4.0

Evaluation:
Laying the foundations

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What is evaluation?

Evaluation is the process of assessing the quality and value of something and why it has that value or quality. It should use relevant evidence to inform decisions about the value of policies and programmes and support the allocation of resources.

Evaluation is the why, which differs from monitoring as the what. Evaluation involves reflecting on the data collected as part of monitoring and considering what it tells us about the impact of the project or programme.

VRU delivery partners might experience evaluation in a number of different ways: as the subject of someone else's evaluation, by doing self-evaluation or by commissioning an evaluation from a professional researcher.

Why is evaluation important?

Evaluation can help us understand **what works** to deliver the maximum impact on projects and programmes. It also helps to highlight any difficulties and uncertainties that might impact on what the project achieves.

Evaluation seeks to uncover the following questions:

- 'What works', for who and why?
- What difficulties and uncertainties lie within an approach.
- What evidence can be used to inform public debate or policy.
- What learning and insights can be gained to inform future project decisions.
- How much a project really costs to deliver.

There are several practical reasons to conduct evaluation. These include:

- To demonstrate project value, creating a business case for future funding.
- To fulfil a funding requirement.
- To support replication of a project.
- To get an independent view on any processes.
- Contribute to the wider evidence-base about what works in a public health approach to violence reduction.

Ultimately, analysis and reflection on the information you gather during the delivery of your project can help you to form value judgements on whether the project's aims have been met.

When should you use evaluation in your work?

You can use evaluation at any point in your project, including during project design, during project delivery and after project completion. Evaluation can also be conducted in an ongoing cycle – at all three stages – to continuously provide information on the successes and challenges of the project or programme. It doesn't need to only happen at the end of delivery.

Figure 6: Evaluation throughout a project lifecycle

Before
Use evaluations from previous similar projects to inform your approach and understand any risks.

It can be really helpful to set up your evaluation before project implementation or during the project design phase, ensuring you have mechanisms in place to collect the right data right from the start. However, you might also want to refer to evaluations and insights from previous similar projects. This will help to inform your approach and understand any risks. It will also help you understand whether the wider policy landscape could learn something new from your context and approach.

The YEF website provides an archive of evaluations which can be sorted by approach to identify similar projects.

During
Formative evaluation allows learnings to feed into delivery for continual improvement.

Conducting evaluation during project delivery is called **formative evaluation** and can allow learning to feed directly into continual improvement of the project or programme as it is being rolled out. This will help you to understand what is working, what is not working and to begin to interrogate why this is the case.

After
An evaluation of a completed project or programme can conclude on the impact and provide lessons for the future.

An evaluation of a completed project or programme can conclude on the impact and provide lessons for the future. Conducting evaluation after the project has been completed allows learning to feed into future projects or programmes. This approach is known as a **summative evaluation**.

Who conducts evaluation?

Some funders will request that an evaluation be conducted as a condition of funding being awarded, but even where this is not the case, we have seen how important evaluation is for contributing to an evidence base of what works. However, it can be difficult to find the capacity, skills, and knowledge to conduct a thorough evaluation in-house, particularly for smaller organisations. You might also want an objective view of your intervention from someone outside your organisation. In either case, it can be valuable to commission an evaluator or researcher to support the process (known as an external or independent evaluation).

When deciding who will conduct your evaluation, consider:

- **The skills required** – do we have a staff member with appropriate expertise and analytical skills?
- **Capacity** – is it possible for staff to take time away from their normal duties to conduct the evaluation?
- **Budget** – how much do you have to spend on resourcing the evaluation? Is it enough to commission an external partner?

If an evaluation is being conducted internally, it's helpful to develop a separate workplan and delivery plan for the evaluation, as well as separation of responsibilities in the team to support objectivity, where possible. The size of the team and the level of involvement of team members will depend on timescales, and the size, complexity, and purpose of the evaluation. It is helpful to assign different aspects of your evaluation to different team members, and keep track of deliverables and deadlines using something like the evaluation and planning table in Annex C of this resource.

