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Good Practice Guide: Commissioning Evaluations

Project: Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs
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This guide is intended to support partnerships delivering the BigLF's *Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs* initiative in their commissioning of local-level independent evaluations. It outlines the key stages in commissioning evaluations and identifies some issues for partnerships to consider during the planning stages of commissioning and therefore should not be regarded as a comprehensive guide to commissioning. Further sources of information are given at the end of the document.

Introduction

Partnerships delivering projects funded by BigLF's Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs initiative are expected to carry out local evaluation of their activities. These evaluations will take place alongside a national evaluation undertaken by CFE Research and the University of Sheffield. A paper has been prepared providing further details on the differing scopes of the local and national evaluations. This is available to download from the Grant Holders' area of www.mcnevaluation.co.uk.

This guide goes through the stages usually undertaken in commissioning an independent evaluation, and some of the issues to be considered.



Before you start: understanding the background

Before you start the commissioning process, it is important to understand the background to the evaluation, particularly any legal requirements or financial constraints you need to work within.

Check that you are aware of:

- *Your project business plan – and the place of evaluation within that plan*
- *The procurement rules your organisation has in place*
- *The procurement requirements of BigLF*
- *BigLF contract conditions relating to independent evaluation (both in the standard grant terms and special conditions)*
- *The budget allocated to evaluation*

If any contractual requirements are not clear, ask for further guidance. It is helpful to know:

- *If funders have specific expectations of the research questions to be asked in evaluations*
- *If funders wish to comment on or approve evaluation specifications*
- *If there are set deadlines for receiving evaluation reports*

Form a steering group

The role of a steering group is typically to:

- *Feed into the development of the evaluation specification*
- *Receive reports on the progress of the evaluation and consider issues arising*
- *Receive evaluation findings and work with partners to learn from the findings*

Representatives of the steering group are also likely to be involved in the selection process.

Having a steering group helps achieve buy-in for the evaluation and increases the chances of findings being circulated to and taken on board by key partners. However, if it is not feasible to form a steering group, try to think of other ways in which you can ensure engagement with the evaluation process from your project partners.

In deciding on the membership of the steering group, there is a balance to be struck between keeping the group to a manageable size for constructive discussions and an inclusive approach involving a wide range of stakeholders.

The membership of a steering group could include:



- *The evaluation/research manager taking a lead on commissioning*
- *A senior manager/Director of the lead partner for the BigLF grant*
- *Representative(s) of core partners delivering activities being evaluated*
- *Representative(s) of external organisations who you want to influence through the findings of the evaluation (e.g. local authorities, commissioners of health services)*
- *Representative(s) of service users*

It is important to include people on the steering group who:

- *Understand research/evaluation methodologies*
- *Understand the policy environment in which you are working (local and national)*
- *Understand the practicalities of project delivery*
- *Understand the management information and administrative data collected by the project partners*
- *Bring a balance of objectivity to the group.*

The steering group should help to shape the brief given to the evaluators. Key issues to be discussed before finalising the brief are likely to be:

A. What do we want the evaluation to achieve?

Evaluation can have a number of different objectives, and these usually change over the course of project delivery. In developing your evaluation objectives, think about the objectives for your project as a whole and what evaluation evidence you need to support these; consider:

- *What questions do we need answers to?*
- *What decisions do we need to make and what information is needed to inform this?*
- *What evidence is needed to influence system change?*

In the early stages of a project, it is likely that you will want the evaluator to consider:

- *Whether systems and processes are working well (particularly where you have introduced new/innovative ways of working)*
- *Whether your data collection and management information systems are adequate to meet the needs of the local (and national) evaluation*
- *Establishing a baseline, against which to assess future impacts*
- *Establishing approaches to engaging service users with the evaluation*
- *Establishing mechanisms for sharing learning from the evaluation*

As the project progresses, the evaluation is likely to focus on:



- *Quantifying the net¹ impacts of an intervention*
- *Cost-benefit analysis/value for money assessments*
- *Assessing if the intervention is working better for some groups of beneficiaries than others*
- *Assessing how well partnerships are working and stakeholder views of what is working and what is not*
- *Gathering case studies and other qualitative evidence of what is working*
- *Identifying examples of good practice and innovation*
- *Sharing emerging learning within the project and with external stakeholders*
- *Producing written reports for external audiences*

B. Balancing self-evaluation, participation and co-production with independence

The independence of evaluators is important as this gives the evaluation findings credibility, particularly with external stakeholders. However, self-evaluation², participatory approaches³ and co-production⁴, offer significant advantages as they draw on many different forms of knowledge and encourage individuals and organisations to reflect and learn from experience.

