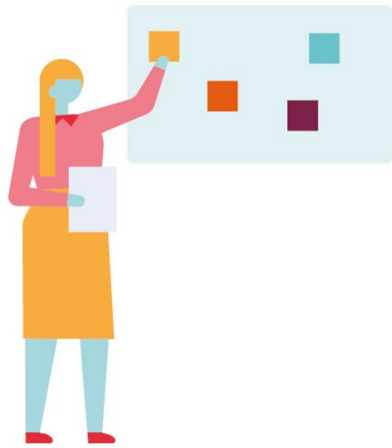
youth futures FOUNDATION

Preparing for evaluation

Guidance for organisations



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National Centre for Social Research

- Youth Futures Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established with a £90m endowment from the Reclaim Fund to improve employment outcomes for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Our aim is to narrow employment gaps by identifying what works and why, investing in evidence generation and innovation, and igniting a movement for change.
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NatCen Social Research is Britain's leading independent, non-profit research organisation with a mission to produce great research with a social purpose. As Britain's leading centre for independent social research, NatCen have over 50 years' experience of listening to the public and making sure their voice is heard. Their research helps government and charities make the right decisions about the big issues and they are passionate about ensuring its widest possible impact on the world around us.

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Introduction

The Youth Futures Foundation aims to "narrow employment gaps by identifying what works and why… so all young people have fair access to good quality jobs". Many programmes designed to support young people in securing good quality jobs target their employability skills (Copps and Plimmer, 2013[1]). These can be defined, broadly, as a range of 'soft' skills and competencies that many employers look for and which enable a young person to thrive in the workplace. Examples include communication, teamwork, time management, and being organised. Programmes aiming to improve employability skills are varied, but might use a combination of mentoring, workshops, mock interviews, work experience, support for families, and various other activities.

Background to these recommendations

This guidance draws on learning from a capacity-building project in which NatCen worked with several organisations that run programmes aimed at helping young people to enter the workplace. This output was not a pre-specified outcome of the project, but was created as part of a suite of learning outputs to help organisations working with young people. As a result, this paper is not intended to comprehensively capture best practice for evaluation processes, but includes some considerations, hints, and tips built up from our experience of carrying out evaluations.

What is included in this note?

The main purpose of this note is to offer guidance for organisations on how to:

- begin to think about evaluation, build a culture of evaluation within the organisation, and prepare for external evaluation of their work/programmes;
- effectively participate in and support the process of an external evaluation; and
- make the most of the learning an external evaluation can provide

[1] Copps, J. and Plimmer, D. (2013). The Journey to Employment (JET) Framework: Outcomes and tools to measure what happens on young people's journey to employment. [Available online: https://npproduction.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/JET-framework-FINAL-Jan-2015.pdf]

We structure our guidance into three sections: embedding evaluation within the organisation, external evaluations, and post-evaluation learning.

Embedding evaluation within the organisation

Before an organisation undergoes an external evaluation, it can be helpful to think about a *broader* concept of evaluation. Evaluation is often thought of as something that is done once a programme is being or has been delivered. However, it is important to not just think about 'one evaluation' but to build a wider culture of monitoring, learning, and ongoing improvement within your organisation. This embedding of evaluation practice will strengthen the way you work and deliver programmes and is important in its own right. It will also help you build capacity and prepare for an external evaluation (or self-evaluation) of your work/programmes.

This section of the note includes some pointers about how to engage with this broader idea of evaluation, and how to increase your organisation's capacity for evaluation – both internal and external.

- **Carefully think about your programme and its aims.** Programme theory, in the form of a logic model or Theory of Change (ToC), can provide a useful framework to map out your project, consider what you want to achieve and how you plan to do this. Developing this theoretical model can make your assumptions about change explicit, showing how your activities are designed to lead to desired impacts. The process of creating or reviewing your ToC will also help you to identify key questions to ask about your programme delivery, and to formulate learning goals for your organisation (see NPC Theory of Change in Ten Steps).
- **Thinking about evaluation early in the process of planning and designing a programme increases the learning that can be achieved from it.** For instance, you can do this by looking at the outputs and outcomes within your ToC. This will help you to develop outcome measures, and ensure that the right data can be collected at the right time. If data collection is left until after the intervention has finished, it may limit the ability to conduct appropriate and meaningful monitoring and evaluation.
- Similarly, **it is important to think about monitoring and evaluation activities throughout a programme's lifecycle** (e.g. before, during and after

programme delivery). This will help ensure that a practice of monitoring, learning and improvement is built into all stages of programme delivery.

