
This *How to Guide* takes you through the steps to create an effective evaluation plan for outcome evaluation.



Outcome evaluation: piecing together an evaluation plan

INSPIRING

SCOTLAND

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As a key funder, Inspiring Scotland believes all organisations should be able to undertake good quality evaluation without having to bring in trained social researchers. This *How to Guide* will take you through the different things you have to think about in developing an effective evaluation plan for outcome evaluation, giving you hints and tips along the way to help you avoid common mistakes. Split into three parts, we aim to help segment out the key understanding and tasks involved in developing a practical evaluation plan that works for your organisation.

Before putting pen to paper with a funding proposal, you must think about what impact you want to achieve, what problem you are trying to solve, how you are going to solve it and how you are going to demonstrate that you've solved it. If you understand these key principles then you are ready to start your evaluation plan.



Evaluation is vital to understanding whether your project is having its intended impact. It can also help you monitor progress and improve your activities or services.

Every organisation should have a vision, and the projects, programmes or activities you deliver should all aim to achieve that vision. External funders are likely to be funding those activities, so they too need to know what impact their funding makes and whether they are achieving their vision. In the case of project evaluation, it is often an assessment of how your work has contributed to the outcomes agreed in your grant award.

What is outcome evaluation?

Outcome evaluation focuses on the observable conditions of a specific group of individuals, behaviours or social conditions that a project aimed to improve, impact or affect. This is the most common type of evaluation for projects and is largely what a funder is interested in hearing more about. This type of evaluation is usually an ongoing feature of the project plan, with data collection conducted at key stages throughout the lifetime of your project. Outcome evaluation allows you to make claims about the effect of your activities on the anticipated outcomes of your project and any changes to your participants.

Why do funders want evaluation reports for their grants?

Evaluation reports should help to clearly explain what you did and with who (activities and participants), the difference you made (outcomes) and what you learned from your project. Your evaluation is a chance to convey to your funder why your project matters and the value your organisation brought to the fund.

Overall, funders need to

- know that you spent your grant on what you said you would spend it on.
- know that you are using their money wisely. The money they gave to you may have come from donations, the government, businesses, or other charities. Just as you must report to your funders, they have to report to theirs.
- make sure that they are achieving their own aims and any outcomes of their fund.
- have good examples of projects that they have supported to make a case for more funding from their donors – this then supports more projects in the future.



When you receive funding, you will likely need to provide a report for the funder setting out what you have achieved at different stages of your work. This report could range from a simple pro-forma to a very detailed template. The better designed and more meaningful the evaluation, the better you can articulate the impact of your project in your reports and marketing, which will then put you in an even better light for future funders and funding.

The following questions will help you to develop your plan.

- Are you likely to focus more on what people are saying in response to your service or project? This is also known as 'qualitative' data. This can be done by interview, or feedback questionnaires by participants. It can also be done by observing behaviours from staff.
- Or are you going to focus on numbers, such as the number of people who are accessing your service? This is known as quantitative data.
- Many organisations use both qualitative and quantitative, so use mixed methods.
- What is your staff's capacity to collect data?
- Have you designed processes for gathering numbers of people accessing your service?
- What else might help?

This guide will help you to consider these questions and identify what is right for your project, as well as direct you to helpful resources. Most outcome evaluations mainly rely on qualitative methods, like focus groups, interviews and other approaches that produce rich, descriptive data. It is also common to deploy mixed methods, also using tools for gathering quantifiable measures, like polls and closed-ended question surveys. There is no right or wrong approach, as long as your approach produces the evidence you need.

Your evaluation plan should sit alongside your project plan. Both should be developed simultaneously and should complement one another. Be sure to consider evaluation as early as possible, as the most valuable data needs to be collected from the start and during a project. If it does not, the quality of your data will suffer as a result.



Evaluation is an opportunity to learn and apply those learnings to increase your impact.

