.

**Analysing the Data**

A team with a diverse skill set will typically be required, including both general evaluation expertise, and the skills required to perform data analysis. Good project planning, and the use of evaluation frameworks such as those described in Guidance Note 7 can help to identify the datasets needed to answer the evaluation questions. However, it is common that evaluators will have incomplete or otherwise imperfect data, and a diverse team with good data analysis skills should be equipped to identify solutions to these challenges. It is the responsibility of the evaluation lead to ensure that the data analysis and interpretation remain on track and relevant to answering the evaluation questions.

**Measurement**

Measuring outcomes presents a range of challenges. Many outcomes are difficult to measure, and the use of unreliable metrics will reduce confidence in the validity of an evaluation’s findings and conclusions.³ It is important to ensure that the chosen indicators reflect the outcomes which the evaluation was designed to measure. A key challenge in evaluating any project, policy or programme is in identifying the counterfactual (what would have happened in the absence of the intervention). For example, if a programme to discourage early school leaving is being evaluated, the evaluators may need to estimate how many children would have left school early in the absence of the programme so that they can evaluate the programme’s

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³ Validity is the extent to which a measure describes or quantifies what is intended. Reliability is the extent to which it consistently produces the same response in similar circumstances.
effectiveness in reducing early school leaving. It may be challenging to source the data required to establish a baseline, against which data gathered for the purposes of an evaluation can be compared. One method could be to implement a programme on a pilot basis, and to compare findings from these pilot areas with data from other (and otherwise similar) areas where the programme has not yet been implemented.

In addressing some of these challenges, it can be useful to consider a wide range of options for collecting outcomes data, and to consider which is most appropriate, according to evaluation need as well as limitations. If possible, data collection methods used successfully in previous evaluations could be replicated. Using existing metrics which meet the needs of your evaluation, and which are rigorously validated, will bolster the legitimacy of your evaluation. Where 'bespoke' measures are needed, test them in advance. Finally, where there may be an issue in sourcing comparative Irish data, it may be appropriate to review metrics from international studies. Where this approach is pursued data should as applicable to the Irish policy context as possible.

Write-up and analysis

It is important to consider the needs of your audience or audiences, when communicating evaluation results. It may be advisable to use a range of communication methods. For some audiences it will be necessary to produce a comprehensive report that details the evaluation process in full, and includes statistical and other data, findings and recommendations. For others, including policymakers operating in high-pressure contexts, an Executive Summary with key findings and policy recommendations drawn from a longer report may suffice. For longer or shorter reports, it is crucial to strike a balance between brevity and demonstrating robustness and rigour. For longer reports, it may be necessary to include a high degree of detail, however it may be most prudent to use appendices or even accompanying technical reports for technical, methodological and analytical details. If an evaluation includes very young or vulnerable audiences, an age appropriate publication, video, presentation, or other means of communicating the findings may be required. Where firm conclusions cannot be reached, it may be
appropriate to outline a range of potential interpretations of the evidence, while emphasising the need for further research.

To avoid these issues becoming problematic, it is best to agree beforehand on the intended audience or audiences, and the type of report that’s need. It is advisable to agree the terms of reference prior to producing the draft report, and presenting it to stakeholders for review and feedback. This will help to set accurate expectations, and inform the type and level of feedback required. Finally, the evaluation team should agree on the maximum number of draft versions to be circulated.

**Post-Evaluation - Challenges and Solutions**

**Assessing Evaluation quality**

Once completed, but in advance of sign/off or publication, it will be necessary to assess the quality of the evaluation. To achieve this, submit report drafts to the relevant stakeholders and/or oversight group for review, and incorporate amendments where appropriate. It is also advisable to submit the final report for peer review prior. To facilitate this review process, the report should include descriptions of all research components, key variable definitions and the analytical techniques used.

**Disseminating the findings**

Establish who is responsible for dissemination and any other evaluation ‘products’ needed early on in the evaluation process. The evaluation team or stakeholder group may use the following list of questions when considering their dissemination strategy:

- Who is your target audience? (Remember, to be useful, evaluation findings need to be tailored to, and reach, their target audience)
- Who is responsible for dissemination – the commissioner or the commissioned?
- What other ‘products’ might be required and who is responsible for their production – the commissioner or the commissioned?
- Is a budget required for dissemination? If so, who is responsible for it?
- At times, evaluation findings may lead to a rethink in the dissemination strategy. Have you built in a contingency for this?
Communicating results

A key suggestion is to rise to the challenge of reporting findings in ways that are clear, nuanced and contextualised, and that present persuasive evaluative arguments using multiple sources of evidence. When communicating the results, the language used needs to be tailored to the evaluations audience to be effective. Political, media, or policymaker audiences are likely to prefer key headline results in simple statements or sound bites. Simple answers or “sticking to the facts” are suggested for these audiences, when getting across key messages on more complex findings. You may wish, for example, to use infographics that demonstrate key metrics, accompanied by simple and accurate statements, and to provide links to more in depth reports that can be downloaded by interested/expert audiences.

Case Study: Communicating Results

Project Title: Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme National Evaluation

Year: The evaluation covered the years 2013-2017 and the final report was published in 2018

Project Budget: €30.7 million

Funders: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, and Atlantic Philanthropies

Evaluators: Centre for Effective Services (CES)

The ABC Programme aims to improve the outcomes of children by providing targeted support to services working with children and families in disadvantaged areas, and through identifying effective interventions for more universal provision. The funders of the ABC programme opted to commission external experts to evaluate the programme’s effectiveness in achieving its outcomes.

The results of this evaluation were extensive and included a lot of technical detail. The evaluators (CES) opted to produce a series of publications, communicating the results in a range of formats suitable to the varying needs of the audiences. The first of these publications were the full evaluation report, executive summary and

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appendices. The key audiences for these documents likely included: the programme funders, practitioners working within services funded by the ABC programme, and management and other decision makers within these organisations.

However, there is also a wider potential audience for evidence of programme effectiveness. The results of this evaluation may be applicable to the work of other researchers, policy makers and practitioners working to improve outcomes for children and families.

In addition to the evaluation report, summary and appendices, CES also produced 6 thematic publications that focussed on the evidence gathered in relation to specific forms of intervention. These included a ‘Briefing Paper’ which focussed specifically on findings relevant to ‘Delivering Interventions to Support Children’s Social and Emotional Development’, and a ‘Learning Paper’ which focused specifically on interventions for ‘Oral Language Development’ in children from pre birth to age six. They also produced a ‘Learning Paper’ which focused specifically on ‘Parenting Interventions’, which would likely be of particular use to practitioners working in that area. This is a good example of communicating evaluation results to a wide range of audiences, with differing needs.

Regarding dissemination, all of these documents are available online on the CES website. Users can consult the list of publications available, and opt to download those most applicable to their needs.

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**Note:** the material contained in this Evidence into Policy Guidance Note has been adapted from the DCEDIY’s 2-day “Understanding Evaluation in Human-Related Government Services” training course for Civil Service staff. The course content was developed in collaboration with colleagues from the Centre for Effective Services under the [Goal Programme](#) for public service reform (an Atlantic Philanthropies initiative to support systemic change in public services in Ireland and Northern Ireland).

**Would you like more information? Would you like to register your interest in participating in our next 2-day Evaluation Training Programme?**

If so, please contact the REU Evaluations team at [research@equality.gov.ie](mailto:research@equality.gov.ie).