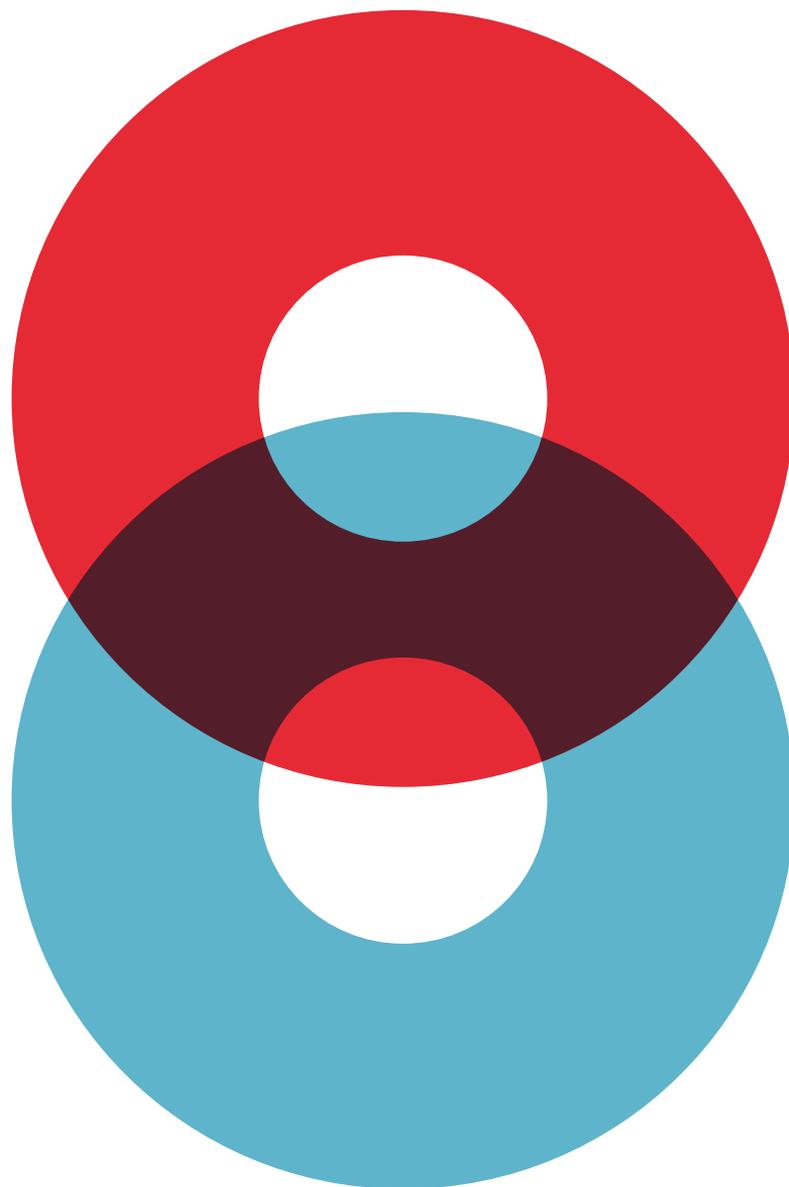


# Improving Evaluation Design



# Our aim

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Evaluation in foundations encompasses a broad range of activities – including performance management, knowledge management, organisational learning, and strategic learning. For ease of reference, the term ‘evaluation’ is used by the Evaluation Roundtable to represent the suite of foundations’ evaluation-related activities.

This paper offers a practical resource for foundation staff in assessing and/or improving their processes for the design stage of commissioning external evaluations. It does not cover all aspects of the evaluation cycle but, drawing on insights from Roundtable discussions to date<sup>1</sup>, it addresses concerns raised by a broad range – in terms of size, type, stage of development and approach to evaluation – of foundations.

In the UK, over the last five years, there has been a significant increase in demand for different types of evaluative activity<sup>2</sup>. How this activity is defined has become increasingly

amorphous. Experiences shared through the Roundtable show that attitudes to, and organisation of, evaluation are different in every foundation, and inextricably bound to broader cultural factors. Discussions about process alone will not answer critical questions about what it means to use evaluation effectively.

**This broader question of what it means to be a learning organisation (covering questions about organisational culture, and the sharing and use of evaluative information) is the planned theme of the 2017 Roundtable.**

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<sup>1</sup> Unattributed quotes from earlier Roundtable reports are presented in italics.

<sup>2</sup> IVAR (2015) *Evaluation in UK Foundations*, IVAR: London.