- Monitoring data is generally used to track progress of an intervention's delivery, rather than as part of an evaluation. However, **having good monitoring data can be a great foundation for a more formal evaluation**, as it gives an organisation greater understanding about the programme delivery, its users and processes. For example, it can cover who is (and who is not) reached by the intervention, the extent to which service users drop out or stay engaged, and measuring progress towards outcomes. Before starting an evaluation, it is worth thinking about whether your existing processes for gathering monitoring data will enable you to collect the information required for the evaluation.
- **Considering these factors and building evaluation skills within your organisation will strengthen your capacity** if you choose to undertake some evaluation activities in-house.
- **When a programme is at certain stage of maturity or development, you may think about undergoing a more formal external evaluation** (in other words, having your programme evaluated by an external evaluator). This will provide insight on a programme, its implementation, and potentially, its impact. It is helpful if you understand the different types of evaluation (set out later in this note), the different types of questions they address and the ways in which they can complement each other.
- It is also important to **consider both the human and financial resources that need to be allocated to an evaluation effort in advance**, as these will be key factors in planning and designing an evaluation.

Different types of evaluation

There are different types of evaluation that can be conducted to answer different questions about a programme. It is important for organisations to understand the differences between them, which stage of a programme's lifecycle they can be used in, and what their main purpose is. While evaluations are often undertaken by a specialist external organisation, evaluations can also be carried out by an organisation's internal team. Before starting any type of evaluation, it is vital to think through which evaluation type is most suited, considering the need and function of the evaluation, organisation budget, capability, and capacity.

Here we summarise the evaluation types most commonly conducted in the field of social research and their aims (also shown in Table 1).

Formative evaluations

- used during the development of a new programme or when an existing programme is being modified, used in a new setting or with a new population
- show whether the proposed programme elements are likely to be needed, understood, and accepted by the population the programme is reaching and the extent to which an evaluation is possible
- allow for modifications to be made to the plan before full implementation begins and maximize the likelihood that the programme will succeed

Process evaluations

- used once the delivery of an existing programme begins
- test how well the programme is working, the extent to which the programme is being implemented as designed and whether the programme is accessible and acceptable to its target population
- highlight potential issues and areas for improvement and assess how well the programme matches its programme theory

Economic evaluations

- usually used at the beginning of a programme or during its implementation
- explore which resources are being used in a programme and their costs (both direct and indirect) compared to expected outcomes
- useful in providing programme managers and funders with a way to assess costs relative to effects

Impact evaluations

- used during the implementation of a programme (at appropriate intervals) and the end of a programme
- measure the degree to which the programme meets its ultimate goals, provide evidence for further funding or scale up, and highlight things to change or address. They are typically used for mature programmes (i.e., already being delivered consistently and with evidence of promise).
- key feature is the counterfactual, i.e., an estimation of what would have happened to the group that received the intervention had the intervention not taken place. A comparison group or control group is used to estimate the counterfactual and measure impact.

- methods include experimental and quasi-experimental designs. In experimental designs (e.g., randomised control trials (RCTs)), assignment to treatment or control group is random, while in quasi-experimental designs (QEDs) the comparison group is constructed using a non-random method.

Importantly, while these types of evaluation answer different questions, they are often complementary and can offer more comprehensive insight on a programme when used alongside each other. For example, while an impact evaluation might indicate that a programme does not appear to be having the intended impact, a process evaluation can shine more light on whether this might be the result of inconsistencies or issues with programme *delivery*, rather than its *design*.

Table 1: Different types of evaluation

Evaluation type	When?	What?	Why?
Formative evaluation	During the development of a new programme	Assesses whether programme elements are needed, understood, and accepted	During the development of a new programme
Process evaluation	At beginning or during implementation of an existing programme	Assesses how well the programme is working (often based on qualitative data)	Highlights potential issues/areas for improvement; assesses how well programme is working and whether it matches the ToC
Economic evaluation	At beginning or during implementation of	Assesses resources and costs	Assessment of costs relative to effects