Independent evaluation by external consultancies and more participative approaches are not mutually exclusive. You may want to consider having an element of the evaluation based round external evaluators supporting participatory approaches and self-evaluation; this could include working with service users to carry out elements of the research or facilitating engagement in the evaluation in other ways.

C. Influencing: Who are the main audiences for evaluation findings and how will it be best to reach them?

The audiences for evaluation findings are likely to include:

- *Project staff, service users and volunteers*
- *Other deliverers of Fulfilling Lives: Supporting people with multiple needs projects*
- *BigLF*

¹ Net impact is the impact of an intervention, once adjustments have been made for deadweight (what would have happened anyway) displacement (where costs/benefits are just shifted between areas) leakage (benefits outside the target area) substitution (where a shift has taken place in activity to make use of the intervention) and multipliers (where the knock on benefits of interventions are considered).

² Where the evaluation is done by people within the organisation

³ An approach where service users are integral to the evaluation process

⁴ Where partners work together to generate knowledge



- *Other organisations delivering interventions to people with multiple needs – locally, nationally and internationally*
- *Local decision makers and policy makers*
- *National decision makers and policy makers*
- *The national evaluation team*

Working out who the priority audiences are will help you to develop a brief which includes appropriate reporting and dissemination approaches.

You will want to consider how your list of priority audiences ties in with your overall communications plan outlined in your business plan.

D. Timescales

Timescales for producing evaluation reports may be set by contractual requirements. However, the steering group may be aware of other activities which may influence timings – such as policy reviews or local commissioning cycles.

E. Selection of evaluators and inception meeting

It is unlikely to be practical for the whole steering group to be involved in the selection of evaluation consultants. However, it is advisable to include a representative of the steering group on the selection panel. It can be particularly helpful to include at least one representative from the partners involved in frontline delivery of the project, as these organisations are likely to be in close contact with the evaluators over the period of the evaluation, so need to feel comfortable with the selection decision.

Likewise, you may not need everybody at the inception meeting – but having the steering group represented will ensure the evaluators are made aware of the views of the group.

F. Ethical and legal issues

It is worth considering at an early stage in planning the evaluation whether there are any issues which need further consideration around research ethics, data protection, safeguarding or health and safety of staff, volunteers, service users or contractors.

Drafting the evaluation brief (or Invitation to Tender (ITT))

The ITT is the document which goes out to prospective evaluation consultants so that they can provide you with a written quote or tender. Therefore it is important that it provides all the



information an evaluator needs to be able to put together a realistic proposal which meets your needs.

The ITT will need to include:

A. Background to the activities being evaluated

You will need to give a clear but concise description of the activities being evaluated. The potential evaluators will need to know:

- *About your organisation, and about BigLF*
- *What your project aims to do, and how you intend to do it*
- *The partner organisations you are working with*
- *The client groups you are working with*
- *The numbers of beneficiaries you are likely to be engaging*
- *Likely timescales for the intervention*
- *What outcomes you are aiming to achieve*
- *What management information and administrative data you will make available to the evaluators (and what the timing for collection will be)*

If you are able to share your business plan with external organisations, this can be included with the supporting documents to provide further background.

B. Scope

This will set out what activities you expect the evaluators to consider. This can be a particularly difficult area for interventions which aim to ‘join-up’ services or develop innovative approaches to delivery, as it is not always clear where the boundaries of the activities evaluated should lie.

The prospective evaluators also need to be made aware of the national evaluation activities.

C. Aims and objectives of the evaluation

Set out the aims and objectives of the evaluation based on your steering group discussion. Try to make your evaluation questions as specific as possible, and if the aims change over the project lifetime, consider dividing the evaluation into phases, and having different aims and objectives for each phase.



D. Methodology and specific requirements

Most evaluation briefs do not specify a methodology to be used in the evaluation – as you would expect the evaluator’s expertise and experience would help to inform the methods adopted.

However, you may wish to specify certain activities which you would expect to be included in the work. For example:

- *Providing opportunities for service users as act as peer researchers*
- *Including learning activities such as action learning sets or practitioner workshops*
- *Delivering training sessions on self-evaluation*

Bear in mind that some of these activities could place additional burdens on service users – so make sure what you are suggesting is practical and has been discussed with service users. Consider the extent to which specific activities complement national evaluation activities.