Find out more about your organisation

Evaluation can provide the same context for understanding your work as market research. Ask yourself these questions when reviewing your data.

- Are there trends emerging across your different services, or across a period of time? If so, what is this telling you?
- How might your organisation consider the outcomes of your evaluative work and use it to improve your own operations, partnership working or wider strategy?
- Does your evaluation confirm or challenge the theory or philosophy which underpins your ways of working? If not, what can you do in response?
- Would others be interested in hearing your findings? How might you share it with them and work collaboratively to implement the learning?

Ensure your participants get the greatest benefit

Fine tune the impact of your work by reaching out to the end user for feedback. It is important to genuinely reflect on their responses and consider what additional action might be needed. Participants might have suggestions for improvement that could help to strengthen your offer and, ultimately, lead to better outcomes for them.



It is useful to understand some of the common terms you will be asked to talk about when writing your evaluation plan or completing funding monitoring reports.

Outcome

An outcome is a description of what success looks like. These can be split into strategic outcomes and programme outcomes, particularly useful if you want your own project outcomes to work towards funder or commissioner outcomes.

Strategic outcome

“Citizens are engaged, informed, included and empowered to make choices about their support.”

Project outcome

“People and carers are better prepared, confident to engage and contribute meaningfully to social care assessments and reviews.”

Outcome Indicators

To know whether you are achieving your outcomes, you need to measure indicators. Whilst an outcome is what success looks like when you've achieved it, indicators tend to reference actions and measurement – they are often focused on the action your organisation can take to better position you to achieve your outcome.

When writing an indicator, it is useful to use a **SMART approach**, and ensure it is **Specific – Measurable – Achievable – Realistic – Time-limited**. Unlike an outcome, it is also expected that your indicator will refer to your activities and, if relevant, long-term goals. Using this approach will help you to focus on the actions needed to implement your indicator, whilst also making them easier to measure.

Outputs

Outputs are the actions you deliver to achieve your project outcomes. Using the outcome examples on the right, the outputs – or activities – that could achieve these outcomes might be:

- Personal outcome and social care planning support available locally across Scotland.
- Putting plans into action and support to manage a locally available social care package across Scotland.
- Social care information provision available locally across Scotland (the outcome of this would be that people feel informed etc.).

Your activities must fundamentally align to your vision – they describe what you will do to tackle the problem you have identified. These activities should help you achieve your outcomes.

Inputs

A fundamental element in budgets, inputs are what goes into a project for it to come to life – for example, personnel, finances, equipment and access to space. By inputting this resource to your project, you are enabling your activities to happen, in pursuit of your outcomes.