# Dealing with stress points in evaluation design

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Building on the Roundtable teaching cases, discussions at the September 2015 Roundtable, and conversations with a small group of Roundtable members<sup>3</sup>, we have identified four distinct, but related, stress points in the design stage of commissioning external evaluations that resonate across the full breadth of the Roundtable network:

**1**

**Defining purpose and need**

**2**

**Getting the questions right**

**3**

**Choosing the best approach**

**4**

**Selecting the right evaluator**

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<sup>3</sup> Gina Crane, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation; Bridget McGing, Pears Foundation; Jane Steele, Paul Hamlyn Foundation; Craig Tomlinson, BBC Children in Need.

# Defining purpose and need

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## Background

Our previous research with members of the Roundtable network identified three main purposes for evaluation.<sup>4</sup>

Accountability	Demonstrating impact	Strategic learning
Monitoring whether grantees are doing what they said they would do and that resources are being managed well.	Determining whether a plausible and defensible case can be made that an effort contributed to observed results.	Using evaluation to help organisations or groups learn in real-time and adapt their strategies to the changing circumstances around them.

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## Challenge

Foundations report a tendency to rush the process of evaluation design, resulting in problems down the line with, for example, conflicting objectives, unrealistic expectations,

inadequate resourcing or poor fit – between aspirations and chosen methodologies, or between evaluators and foundations.

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<sup>4</sup> IVAR (2014) *UK Evaluation Roundtable Framing paper*, IVAR: London.

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## Action

The key message here is: make a conscious judgement about the value of an evaluation and the benefits it will deliver. It may be that there are other ways to answer your purpose - or that existing monitoring and reporting and contact with grantees might tell you

what you need to know. If an externally commissioned evaluation is the right approach, taking time and care with pre-evaluation work provides a sound foundation for a successful process.

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### Key areas of focus are:

- 1 What do you want to know?
- 2 How will you - and others - benefit from the results? What are you going to use them for and how?
- 3 Where are you now? What do you know already? What has been done elsewhere?
- 4 Who requires it? Who needs it? Who will own it? Who will make sure the learning is implemented and makes a difference?
- 5 What will it cover/not cover? What is off-limits?
- 6 What resources does it require of you and of others? Is this realistic? If grantees are involved, will they be properly resourced to contribute effectively? What are the benefits to them?
- 7 When must it deliver? What is your timeframe?

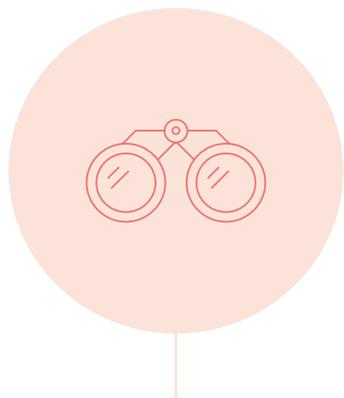
# Getting the questions right

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## Challenge

In evaluation, as elsewhere, form must follow function: in other words, approach needs to be driven by purpose. Any disconnect between the questions foundations want to answer and the methods adopted by their evaluators creates difficulties and

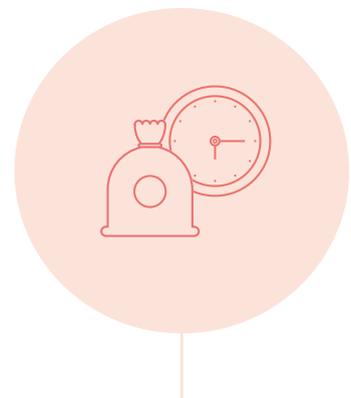
frustration, on both sides. Some of the reasons for poor alignment between evaluation questions and information gathering methodology include:



Insufficient focus - with too many questions and sub-questions, and little clarity about their relative priority and relevance.



Questions do not make sense to, or are not important to, the grantees supplying the data.



Insufficient resources - the time, funds or expertise available do not match the questions asked.

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## Action

Good questions – and a good process more broadly – come from a clear sense of purpose and of your primary audience (e.g. Trustees, staff, policy

makers, other funders, grantees, etc.). It may be helpful to test the development of questions from two different perspectives.

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1

### Do the questions fit what is being evaluated?

#### Are we doing things right?

Some funded work may be more familiar and predictable. In these cases, where there is an anticipated and planned relationship between activities, outputs and outcomes, the overarching question is 'Are we doing things right?' As part of that, attention needs to be paid to:

- What are individual grantees achieving?
- Can anything be said more broadly about the outcomes being achieved?
- What are the barriers to success for grantees?
- What do we need to do differently on the basis of these results?

#### Are we doing the right things?

Other work may be less predictable and more dynamic and emergent. Here, the overarching question is 'Are we doing the right things?' With particular attention paid to:

- How can we understand the problem better?
- What is and is not working now?
- What more could we do to help?
- What other scenarios are possible?

2

### Will the answers speak to our audience(s)?

Although evaluation findings may be of general interest, trustees, staff, grantees, other practitioners, policy makers and other funders will have different interests, needs and priorities. Designing questions for too broad an audience may undermine the coherence and focus of an evaluation, reducing its value as a tool for decision making or action.