Commissioning an external evaluation

If you decide to commission an external partner, such as a freelance consultant, a research agency or an academic partner, there are several steps involved in the commissioning process.

1. Write a specification for your evaluation. This acts as a brief for those who tender for the work, although the details of research methods can be ironed out later in the process, with the evaluators. You should stipulate the timescales for the work, and any deliverables you would like at the end (such as summary reports, full reports and presentations).
2. Set a budget for the amount you want to spend. You might have already included this in the overall budget for your funding.
3. Share the specification and invitation to tender with relevant networks. You could ask colleagues in other organisations for recommendations or share the invitation to tender through professional bodies.
4. Develop criteria for scoring the bids you receive. This should include considerations of the quality of the tender and the price quoted. You can also ask the highest scoring bidders to 'pitch' for the work in a meeting, where you can ask clarification questions about their proposals.
5. Once a successful bidder has been identified, agree terms of reference with them and put a contract in place. An inception meeting with the supplier can be useful to help finalise the aims, objectives and approach for the evaluation.

There is more detailed information about each of these steps in this good practice guide[19] to commissioning an evaluation.

4.1 An overview of different types of evaluation

Although there are many different approaches to conducting evaluation activity (see section 5), broadly there are three main **types of evaluation**. Each type focuses on a different aspect of an intervention:

- **Process evaluation:** What can be learned from how the intervention was delivered?
- **Outcome or Impact evaluation:** What difference did the intervention make?
- **Value for money evaluation:** Was this a good use of resource?

19 https://golab.bsg.ox.ac.uk/documents/Good_Practice_Guide_-_Commissioning_Evaluations_Final_feb_14.pdf

A **process evaluation** gathers evidence on how the intervention has been implemented in practice and can offer insights into why an impact has or has not been realised. This type of evaluation would answer questions related to inputs, activities, and outputs from the ToC, as well as giving insight into what has helped or hindered delivery and what are the lessons being learnt. There is more information on methods for process evaluation in section 5.1.

An **impact or outcome evaluation** is usually conducted after an initiative is completed (though preparation should begin while the project is being delivered, with appropriate data collection systems being put in place). Both these types of evaluation aim to understand the extent to which the outcomes or impacts set out in the ToC have been realised. The key difference between them is whether they have some causal attribution or not: an impact evaluation uses a **counterfactual** to assess what would have likely happened in the absence of the intervention, in order to better attribute changes to the intervention. An outcomes evaluation does not usually look at attribution, instead measuring the outcomes of the intervention without as assessment of what would have happened in the absence of the programme. There is more information on methods for outcomes and impact evaluation in section 5

A **value for money evaluation** weighs up the relationship between the costs of an intervention and the benefits or effects the intervention achieves. This is often done by allocating 'proxy' monetary values to outcomes and impacts and weighing those values against the costs associated with the intervention. For more information on conducting value for money evaluation, see section 5.5.

These different evaluation types are not mutually exclusive but complimentary. Often, evaluations will use a combination of these different approaches to gain a broad understanding of whether an intervention achieved the outputs and outcomes laid out in a ToC.

4.2 Evaluation frameworks and research questions

This section will help you to put the foundations in place to conduct an evaluation, through the development of an evaluation framework.

Put simply, an evaluation framework is a plan that clearly sets out how you will measure the success of the different elements of your ToC, through collecting and analysing data, to evidence and learn from your story of change.

Ideally, you should try to write your framework before your project starts so that you can make sure you are collecting appropriate data from the beginning; this can reduce the costs of data collection by building evaluation activities into project delivery. Planning an evaluation also requires consideration of both the design and the project management of the evaluation.[20] Although this will require some thought at the beginning, which can be difficult when you are short on time and resource, it is an opportunity to keep stakeholders focussed on the ultimate goal of the project.

20 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879438/HMT_Magenta_Book.pdf

Developing an Evaluation Framework is a process that looks at:

- Defining the intervention to be evaluated (i.e. the scope).
- Defining the evaluation aims and research questions.
- Selecting appropriate evaluation approaches and methods.