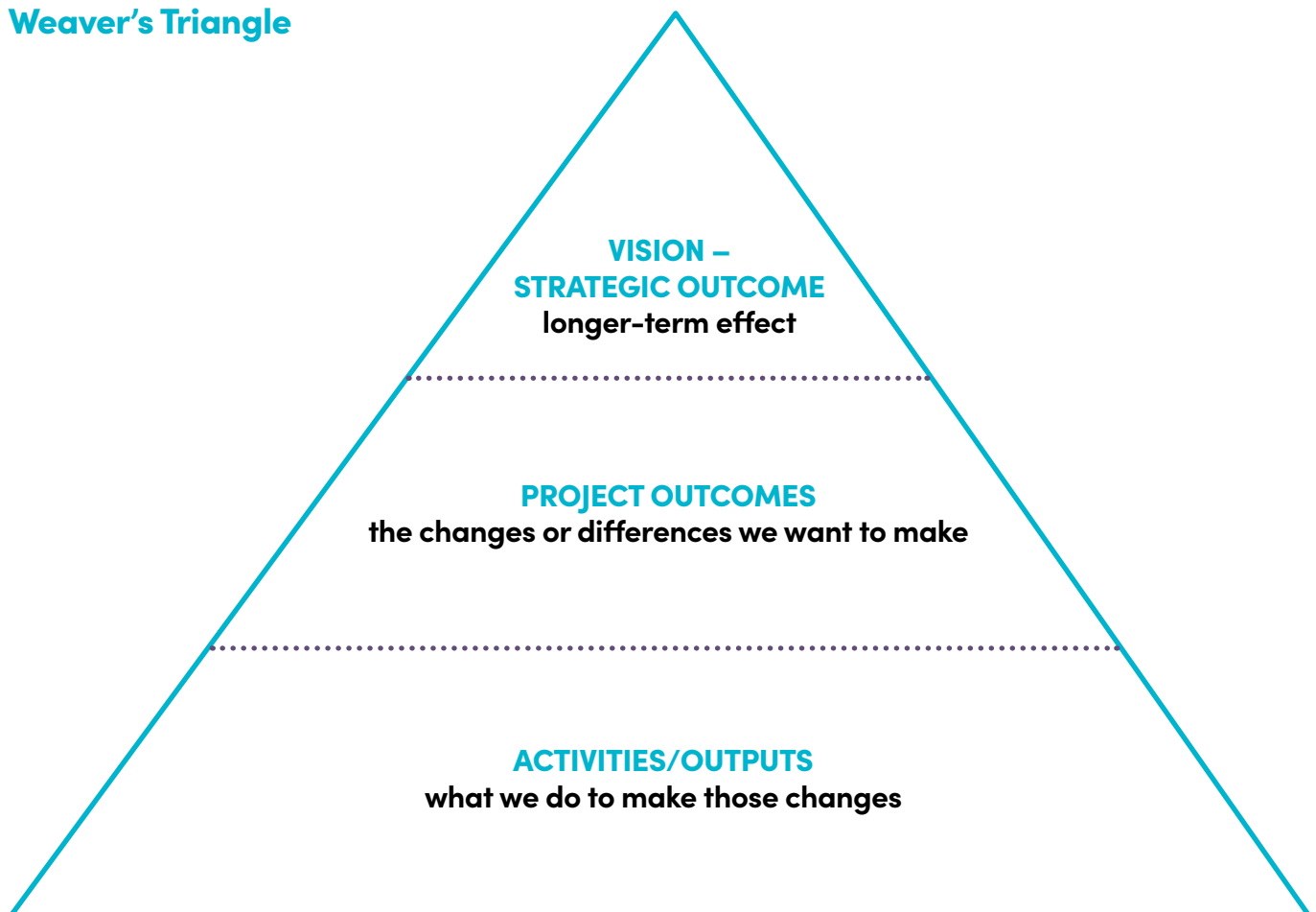
Start planning with a Weaver's Triangle



One simple way to start your project and evaluation planning is to draw up a Weaver's Triangle. The top of the triangle houses the vision, or strategic outcome. Project outcomes that will help you reach the vision are included in the middle, and below are the activities or outputs that achieve those outcomes at the lowest level.

Once you have filled in a Weaver's Triangle, you can then complete a logic model. **Logic models** are particularly useful for funders and commissioners. They enable you to demonstrate how your project outcomes can affect their strategic outcomes.