State if you have any specific requirements related to engaging with vulnerable or ‘difficult to reach’ clients (such enhanced CRB checks for interviewers, gender of interviewers or translation of material into community languages).

It is perfectly acceptable to say that you would welcome proposals which include innovative approaches and methods.

E. Dissemination

The output of an evaluation is typically a written evaluation report. However, this is often not an ideal medium for disseminating findings to people who need to learn from the evaluation. So, specify what else you want the evaluators to provide. This could include:

- *‘Plain English’ summaries of evaluation findings*
- *Case study write-ups*
- *Presentations at events or conferences*
- *Workshops and seminars*
- *Videos, blogs or contributions to newsletters*

Go back to your steering group discussion on who you are trying to influence and use this to give the evaluators a clear steer on the outputs you want. If you don’t do this, the evaluators may not cost in sufficient time for dissemination activities.



F. Timescales

Provide upfront dates for:

- *Deadline for questions about the tender*
- *Deadline for submission of tenders (including exact time)*
- *Interviews with shortlisted tenderers*
- *Inception meeting with successful tenderer*
- *Reporting deadlines for each phase of the work*

G. Deliverables

State to prospective tenderers what deliverables are required throughout the duration of the project. For example:

- *Project inception and scoping meeting*
- *Project initiation document*
- *Attendance and participation at evaluation steering group meetings, and production of likely documents required for each meeting.*
- *Production of research tools*
- *Production of evaluation framework*
- *Reporting – expectations of how often the evaluators will be required to provide verbal updates to the evaluation manager as well the number of reports expected per year*
- *Presentation of results and production of recommendations for system change*

H. Budget

Procurement professionals often disagree on whether a budget should be given in a tender document. If you give a budget, most prospective evaluators will supply a proposal based on the budget figure – so you may be missing an opportunity to procure an evaluation more cheaply. However, if you don't give a budget it is very difficult for evaluators to make a judgement as to the depth of the research and analysis you require.

Generally, when commissioning evaluation it is best to give a budget, or indicative range. The exception would be in cases where you have been very specific as to the work you want the evaluators to do – then it may be possible for the evaluators to provide a realistic quote without a budget for guidance.

If you want to retain some flexibility in what is commissioned, you may ask for the prospective evaluators to cost a range of options.



Be clear whether the budget you quote includes or excludes VAT.

I. How to tender

Provide clear instructions on how the tender should be submitted.

Set out what you want submissions to cover. Typically this will include:

- *Contact details for the tendering organisation(s)*
- *1-2 page summary outlining: their proposal, team, method, strengths and added value.*
- *The tenderer's understanding of the brief*
- *The proposed methodology, reporting and dissemination details*
- *The evaluation team (with CVs / biographies in an annex)*
- *Track record in evaluating similar interventions and research in this field*
- *Management arrangements for the evaluation*
- *Timings – a detailed timetable for carrying out the work; highlighting key milestones, deadlines, suggested meetings and progress reports.*
- *Quality assurance and approach to risk management*
- *Costings (clear structure of charges broken down by days, member of staff and activity). You can also set out proposed staged payment arrangements e.g. x% on appointment; x% when fieldwork begins; and x% once the final report is completed.*

You may also wish to request:

- *Contact details for referees*
- *Evidence of professional indemnity and public liability insurance*
- *Financial accounts*

It is well worth considering setting a page limit for the submission (with additional material being allowed in the form of annexes), the order that you want the bid presented in, and whether you want the bid in a particular font and size. The purpose of this is to ensure consistency across all bids received.

You will need to specify if the tender should be submitted in hard copy (including the number of copies required and whether they should be bounded or unbound) by post, by email or via a web-based tendering portal⁵. It is good practice for all tenders to be opened after the deadline

⁵ Such as www.mytenders.org



– so you will need to tell tenderers to mark post or emails clearly so that those receiving the tenders are aware of the contents and do not open.

Set out the criteria you will use for selecting the successful tender (see below) and give contact details for a person who can deal with enquiries.

J. Contracting

You will need to put a contract in place with the successful evaluators – so provide the standard terms and conditions used in purchasing services by your organisation at the tendering stage, so that organisations submitting proposals are aware of what they would need to sign up to. If the terms and conditions usually used by your organisation are not specific to research contracts, you will need to review the terms to ensure issues such as client confidentiality, data protection and intellectual property rights are appropriate to an evaluation project.