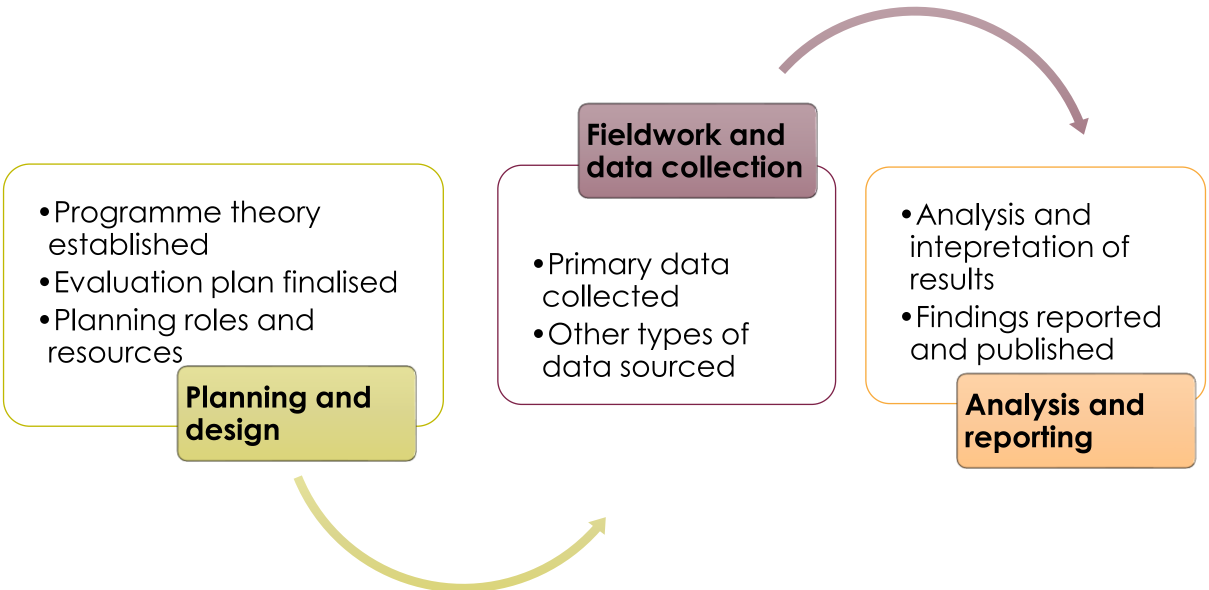
	an existing programme		
Impact evaluation	During or after implementation	Assesses whether programme has met its ultimate goals (mostly through quantitative data)	Provides evidence of impact for further funding or scale up (may also highlight things to change or address)

The external evaluation process

In this section, we set out a few factors that are important to consider when undergoing an external evaluation. We also recommend steps you can take to get the most out of participating in and supporting the evaluation process when working with an external evaluator.

An external evaluation can typically be broken down into three stages (shown in Figure 1). In the rest of this section, we set out elements to consider for each of these stages.

Figure 1. Key stages of an evaluation



Stage 1: Planning and design

This section is spilt into three subsections, covering key considerations for three aspects of planning and design.

Key considerations: Programme Theory

- Be clear about your programme, its aims and how it is supposed to achieve them. This will help you develop the ToC or logic model, in collaboration with external evaluators.
- It is important to have a ToC or logic model that accurately and comprehensively reflects the nature of the programme and clearly identifies key inputs, causal mechanisms[2], and outcomes – in the case of impact evaluations, the latter directly map onto what the evaluation will be testing.
- Input from stakeholders involved in designing and implementing the programme is essential when developing a ToC. The process typically involves workshops or consultations.

Key considerations: The evaluation plan

- In developing the evaluation plan, together with the evaluator
    - Decide on key learning goals and specify the research questions to be addressed
    - Decide on the type of evaluation that would be most useful
    - Plan for data collection (also in planning and design phase / pre-evaluation stage)
- Make sure that you are familiar with the study protocol[3] and that it accurately describes the programme, the agreed research questions, evaluation methods and timeline, as well as other useful information including key contacts.

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[2] Causal mechanisms are the connection between activities and outcomes, describing *how* change is assumed to come about. Mechanisms typically describe how people should ideally engage and experience activities, to make outcomes more likely. For example, simply attending a workshop may not be sufficient to achieve the workshop outcomes. The participant might also need to be open to learning, to engage with the content and participate in activities, and the facilitator should be skilled and able to create a supportive learning environment in the session.

[3] A study protocol is a written document describing the plan for an evaluation. It includes details of the intervention, roles and responsibilities for the evaluation, methodology for data collection and analysis, and timescales. See example protocol: ASCENTS_trial_protocol_website.pdf. More examples can be found at: Projects | EEF (educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)

- Check programme details are accurate. If the programme has changed since the protocol was written, alert the evaluators so it can be updated.
- Review timelines noting data collection periods and when your organisation or programme participants may be asked to take part in fieldwork.
- Familiarise yourself with the modes of data collection. If something about data collection is not feasible or has changed discuss it with your evaluator.