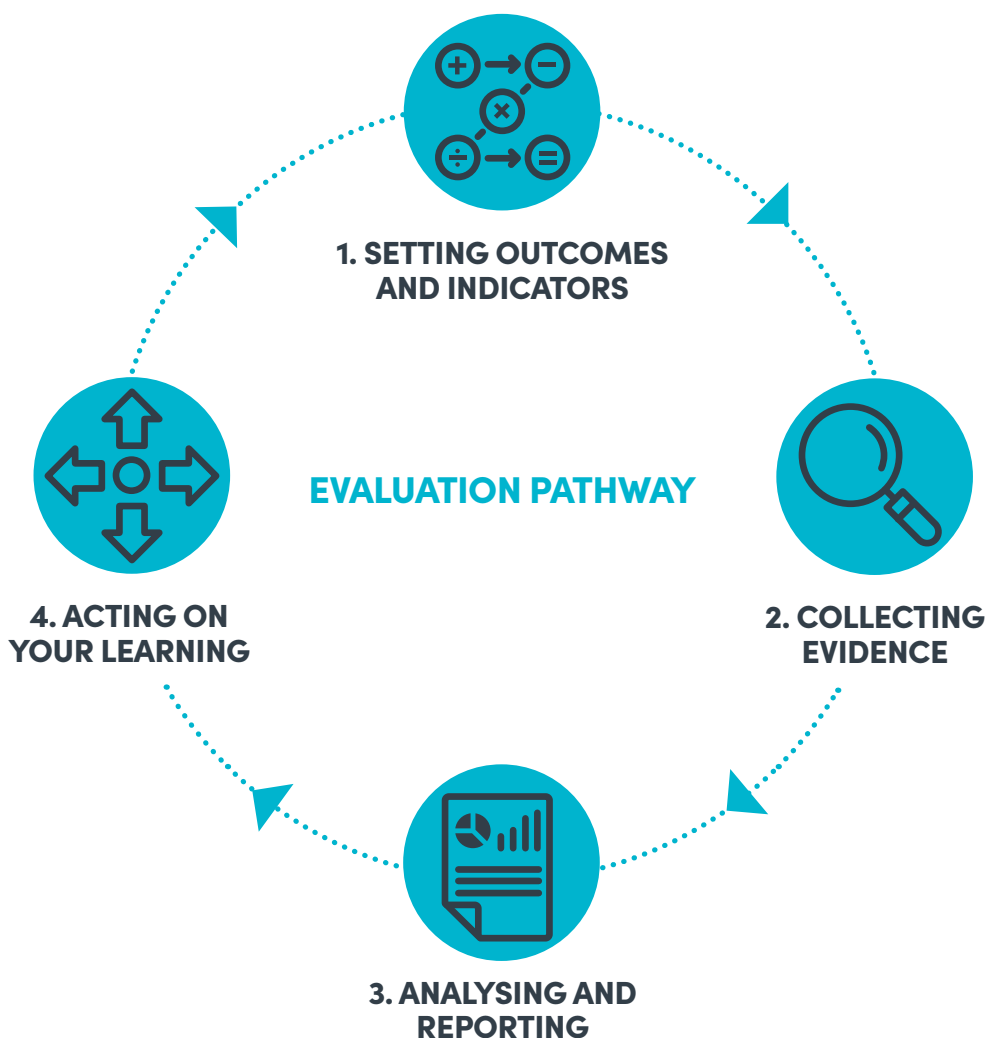
Weaver's Triangle



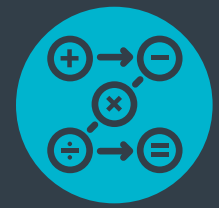
The four stages of the evaluation pathway



Now that we have provided a basic overview of the different components of evaluation, we can take a deeper dive and go through the four stages of evaluation, otherwise known as an Evaluation Pathway. These sections cover how to define outcomes and indicators, collecting evidence, analysis and reporting, and acting on learning.



Stage 1: Setting outcomes and indicators



Outcomes

Arguably the most vital component of any evaluation plan, your outcomes are the building blocks that will help you to deliver on your organisation's vision.

To help define your outcomes remember, **outcomes are almost always directional in nature** – they are either aiming for an increase or decrease in something related to the problem your project is trying to solve.

Words which are commonly used in outcomes are: *increased – improved – more – expand – enhanced – reduce – decreased – lowered – lessened.*

In some cases, your outcome might not be quite so clearly directional – you may be aiming to maintain or continue something instead. An outcome like this might be appropriate when you have already achieved the increase or decrease necessary to tackle the problem, and the challenge now is to sustain it.

When developing outcomes, **keep it simple**. This is where a logic model is useful ([see appendix](#)), helping you systematically break down the inputs, outputs, indicators, and outcomes.