# Choosing the right approach

## Challenge

Foundations have talked about the difficulty of choosing the right evaluation approach, especially where they have no dedicated internal resources or history of designing and commissioning external evaluations. 'Formative'? 'Summative'? 'Formative and summative'?

'Developmental'? 'Real-time'? The plethora of terms, some of which have contested meanings, is, at best, confusing and, at worst, daunting. What matters more than the title of an evaluation is a shared understanding about what it will entail and what it will require.

## Action

Once purpose and need are clear - and the right questions are in place - there are number of considerations that foundations can benefit from taking time over.

Some of the factors that may influence the evaluation approach are:

- The type of activities you want to evaluate (grants, direct technical support and advice, increasing reach through advocacy/networks, policy change etc.).
- The time period available for evaluation. Is it fixed or flexible? Short-term or long-term?
- If the evaluation is collaborative (e.g. between more than one funder or between a funder and grantee), how will you establish shared objectives? Where does authority and accountability reside for evaluation oversight and reporting?
- The extent to which you want your grantees to be involved/benefit from the evaluation process and/or findings.
- The extent to which you want beneficiaries to be involved/benefit

from the evaluation process and/or findings.

- The extent to which your grantees and beneficiaries can, as well as want to, be involved?
- The extent to which you want to be involved. How hands on are you willing to be? How much oversight do you want?
- Are you interested in capturing unintended as well as intended outcomes?
- Do you value and give weight to 'informal evidence', gathered unsystematically through visits, conversations and observations?
- What sort of relationship do you want to have with the evaluator? Are they directly involved in convening/training participants, are they a critical friend or are they maintaining a strict academic distance?

Conversations (without prejudice) with evaluators and/or peers with relevant experience can help with your thinking and planning at this stage.

## Evaluation purposes and approaches

Accountability	Demonstrating impact	Strategic learning
<p><b>USED TO</b></p> <p>Track whether plans are being implemented in accordance with grant agreements.</p> <p>Track actual against planned expenditure.</p> <p><b>APPROACH</b></p> <p>Self-reporting by grantees against agreed budgets, work plans and outcomes.</p> <p>Synthesis and presentation of reporting data by grant staff.</p>	<p><b>USED TO</b></p> <p>Understand impact as individual funder.</p> <p>Demonstrate to other stakeholders how funding has made a difference.</p> <p>Develop evidence base for funded work.</p> <p><b>APPROACH</b></p> <p>End of grant/initiative assessment of performance and change.</p> <p>Measurement against planned outcomes.</p> <p>Emphasis on quantitative data.</p> <p>Control groups or testing against benchmarks.</p>	<p><b>USED TO</b></p> <p>Develop greater expertise or knowledge in particular areas, e.g. where involvement will be effective or to find an appropriate niche.</p> <p>Test out a theory of change.</p> <p>Inform future strategy and build on what has gone before.</p> <p>Improve grant making decisions based on understanding of what does and does not work (e.g. when funding new ideas/pilots).</p> <p><b>APPROACH</b></p> <p>Iterative and collaborative process, working alongside foundation staff and grantees.</p> <p>Flexible, mixed evaluation methods, with an emphasis on qualitative data.</p>

# Selecting the right evaluator

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## Challenge

Foundations report making most use of external evaluators for evaluations focused on demonstrating impact or for strategic learning, relying more often on internal resources or grantee reports when the focus is accountability.<sup>5</sup>

The fit between an external evaluator and commissioner is crucial. And it is not simply a matter of reputation or technical skills: *'Appointing the right evaluator is an issue of skills, style, personalities and cost'*.<sup>6</sup>

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## Action

Any appointment is a judgement call - but there are a number of ways to make this judgement as informed as possible:

- Explore how you might use the role of the evaluator, for example *'at the beginning of an initiative ask the evaluators to be involved in thinking about the questions and recruiting projects so they are positioned as part of the programme team'*<sup>7</sup>
  - Set store by word of mouth recommendations; trust your judgement in repeat work. Ask yourself what kind of relationship you will require and assess people accordingly.
  - Think about what matters most to you in relation to the evaluation
- and then appoint someone who is fit for purpose. If your primary audience is policy makers, you may lean towards a prestigious evaluator with sound credentials; if you are most interested in a process of deep reflection, you will need someone who shares your values; if you expect a degree of unpredictability in the process, look for someone with experience of changing tack and being flexible about methods.
- If you want you want your assumptions to be challenged and your thinking to be critiqued, formally and publicly give the evaluator permission to act as a devil's advocate or provocateur.
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How to make this paper a useful and usable resource for foundations will be the focus of discussion at the Roundtable event on 27th April 2016.

<sup>5, 6, 7</sup> Ibid 4.