Defining the intervention

The first step in any evaluation is to define the scope, which means considering what the intervention to be evaluated is. Developing your ToC first will allow you to clearly understand the rationale for your project, what it aims to achieve, and how. At this stage, you should be clear on the overall purpose of the project and be able to specify how its activities will contribute to a chain of effects that bring about its intended outcomes and impact.[21] **Your ToC will underpin your evaluation design.**

Defining the evaluation aims and research questions

At the outset, you must be clear on what is to be evaluated (your intervention) and what you (and your audience, or stakeholders) want to learn. Defining the aims of an evaluation depends on its purpose and use, whether that be to:

- Identify risks and modify your project in response.
- Monitor progress towards outcomes and take action when necessary.
- Respond to external scrutiny.
- Communicate impact and win future funding.
- Create internal learning and influence the design of future provision.

The Magenta Book includes more information on key evaluation uses in Table 2.1, on page 27.

By setting out the aims of your evaluation (in other words, what you and your stakeholders hope to get out of it), you can be clear about what these questions are and how the findings from them are expected to be used, by whom and when. This will inform the evaluation approach to be used, help focus the evaluation, and ensure the findings stand the strongest chance of having an impact and being used.[22]

When considering the purpose of your evaluation, think about whether you would like to understand the **process** by which your project was implemented; the **impact** of the project; or the **value-for-money** of the project. This will influence the types of research questions your evaluation will aim to answer. Table 2.2 in the Magenta Book, page 31, includes useful examples of evaluation questions for each type of evaluation.

Finally, the scope of your evaluation will also be defined by what resources (budget, staff, and time) are available to conduct the work.

21 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-in-health-and-well-being-overview/planning-an-evaluation

22 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879438/HMT_Magenta_Book.pdf

Developing research questions

Evaluations can be designed to answer a range of questions about whether and how the aims of your intervention (set out in your ToC) were achieved. Initially, it can be helpful to write down all the potential questions you would like your evaluation to answer. This is likely to result in a long list – you will probably not be able to answer every question posed, typically because of the time and resources that would be required to answer them all, as well as methodological limits.[23] It is useful to narrow the list down to around 5- 6 high-level research questions. This will keep your evaluation manageable and focussed. Your research questions should be:

- Clear, specific, and well-defined
- Focus on a program or program component
- Measurable by the evaluation
- Aligned with your Theory of Change.

It is helpful to think of the research questions as ways to 'test' the 'theory' behind your ToC. Ultimately, your research questions should be centred on whether or not your intervention met its intended objectives. You can work through your ToC and consider whether the project went as expected and if your assumptions were correct, thereby mapping your questions to the different ToC elements. For example, did our inputs help support the delivery of activities as we predicted? Did our activities lead to the outputs we planned?

The decisions you make about your research questions (directed by what you want to gain from the evaluation), and the evidence needed to answer those questions, will directly influence the types of evaluation approaches and methods you choose. More specifically, your evaluation focus will depend on which elements of your ToC the research questions are linked to. For example, if you decided that you want to learn lessons on whether the identification of young people to take part in the program was effective, you would be assessing how the 'outputs' and 'activities' on your ToC played out in reality. This would require a process evaluation (see section 5.1).

23 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879438/HMT_Magenta_Book.pdf

Figure 7 below illustrates how research questions about inputs, activities, and outputs will fall into process evaluation, and those about outcomes and impact will fall into an outcome or impact evaluation.

Figure 7: Aligning research questions to your ToC

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impact
Research questions compatible with **process evaluation**, to understand how and why outcomes/impacts are being achieved or not.			Research questions compatible with **outcome/ impact evaluations**, to assess the results of the intervention and the change brought about by the inputs, activities and outputs.	