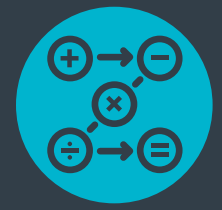
- Write achievable outcomes which sound realistic and feasible.** Do not make claims that will be difficult to qualify or quantify later.
- Think about how you will measure these outcomes.** You could be delivering phenomenal work and be helping people achieve incredible changes, but if you have no way of evidencing this, you risk the credibility of your project and stability of your funding.



Top tip

[Evaluation Support Scotland](#) have a catalogue of resources to help you create outcomes and indicators.

Stage 1: Setting outcomes and indicators



Indicators

An indicator is something you can point to as being indicative of something else, for example, laughing or smiling could be an indicator of being happy. Another example is where attendance at a club or group could be an indicator of how engaged someone is with their community. Whilst indicators are not absolute proof of the link being made, if used properly as part of a wider evaluation plan, they can be very useful in making claims about your outcomes and impact.

The following tips will help you to create meaningful indicators for your outcomes.

What would your outcome look like if it were happening? This is a good way to think about indicators. If your outcome is about making people happier, seeing them smile and laugh is a good indicator that you are achieving your outcome. Think about how you might communicate this.

If you can't observe the change, use what is known as a 'proxy-indicator'. Don't worry if your outcome is not immediately observable or measurable. Using a proxy-indicator is better than nothing or using unrelated indicators. A good example of a 'proxy-indicator' would be the use of welfare benefits as an indicator of child poverty.

Make sure you communicate your findings effectively. 'Participants report feeling safer' rather than 'participants are safer'. This is about how you talk about your evidence. The first reference is specific and measurable and will be more useful when it comes to analysing your data and writing your report.

It is ok to use the same indicators for a number of outcomes. You do not need to use unique indicators for every outcome and whilst we would expect some variance across outcomes, it is perfectly acceptable for outcomes to share indicators. This is because they could indicate a number of things are happening, and this could be relevant to more than one of your outcomes.

Have more indicators, not less. The more you have, the more you can measure, and this will help improve your position when it comes to reporting. If you only have 1 or 2 indicators, you may not be giving yourself enough room to collect data. But do make sure you have the capacity to record this and that evidence collection has been effectively designed to match up with your claims.

Indicators should be specific and measurable. They must support your analysis, proving if there has been a change that evidences your outcome being delivered.

Stage 2: Collecting evidence



Once your outcomes and indicators are in place, think about how and when you will record and measure them. You must consider what data you plan to collect and how to evidence your outcomes.

Many people talk about evidence and data interchangeably – however, not all data you collect will, or can, be used as evidence in your evaluation. Evidence is the specific, analysed data that helps you confidently claim you have achieved your outcomes. With a well-developed evaluation plan, you should be able to collect lots of data which can be used in your evaluation reports.

Before you do anything else, get familiar with data protection and take it seriously. It is vital that your evaluation plan be legally sound and there is plenty of support to help you with this.

🔗 The Information Commissioner's website is a good place to start.

Some of the most common resources you will want to prepare and make available to your participants are privacy notices, consent forms (including photography and social media use), 'leave behind cards' and an accessible data protection policy. This is especially important if you plan to share information with your Fund Manager. Participants should know how their data will be used, stored, processed and if it will be shared, who with and why.

Data can and should come from a range of sources. It is not just participants that can provide data, but also their social network (if appropriate), your staff, your partners, etc. A variety of tools can be used to collect the data and you can consider secondary sources if useful, such as changes to local or national policy or findings from other projects.

Use a variety of methods to collect data. Sticking to one form of data collection can greatly reduce the richness of data available to you. It is worthwhile considering what type of evidence you want or need. You should also think about which data collection method best suits your organisation's capacity and abilities. Examples could be case studies, focus groups, interviews, questionnaires, observations, internal records (e.g., register or minutes of a meeting), surveys/polls, feedback forms, awards or certificates.