- Be clear about the desired impact of the evaluation and its outputs. For instance, the aim might be to positively change the way a programme is implemented. Linked to this, it is also helpful to think through how the evaluation will be used and by whom. This will ensure that outputs can be tailored to key stakeholders/audiences.
- Understand data protection, ethics, and consent[4]. Data protection involves ensuring that people can trust you to use their data fairly and responsibly. This includes implementing a method to seek informed consent from participants, for example through a consent form that specifies what the data can and cannot be used for and who has access to the data. An external evaluator would be able to support you with this.

Key considerations: Planning roles and resources

- Decide with the evaluator who is doing what. Different types of evaluation (or evaluators) may require different things of both the evaluator and the organisation undergoing the evaluation. For example:
    - Discuss what your role should be in creating a participant recruitment strategy and in managing participant communications. Think about whether recruitment targets feel achievable and, if not, flag this to the evaluator.
    - As well as understanding how and when data will be collected, make sure it is clear who is responsible for collecting and processing data.
- Carefully plan resources, staffing and governance structures to support the evaluation process
    - Have a main contact on both ends. This should be the person that is likely to have an oversight of everything.
    - Think about organisational capacity and consider whether you have enough staffing or expertise to cover roles and tasks. If not, you might need to think about diverting existing staff time or

[4] See The cycle of good impact practice: Research ethics and data protection - NPC (thinknpc.org)

training/hiring staff. You might also agree with the evaluator that they will be more heavily involved at these stages to offset capacity issues.

Stage 2: Fieldwork and data collection

- Once the evaluation has been agreed upon, designed, and launched, it is best practice not to change anything about the programme during delivery. This is key because the evaluation will report against the logic model or ToC and descriptions of the programme agreed when planning and designing the evaluation.
- If any changes to the programme delivery or ToC do occur, perhaps because of external uncontrollable factors, it is important to keep track of these changes and the rationale behind them. You should also let the evaluator know as soon as possible in case it impacts on the evaluation design.

What if your Theory of Change no longer reflects your programme?

Scenario*: You have created a Theory of Change for one of your programmes, and the evaluator has used this when planning the evaluation protocol. However, your programme has been evolving over the last couple of years and now includes a number of new activities. Your ToC still reflects the main elements and aims of the programme, but it is no longer completely accurate as there are some substantial changes which are not reflected.*

Next Steps*: It is important to alert the evaluator to the changes that have occurred within the programme. Together, you can think through how the new activities might change mechanisms or outcomes and work with the evaluator to revise the diagram. These revisions might have knock-on implications for the research questions and plans for data collection set out as part of the evaluation protocol.*

- Communication is key: Keep the evaluator updated about how things are going and let them know if you face any difficulties.

What if you cannot deliver your programme to enough participants?

Scenario: *The evaluator has specified that they require 200 participants to take part in the intervention in order for the sample size for the evaluation to be large enough. However, several staff members leave your organisation shortly before the evaluation is due to start, and it is now looking very unlikely that you will be able to deliver the programme to the target number of 200 participants within the timeframes of the evaluation.*

Next Steps: *Continue with the delivery of the programme, while alerting the evaluator as soon as possible to find a solution that would still allow for meaningful results. This may include extending the timeframe of the evaluation, recruiting more staff, or potentially changing the programme (in discussion with the evaluator) so that it is less resource intensive to hit the target numbers with the staff available.*

What if you face difficulties around data collection?

Scenario: *An employment programme run by your organisation is undergoing a process evaluation. As part of the evaluation, 300 programme participants will need to complete a survey. The evaluator advised that with fewer than 300 cases they wouldn't be able to do the planned analysis. You are halfway through the data collection period and realise a lot of the participants are opting out of the evaluation. You are concerned you will not hit the target number.*

Next Steps: *It is important to notify the evaluator as soon as possible to discuss potential solutions. This might include changing the way data is collected, slight changes to the consent process, or adapting the analysis plans so that they would be appropriate for a smaller achieved sample.*

Other considerations: *If changing the consent process, it is important to get ethical approval and funder sign off.*

- Understand that timelines for evaluations are often tight and it is important to be responsive to requests and queries.
- Connect the evaluator to people they need to speak to on the ground to facilitate primary data collection.

- Understand consent as an ongoing process. Informed consent is a crucial part of any data collection, whether it's for your programme monitoring or external evaluation activities. Consent should be collected before the evaluation begins and it should be thought of as 'ongoing' as participants might change their mind during the evaluation or afterwards and have the right to withdraw consent.
- In the case of impact evaluations, comply with randomisation of programme delivery where relevant and where previously agreed with the evaluator / understand that it is important to follow the agreed protocol.

What if there is a spill-over effect during a randomised control trial (RCT)?