Figure 7 highlights that there is crossover between process and outcomes evaluations. The process evaluation is concerned with the **processes** by which **outcomes** and impact are (or are not) realised, and the **outcome/impact** evaluation is concerned with the outcomes and impact brought about by those **processes** (inputs, activities and outputs). Whilst they are different, process and outcome-focussed evaluations are often done at the same time, their findings being combined to give a deep, well-rounded understanding. There is information on how to combine findings from different evaluation approaches in section 5.4.

You may want to include more detailed sub-questions under some of your research questions. For example:

- **Did our activities lead to the outputs we planned?**
- **Were there enough resources?**
- **Were there any unexpected or unintended issues in the delivery of the activities?**
- **To what extent has the intervention reached all the people that it was intended to?**

Figure 8 shows examples of research questions developed for each element of the example ToCs set out in section 2. See more on process and outcomes evaluation approaches in section 5.

Figure 8: Research questions for different types of evaluation and their associated ToC element

Process evaluation	
▪ To what extent and how: – Did existing data sharing between agencies support the identification of perpetrators of VAWG crimes (potential beneficiaries of support)? – Were police and probation available to support the identification of perpetrators, and provide timely initial and longer-term support to the project? – Was the right staffing in place to deliver the intervention? ▪ Was the funding for intervention sufficient and how was it used?	Inputs to activities
▪ How were offenders identified? ▪ How were the initial group interventions delivered? ▪ How were the longer-term interventions delivered?	Activities
▪ Was the identification of offenders timely and accurate? ▪ Did those identified engage with the initial intervention? ▪ Did those identified engage with longer-term interventions?	Activities to outputs

Figure 8: Research questions for different types of evaluation and their associated ToC element continued

Outcome/impact evaluation questions	
▪ Did participants recognise the seriousness of the situation through the initial group intervention? ▪ Were underlying risk factors identified (at initial intervention) and subsequently supported (through longer-term) intervention? ▪ Were alternative life choices recognised by and available to those supported? ▪ Were there any unintended (positive or negative) outcomes?	Outcomes
▪ Were underlying risk factors addressed? ▪ Were alternative behaviour choices addressed/taken up? ▪ Was there a direct/independent link between participant recognition of their offences and impacts achieved by the project?	Outcomes to impact
▪ (Relative to what would have likely happened in the absence of intervention) was there a reduction in reoffending, arrest rates, criminality and risky behaviours for those supported?	Impact

Monitoring	
▪ How many perpetrators were identified and what were their characteristics? ▪ How many of the identified perpetrators were supported through initial and subsequent longer-term support?	Outputs

It is worth noting that whilst testing the ToC should be the primary purpose of your evaluation, there may be other research questions which are not captured in the ToC. For example, you might want to consider the experiences and outcomes of different groups (taking into account gender, ethnicity, neurodiversity and other characteristics) with a view to understanding how you could tailor your intervention for different barriers or needs.

Mapping research questions to data sources

Once you have set-out your research questions, you can begin to consider exactly how you might answer them. This involves considering the data sources and evidence needed to show whether you achieved the outputs and outcomes detailed in your ToC.

For each measure of progress, it will be important to find out what information you have already, what additional information you will need to collect, what methods you will use to gather it, who will take responsibility for collecting the information, and the timescale.[24]

Ask yourself:

- What relevant data do you already collect?
- Are you missing any data to answer this question?
- How could you collect the data in a way that's proportionate to your evaluation budget and the sort of project you have delivered? Can it be incorporated into project delivery?
- Who can provide this data? Consider whether you can collect it yourself from participants (for information primary data, see sections 3.0 and 5.1.) or if you will access existing data collected by others (for information on secondary data, see below).
- Are there any barriers to collecting this data?

It is particularly important to plan early what data and evidence should be collected before implementation and during the lifetime of your intervention. If data collection is left until the end or after the lifetime of your project, it may limit your ability to conduct appropriate evaluation (for example, it may be necessary to collect baseline data before delivery starts).

Top tip: Set up systems to gather data on a regular basis. Clarify what information you will need to help you to answer or explore your research questions. Think about the records you will be collecting anyway as part of your project monitoring that will provide some of the information you need.