If the evaluation is taking place over several years, you may not be in a position to contract for the whole period. If this is the case, make it clear in the ITT what period you will be contracting for, and if subsequent years will be subject to funding being secured.

K. Supporting documents

Provide prospective evaluators with:

- *Your business plan (or extracts if the document is confidential)*
- *Papers by CFE Research and the University of Sheffield on:*
 - *The scope of local/national evaluations*
 - *The evaluation framework for the national evaluation (including common data framework) [note: a summary version of this, suitable for circulation is currently being prepared and will be available shortly]*

Procurement

Once you have a finalised evaluation brief, you will need to invite prospective evaluators to tender. There are a number of options which can be followed:

A. Single tender action

This involves asking one supplier (or consortium) to provide a proposal for the work. This is rarely used unless there is a very strong justification for approaching only one evaluator. If a



single tender action is pursued, it is good practice to record the reasons as to why the approach was appropriate.

B. Closed tender

This involves approaching selected evaluation consultants and inviting them to supply a proposal. You would typically approach between three and five suppliers – with the aim of having at least three proposals submitted.

This method tends to be used for reasonably small value contracts⁶ or where there is a pre-selection process such as an approved suppliers list or ‘panel’ of consultants to draw on.

C. Open tender

This involves opening the tender up to any organisation who wishes to submit a proposal, and is the preferred method for larger contracts.

This can either be split into an ‘Expression of Interest’ (EOI) phase and ‘Full Tender’ phase, or you can go straight to the full tender phase.

An EOI is a short submission (usually only a couple of pages) which allows you to narrow down your prospective tenderers prior to full tender. So, the focus is usually on experience of the potential evaluators – and not details on methods, costs etc. If you use an EOI you need to have clear selection and scoring criteria, just as you would for a full tender.

As a minimum, you would need to put information about the tender on your website and circulate information to partners involved in the project. It is also worth asking contacts in partner organisations, your local voluntary sector infrastructure organisation and research teams of national bodies if they can supply contact details for consultancies they have worked with in the past.

Public bodies are required to post large research contracts (over £172,514 (€207,000)) in the Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU). Any organisation is able to use this method of advertising (see <http://www.ted.europa.eu/TED/main/HomePage.do>) – however, it should be noted that this can add considerably to commissioning timescales as OJEU has minimum notice periods for publishing contract notices.

⁶ Different organisations have different thresholds for what constitutes ‘small’ – it will depend on both your internal organisation rules and funders’ rules



Try to supply a realistic notice period for submission of tenders – particularly if you wish to encourage bids from consortia, as these can take more time to develop.

To make the tender process as fair as possible, no tenderer should be given more information than another. This can create a problem when potential tenderers contact you for more information about the assignment. To avoid any preferential treatment, two possible options are:

- *Holding a suppliers briefing session open to all prospective tenderers and write up the notes from the session and make available to those not able to attend*
- *Post responses to any queries on a website alongside the ITT, or set up a group e-mail distribution list of all interested bidders to share all questions and answers posted (making sure that bidders cannot see who else you are circulating the information to)*

Set a deadline for receiving any questions several days before the tender deadline.

When setting the final deadline for tenders and choosing how tenders will be sent to you, consider the practicalities and time involved, such as ensuring somebody is available to monitor emails received/sign for mail delivered – and field phone calls from tenderers wishing to check receipt. It is good practice to record all receipts in a tender log and have this checked and signed by a second member of staff.

If tenders are received after your stated deadline they should not be considered.

Selection

Most evaluation tender selections use a two-stage selection process involving shortlisting and an interview.

Prior to shortlisting, decide who will be on the selection panel and what criteria you will be using to assess the tenders (these should be stated in the ITT).

Criteria will generally include:

- *Showing a good understanding of the evaluation brief*
- *Evidence of a strong track record in evaluation of similar programmes*
- *Experience and expertise of the team proposed*
- *Capacity to deliver to required timescales*
- *Suitability of the methodology proposed*
- *Value for money*
- *Appropriate management arrangements and quality assurance*



These criteria may be weighted if some are felt to be more important than others.

‘Value for money’ does not mean the lowest price. Consider the day rates being quoted, if these are commensurate with the expertise of the team, and the balance of time shown in the proposal between more junior and senior staff.