Scenario: *You are working with an evaluator on an RCT to assess the impact of your programme. The evaluator has carried out randomisation and allocated participants to a treatment group who will receive the programme and a control group who will not. Two weeks into the programme, you hear that several participants allocated to the control group have been attending workshops that are part of the programme. The staff who are running the workshops allowed the participants to attend because they didn't think it would be fair to send them away.*

Next steps: *You should notify the evaluator immediately. Ideally, to prevent similar situations occurring, the ethical considerations and appropriateness of an RCT design should be discussed before the evaluation begins. Developer and evaluator should also work together to put together a system of checks to make sure that only the treatment group are receiving the programme.*

Other considerations: *It is very important to make sure that all programme delivery staff are aware of the purpose and protocol of an RCT. This greater understanding should mean that delivery staff are more engaged with the trial and understand the reasons and importance of the randomisation protocol.*

Stage 3. Analysis and reporting

- Be prepared to wait some time to see the final report. The analysis and reporting stages can take months.
- Be aware of what your role is in the feedback process: programme developers have an important role in checking the factual description of the programme rather than commenting on findings and conclusions.

- Understand evaluators' impartiality and objectivity means that they have to report on all their findings. This contributes to making sure the evaluation is robust. Be prepared for null (no statistically significant differences in outcomes found) or negative results – think about them as opportunities to learn and improve the programme.
- Make sure your expectations of what the report will cover match the objectives the evaluation was set up with – the report will be focused on the research questions set out in the evaluation plan.

Post-evaluation learning

In this final section, we set out some pointers on things to consider once an external evaluation has concluded in order to maximise learning.

- **Review the final evaluation report** and make sure you have a good understanding of it. Discuss with the evaluator any questions that you may have or if anything is unclear.
- **Think about the implications of the report's findings**. What has the evaluation revealed about the programme? What lessons can be taken forward? What further questions do findings raise?
- Consider **opportunities for wider learning** – are findings likely to provide useful insight into a wider set of issues?
- **Can findings provide evidence for the Theory of Change or logic model** developed previously or could findings inform its revision? Most ToC models and/or logic models are primarily a *theoretical* proposition about the workings of the programme, and evaluation findings give your organisation an opportunity to refine these models, and/or underpin them with evidence. Most evaluation reports will have a section containing recommendations for organisations, funders, and future evaluators, which often include revisions to the ToC or logic model.
- **Reflect on the evaluation process** – what has gone well and what could be improved in terms of working with an evaluator in future?
- **Reflect on whether outcomes or outcome measures could be refined** in light of present findings. Can data collection be improved in terms of timing and/or methods?
- Reflect on ways in which your **in-house evaluation capabilities** could be developed using learnings from the commissioned evaluation (for example, by improving the collection and use of monitoring and administrative data).

Conclusions

Some key take-aways from our recommendations are:

- **Understand evaluation as an embedded practice**, which is an integrated part of an organisation's way of working, rather than a separate or one-off event. This involves building evaluation skills, monitoring and learning into the everyday practice of your organisation.
- **Thinking about evaluation early in the process of planning and designing a programme increases the learning that can be achieved from it.** There are many things that need to be considered before, during, and after an evaluation to make sure the process runs smoothly.
- **Be clear about the type of evaluation you are undergoing and its purpose**, whether undertaking evaluation activities in-house or going through an external evaluation.
- When undertaking an external evaluation, **transparency, accountability, and communication are key when working with an evaluator**. Aim for regular and open communication with the evaluator throughout the process.
- **Understand the division of roles and responsibilities in the different stages of the evaluation process**. Ensure that all parties within the organisation understand the objectives of the evaluation process and how their role fits with this.
- **See the evaluation as an opportunity to learn more about the programme, and a way to guide future actions and next steps.** This may include changes to the programme/intervention or the theory of change/logic model. It could also involve reflections on the evaluation process and learnings for any future evaluations.

References / Further reading

Useful sources for further reading:

- Magenta book
- Magenta Book Annex A: Analytical methods for use within an evaluation
- NPC Understanding Impact
- NPC Starting to measure your impact
- NPC Theory of Change in Ten Steps
- YEF Project Team Guidance
- Evaluation Support Scotland

- Evaluation Support Scotland Evaluation Tool: Self-evaluation health check
- National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement – How to evaluate public engagement projects and programmes
- Better Evaluation
- UNICEF Overview of Impact Evaluation
- What works wellbeing – Quality in qual: A proposed framework to commission, judge and generate good quality evaluation in wellbeing impacts
- UK Evaluation Society – Guidelines for Good Practice in Evaluation