Then: Decide what additional information you will gather specifically for the evaluation, and how you will gather it. The following table shows how some different data sources can be aligned to specific research questions. You should choose different methods in order to get a 'full picture'. Also, different ways of gathering information will suit different projects and research questions. Which you choose to use, and how much time you spend gathering data, should be tailored to the capacity of your organisation.[25]

24 https://www.jrf.org.uk/evaluating-community-projects-a-practical-guide
25 https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/evaluating-community-projects-practical-guide p7

Figure 9: Mapping research questions to data sources

Research questions	Desk review	Management information	Interviews	Survey	Secondary data
To what extent and how did existing data sharing between agencies support the identification of those at risk of involvement/ already involved in crime?	●		●		
Did young people recognise their vulnerability through the initial intervention?			●	●	
(Relative to what would have likely happened in the absence of intervention) was there a reduction in arrest rates, criminality and risky behaviours for those supported?		●			●
How many young people (potential perpetrators) were identified and what were their characteristics?		●			

Secondary data and data sharing

If you are commissioning an evaluation, it is unlikely you will need to source secondary data yourself. However, if you are designing an internal evaluation, you will most likely need to access secondary data. Secondary data is information that already exists, collected by other people or organisations for a different purpose. This can come from various sources, including national and local crime statistics, previous evaluation reports, or data collected by other organisations. It may be publicly available, although you might need permission to access it. It is necessary to consider whether the secondary data you plan to use for your evaluation is:

- Available – readily accessible
- Reliable and trustworthy
- Relevant to your work and appropriate for evaluation use

One of the main reasons for collecting secondary data is to avoid duplicating work that has already been done. If you can use secondary data sources, you may be able to save both time and expense. There are other reasons for reviewing or collecting secondary data:

- It will show the gaps in existing information and the quality of evidence already available.
- It can provide a context in which to place your analysis of the primary data that you are collecting (for example, if there is a general trend nationwide of a reduction in young people knife crime, this should be acknowledged by the evaluation).
- It can give you a greater understanding and insight into the problems, issues and practice related to the field in which you are evaluating (and often has greater scope).
- It can provide a basis for comparison for the data that you are collecting.

Note that using secondary data comes with a risk of misinterpreting how the data was sourced and how it should be analysed. Most public sources will have guides of how you can use the data.

Quantitative secondary data sources

You can freely access national and local statistics through government websites, such as www.statistics.gov.uk. The Office for National Statistics (www.ons.gov.uk) is the largest independent source of national statistics. There are also a number of sites where you can get more specific data on different topics, for example you can also find data about reported incidents in a specific locality on www.crime-statistics.co.uk and www.police.uk. The outcomes framework[26] developed by South Wales Violence Prevention Unit includes links to other relevant datasets.

Furthermore, there is a wealth of data held by public bodies such as police, health and local authorities. Access to this data can be key to supporting prevention activity, though you may need to develop data sharing agreements in partnership with these agencies, although some information could be obtained through Freedom of Information Requests.[27]

Qualitative secondary data sources

You can undertake a literature review (a summary of relevant literature on a topic, or of research findings which relate to the project or programme being carried out) or a document review (including organisational documents, client reports or meeting minutes). You can also analyse media or online resources. In each case, it is important to verify the dependability and reputation of the data source,[28] and add weight to your findings accordingly.

Now that you have clearly defined your intervention (through your ToC) and established concise research questions and their aligned data sources, you can complete your Evaluation Framework by deciding on appropriate evaluation approaches and information collection methods.

26 https://www.violencepreventionwales.co.uk/cms-assets/global/Violence-Prevention-Indicators_Wales-VPU_2021.pdf

27 https://www.violencepreventionwales.co.uk/cms-assets/research/Violence-Prevention-Evaluation-Toolkit.pdf

28 NCVO, Using Secondary Data, Available at: https://www.ncvo.org.uk/help-and-guidance/strategy-and-impact/impact-evaluation/planning-your-impact-and-evaluation/choosing-evaluation-methods/using-secondary-data/