Don't focus solely on 'process' type of data, these do not get to the heart of your outcomes.

Think back to the last time you attended training – and received a feedback questionnaire. Did it ask how you found the venue, facilities, lunch, and overall satisfaction with the course/ would you recommend it – or did it ask whether your learning improved, confidence in the subject increased or practice-skills were enhanced? Think about what you want the evidence to show, and then design the questions around this.

Collecting output data and neglecting outcomes is a common but avoidable mistake. A good evaluation plan will include data designed to capture delivery of outputs – especially as many awards will include targets, an expectation on number of beneficiaries and a certain level of activity being delivered – but this is often where projects stop. For example, maintaining a register which allows you to show an average session attendance of 25 people might be useful if there were targets attached to your award, but this in itself is not evidence towards achieving an outcome, unless an indicator of your outcomes is that there has been 100% engagement of your project every day since it started.

Stage 2: Collecting evidence



Plot data collection against your 'points of contact' with participants. Make it convenient and meaningful, and make sure you don't end up with gaps in your data. Trying to retrospectively collect data can be difficult and more time consuming, and sometimes it is not possible at all. Common 'points of contact' and the type of data you might collect are:

1 Before delivery – Capture a 'baseline' to compare future data against – this should be done before your project begins delivering, or as soon as practicable thereafter. It is not always necessary or possible to do this. You may have access to other sets of data which can be used as your comparator, or you can design your data collection in such a way that it is not needed.

2 During delivery – Depending on the length, intensity and type of activities being delivered during your project, you may want to consider collecting data on an ongoing basis. It could be that the data collected is the same and is used to compare different moments in time or it could consider different outcomes and sources. Most projects will incorporate this into their delivery in some way but be mindful that some methods of collecting might be more appropriate and credible than others (i.e., greater chance of bias if the participant is reluctant to provide negative feedback directly to project staff). Remember to think about the type of data you may want to collect during delivery – is it feedback and/or numbers?

3 After delivery – It can prove challenging collecting data from participants after their time with a project has ended, so it is common for this challenge to be overcome by scheduling data collection during or just after the final session. For truly post-project data collection, consider what steps you could take to make this as easy as possible for participants – stamped addressed envelope included with printed feedback forms, surveys available online, incentivising feedback etc.



Top tips

Prepare your data collection tools ahead of time – these are the things you will use to collect data such as feedback forms, questionnaires, surveys, and topic guides for a focus group.

Input and store your data as soon as possible after collection – this will make analysis easier and faster and reduces the risk of data loss, a potential GDPR breach you want to avoid. You might have very sophisticated methods and software for capturing, storing and processing data, but for smaller projects a simple excel spreadsheet may be enough. The important thing is that you have a system in place to help you safely store and retrieve the data. By inputting data as soon as possible after collection, you also reduce the chance of accidentally losing the data – and whilst this is a concern for your project and participants, it might also mean you are unable to fully report back to your Fund Manager.

Stage 3: Analysis and reporting



Once you have all your information, you can begin to assemble your evaluation report for your funder.

At the start of the funding cycle, ask your funder if they have a report template. Depending on the level of investment, you may only be asked to fill out a simple, short pro-forma, but in most cases, you will have to use a template designed by the Fund. Knowing what you will be asked to report on is half the battle. Design your evaluation plan around your project and the outcomes you want to deliver. You may have more than one funder that you must report to, so try to ensure a fit between your own outcomes and those of the funder(s).

Don't bend the truth. Funders would much rather know what didn't work and what action you took as a result, so be upfront and bold. Knowing about the challenges of delivering your project helps funders to better understand the complexity around the problem you are tackling. Funders can then use the increased knowledge to better support others and to adapt and develop future Funds.

Don't misinterpret or present data badly. It could really detract from the quality of your report and will lessen their trust in you as an organisation. For example, a project operating a helpline might make the claim they received 300 additional calls that year – but when their previous years calls are looked at (30,000) this minimal increase of 1% actually shows a normal fluctuation in their service.