Develop a scoring system for proposals. For example:

Give each proposal a score under each criterion where:

- 0 – *does not meet criterion*
- 1 – *very limited evidence that the tenderer meets the criterion*
- 2 – *partial evidence that the tenderer meets the criterion*
- 3 – *good evidence that the tenderer meets the criterion*
- 4 – *excellent evidence that the tenderer meets the criterion*

Multiply the score by the weighting for each criterion and add up to get a total score.

All those shortlisting should record their scores and you should retain copies of the scoring sheets centrally.

The top scoring submissions should be invited for interview. This will be a chance for you to examine the teams’ understanding of the assignment in more depth and discuss any particularly difficult aspects of the evaluation.

Just as with a job interview, it is good practice to ask all tenderers the same questions and record your assessments of their suitability. However, it is acceptable to ask for clarification if there were aspects of a proposal which are unclear.

It is common to ask tenderers to do a presentation to the selection panel. This could be a fairly generic presentation of their proposal – this is unlikely to provide you with information not already set out in their proposal, but gives you an opportunity to assess the team’s ability at presentation. Or you could ask all shortlisted tenderers to address a specific question which you feel to be critical to the evaluation.

Make a record of how you arrived at your decision and be prepared to give feedback to unsuccessful tenderers.

If you have asked tenderers to provide references, contact the referees to verify that they can recommend the supplier.



Inception

Once you have decided on your preferred supplier of the evaluation, arrange an inception meeting.

The inception meeting will typically cover:

- *A reiteration of the aims and objectives of the evaluation*
- *Reviewing the proposal submitted by the preferred tenderer and discussing any areas where you would wish to see a change in the approach*
- *Reviewing timescales for the evaluation and ensuring they are realistic*
- *Providing information needed by the evaluators such as key contacts in partner organisations, beneficiary data and management information*
- *Agreeing on communication protocols and management arrangements – such as asking for a phone/email progress update from the evaluators fortnightly*
- *Agreeing a schedule of deliverables (such as evaluation reports)*
- *Agreeing an invoicing schedule (preferably with invoicing points aligned to deliverables)*
- *Making the evaluator aware of any sensitivities, concerns and risks that could have an impact on the successful delivery of the evaluation*

The inception meeting should be minuted and deadlines for actions agreed.

The evaluator's proposal (subject to any amendments), schedule of deliverables and invoice schedule will form the basis of the contract drawn up with the evaluators. This should be reviewed on a regular basis by the commissioning organisation.



Sources of Further Information

- *BigLF : Guide to Self-Evaluation* - <http://www.biglotteryfund.org.uk/funding/funding-guidance/managing-your-funding/self-evaluation> **Guide to Self-Evaluation, aimed at BigLF grant holders**
- *Charities Evaluation Services: Guidance Paper 1: How to Cost an Evaluation* - <http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/tools-and-resources/planning-for-monitoring-evaluation/guidance-paper-one-tools>
- *Charities Evaluation Services: Guidance Paper 2: What to Include in an Evaluation Brief* - <http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/tools-and-resources/planning-for-monitoring-evaluation/guidance-paper-two-eval-brief-tools> **Guidance aimed at voluntary sector organisations commissioning evaluations.**
- *CLES: Evaluating Projects and Programmes* - <http://www.cles.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/Evaluating-regeneration-projects-and-programmes.pdf> **Designed primarily for regeneration projects – but applicable to a wider range of initiatives**
- *HM Treasury (2011): The Green Book* - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-green-book-appraisal-and-evaluation-in-central-government> **This provides guidance for central government departments on appraisal and evaluation**
- *HM Treasury (2011): The Magenta Book* - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book> **This provides comprehensive guidance on good practice in evaluation. It is primarily intended for government departments, complementing the Green Book – but is a good reference source on policy evaluation**
- *Social Research Association (2002): Commissioning Social Research, a good practice guide* - <http://the-sra.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Commissioning-Social-Research-good-practice-guide1.pdf> **Fairly technical but comprehensive guide on wider social research – includes issues such as intellectual property**
- *UKES: Good Practice Guidelines* - <https://www.evaluation.org.uk/assets/UKES%20Guidelines%20for%20Good%20Practice%20January%202013.pdf> **Some general principles to be followed by evaluators and commissioners**
- *University of Sheffield: Research Ethics Policy Note no. 6: Research Involving Vulnerable People* - <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/ethicspolicy/policy-notes/vulnerable-people/concept> **A policy note from the University of Sheffield on research involving vulnerable groups**