Do not adjust a participant's quote, unless you have clarified it with them first and they are happy for you to change it. This includes only using part of a quote, for instance, you would be misusing data in support of your outcomes if you only use the first line of the below quote:

"I loved coming to the group, it really gave my life purpose and I felt I had something to look forward to. But when I raised an issue with the Project Coordinator, they told me I was making it up, that really knocked my confidence and I stopped going. I feel even worse than I did before."

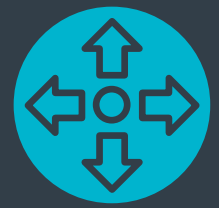
Give yourself plenty of time to write a good report. A rushed report will not be a genuine reflection on your project. A well-written and evidenced report gives funders confidence in your organisation and can increase the likelihood of you being funded by them in the future. Investing in report writing is an investment in your future fundraising and relationships.



Top tip

Evaluation Support Scotland have collated a wide range of tools and examples to help you make the most of your reporting.

Stage 4: Acting on learning



Preparing an Evaluation plan and then seeing it through takes a lot of effort, as does writing a report for your funders, so be sure to get the greatest possible benefit from it. This stage helps you to consider what you have learned from evaluation and how it can improve the services or projects you deliver.

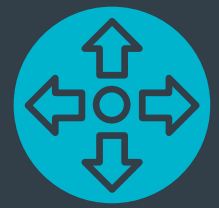
Use it as a reflection piece of your organisation and/or of the sector. If you have evaluated several services or projects, are there any themes or commonalities? Can you start piecing together a big picture of what is happening – either in your organisation or externally – using the totality of evidence and data you have? Reviewing the evidence over a longer time period could help you to identify something, or perhaps provide evidence towards something you've long suspected. Or compare with evaluations done by others tackling the same social problem or working towards similar outcomes – does something new come to light?

Inform organisational improvement. If results give evidence of how your staff or volunteers are feeling about the project(s), what is it telling you? Your evaluation work could help identify what's working well, what needs to change, what should stop and what you should begin. These changes could improve the working life of your staff and volunteers, make your services/projects more impactful for participants, and lead to improved processes/systems which might increase efficiency and decrease overheads.

Use your findings to advocate for change and influence decision-makers. By engaging with decision-makers, such as policy making bodies (e.g., Education Scotland, Scottish Government) or donors (e.g., Inspiring Scotland, National Lottery Community Fund), you could help shape the future direction of practice, policy, and funding available to tackling the social issues. Use what you learn to create conversations for change – you could give talks at events or conferences, run social media campaigns or webinars, put out a press release, the list is endless.

Use your findings to show others your value. Draw on your evaluation work to make a more convincing case to donors that you are best-placed to solve the problem that you focus on. When writing an application, you can demonstrate how your project or service has evolved based on learning from your evaluations. Not all funds will make an award for an existing service or project, but those that do will often want to see what you have learned from previous evaluation.

Stage 4: Acting on learning



Allow yourself to be critical of the results. When you analyse your results, you may need to reconsider whether your approach is appropriate or accurate. It could be your evaluation shows little or no effect on your outcomes, in which case it could be that your activities need some thought. Being able to accept that your project has not achieved what you expected is difficult, but it's one of the most important things you can learn from evaluation.

A good way to analyse this is to develop a Theory of Change, which helps analyse which behaviours you were hoping to address with which activities. Recognising that your Theory of Change is not quite right gives you a chance to readdress it and alter your approach. Funders will sympathise with projects that are honest about their success, as they understand tackling complex and deep-rooted social problems is not straight-forward. The worst thing to do is to keep going on without changing course. At best, your participants will stop engaging and your staff's motivation will reduce, as they don't see or feel any change for the better. At worst, you may be directing funds away from a project that really could make a difference.

Reinforce your success. If your evaluation shows you have made a difference and your work is achieving its outcomes, learn from this and embed what is working. If you know what you're doing works, stick to it. Likewise, if what you're doing doesn't work, adapt, trial, fail, and try again. This could be a big thing to learn for any organisation, as a lot of emphasis is placed on innovation and demonstrating new practice. This is where your ability to influence decision-makers about what you have learned is vital.



Top tip

Have a look at the Theory of Change on page 17. This is a great approach to understand how to streamline your work and services to make a bigger impact. Inspiring Scotland can help facilitate a Theory of Change workshop.

Appendix 1: Logic model

SITUATION OR NEED	RESOURCES	PARTICIPANTS (CLIENTS/ BENEFICIARIES)	PARTNERS	ACTIVITIES	OUTCOMES			
					Short	Medium	Long	National – other strategies that these link to
Stats or example of what you are trying to solve – link it to the specific activities and outcomes	e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inspiring Scotland Other third sector organisations 	e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Young people with LD Adults with LD 	e.g. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employers Project Search Other third sector/ voluntary organisation Local authorities 	Activities that you do that will help you to achieve your outcome	What is the short-term outcome of those activities?	What does the short-term develop into?	What do you anticipate in the long-term?	<p>e.g. Mental Health Strategy. Our activities centre around the prevention and early intervention component of this strategy</p> <p>e.g. A Fairer Scotland for Disabled People. Our access audits fit well in terms of making Scotland more accessible and our work in promoting employment</p>

Appendix 2: Example Theory of Change

OUR APPROACH:

WHAT HAPPENS IN LD PORTFOLIO:

WHAT THIS ACHIEVES:

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR PARTICIPANTS:

LEARNING SESSIONS

Knowledge sharing sessions where leaders of charities can learn new tools and techniques to aid their development, and share challenges through Action Learning Sets to help them overcome barriers.

STRATEGY WORKSHOPS

Delivered to staff, senior management and Board members to help them develop strategic objectives and an Action Plan to create the greatest impact.

ONE TO ONE

In-depth support to work with leaders on developing their strategic objectives, positioning themselves and identifying future funding streams. Knowledge and opportunities to network/ learn are also shared with each organisation.

FUND MANAGEMENT

Distributing core funding from Scottish Government Keys to Life policy team

SPECIALIST VOLUNTEER NETWORK

A service that connects that connects the portfolio charities to professionals that can help them achieve their strategic objectives, from lawyers to business coaches.

Participants identify with and support fellow leaders with challenges they all face

Strategy workshops create buy-in and agreement from the whole organisation as to its future direction

PA supports leaders alongside their day to day work to articulate their organisation and identify future funding streams

Quarterly funding aligns to the achievement of the agreed strategic objectives and Action Plan

Leaders can request support from a range of pro bono professional services

Participants know they are 'not alone' and build strategies and coping mechanisms to face challenges

Organisations understand the reasons behind creating and then following strategic objectives, Action Plans and KPIs

Increased capacity, headspace and reflection for leaders, with increased knowledge

Ability to focus on consolidating organisation and grow resilience, identify other funding streams

Expedited help and support that the organisation may not be able to afford

Participants feel more informed and confident in their roles

Organisations are more focused and energised

Leaders have a critical friend to bounce ideas off and focus on future direction

Leaders have breathing space to achieve strategic objectives and create the greatest impact while diversifying funds

Barriers are removed and there is increased capacity in helping to achieve the strategic objectives

Inspiring Scotland support the LD charities to achieve their strategic objectives over a two year period

Participants are confident, strategic leaders of organisations that know the impact they want to create and how to get there.

LD portfolio charities are sustainable and resilient

Organisations with a healthy infrastructure

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Registered Office:

Riverside House, 502 Gorgie Road,
Edinburgh EH11 3AF

T. 0131 442 8760

E. enquiries@inspiringscotland.org.uk

www.inspiringscotland.org.uk

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