

**Inaugural UK Evaluation Roundtable  
Proceedings**

## Introduction

The basic intention behind the establishment of the UK Evaluation Roundtable was to support foundations in their efforts to understand and learn from what is and is not working as they try out different options in response to uncertain and shifting economic conditions. We aimed to create a dedicated, safe, facilitated space in which these issues could be raised in order to stimulate learning and start dialogues that might, over time, help to strengthen the field.

The outcomes that we set for ourselves included:

- A better understanding of the theory and practice of evaluation for strategic learning
- Greater confidence in how to design, commission and engage with evaluation
- Generation of practical ideas about how to use evaluation to inform decision-making about strategy
- Better relationships with peers interested and active in this area.

Following the event, feedback from Roundtable participants has been overwhelmingly positive (see page 9), concurring with our experience. For us, it was an invigorating and enlightening event and, having reviewed the wealth of material synthesised for these proceedings, we can see a number of fascinating threads of inquiry. In order to produce a succinct account of the areas covered at the event we have, inevitably, had to edit and be selective with the material. This report covers: the purpose of evaluation; enduring challenges; and action needed to introduce and use evaluation for strategic learning.

These brief proceedings conclude with a summary of the various follow-up activities that we have planned. Some are concerned with extending the dissemination and discussion of the teaching case; others with picking up on some of the trickier points raised in March. We hope to complete this phase of the work by the end of 2014. In January 2015, we will turn our attention to two tasks:

- Preparation for the second Roundtable gathering which we hope will take place in September 2015
- Thinking about how we can further support the development, adoption and utilisation of evaluation for strategic learning.

This process will involve conversations with Roundtable participants and other interested parties. One of the challenges that we will face as we move forward with the Roundtable is making a reality of our aspiration for it to be more than the gathering. In other words, thinking about how we can support and encourage the Roundtable to act as a learning network and a space for honest, supportive and productive peer exchange about how foundations learn about the difference their grant-making makes. One of the resounding messages from participants at the March gathering was that the structure and content of the event freed people up to share and listen in a meaningful way. We want to protect that as well as capitalise on it. This will require a mix of approaches and content – as participants pointed out at the event, individuals and their foundations may be at different points on the strategic learning ‘journey’. So, whilst some might benefit from a paper that unpicks the ‘strategic’ bit of strategic learning, others have an appetite for more material about data utilisation. Going forward, we need to balance shared interests with individual concerns.

The operating environment for foundations and the organisations that they collaborate with and fund continues to be characterised by complexity and change. It is an environment in which it is unclear exactly how to achieve desired results; there is high uncertainty; key stakeholders may disagree about what to do and how to do it; and many factors are interacting in a dynamic way that

can undermine efforts at control. In this context, the apparent success of the Roundtable sends an important signal to other trusts and foundations, as well as philanthropy commentators and advisers – complex situations challenge traditional practices. This places a premium on imagination, collaboration, patience and, above all, a willingness to invest in learning and to see it as integral to both the strategy and the actions of grant makers.

# Evaluation Roundtable proceedings

These notes are based on points raised by participants at the inaugural gathering of the UK Evaluation Roundtable, 25-26 March 2014. The contents are as follows:

- Purpose of evaluation
- Key issues and concerns about the purpose, design and use of evaluation
- Next steps in the adoption and development of evaluation for strategic learning
- Summary feedback from Roundtable participants.

## 1. Purpose of evaluation

At the beginning of day one, participants considered the purpose of evaluation in their foundations. Three broad areas were highlighted (with some specific examples in italics):

### Learning for improvement and change

- *To draw out lessons that help us get better at what we do and how we do it*
- *To become smarter funders*
- *Supporting organisations to reflect on their work and improve their practice (and ours)*
- *To make our work better by feeding lessons back into programme design, and how we work*
- *To learn from what we do in order to be a more effective grant maker*
- *To challenge thinking and get rigour.*

### Demonstrating outcomes and impact

- *What difference we are making (how and why)*
- *What works and what doesn't*
- *To monitor outcomes and assess value for money*
- *To set out to stakeholders, especially trustees, what the Foundation is achieving*
- *To know whether we have made a difference.*

### Sharing and influencing

- *Accumulating evidence for policy/practice influence*
- *Share knowledge and learning*
- *To work out what makes a difference in improving the lives of the most disadvantaged and what lessons this holds for wider systems, policy and society.*

In addition, a small number of people suggested that there may be other drivers behind their foundation's use of evaluation:

- *To leave a lasting legacy that can be attributed to your grant-making*
- *Because other foundations do*
- *To guard against existential angst.*

## 2. Issues and concerns about the purpose, design and use of evaluation

During and after the facilitation of the teaching case on day one, participants discussed and noted a number of issues and concerns about the purpose, design and use of evaluation. Six broad areas were highlighted (questions/ideas raised by participants are in italics). These helpfully set out some of the practical challenges and learning opportunities facing foundation staff as they further develop their use of evaluation. Over time, it's hoped that some of these may be explored in more detail through the Roundtable.

### Rationale for evaluation

- *What makes an evaluation worth it?*
- *Why evaluate? How and who can help answer whether you should proceed up-front?*
- *Why do we have to evaluate everything and can we say no? If so, how?*

### Purpose

- *How do you ensure that evaluation objectives are realistic?*
- *At what point should an evaluation brief be drawn up?*
- *How do you create the 'right' brief and ask the most effective questions of evaluators?*

### Design

- *Importance of making time for meaningful learning and getting the tools right to support that process*
- *What does a true learning programme look like?*
- *How can you build into design a process for using learning to shape what foundations do?*
- *Importance of balancing the need to be clear when commissioning with the ability to adapt and change throughout the evaluation process*
- *What (internal) expertise/capacity do you need in order to effectively tender and co-design evaluations?*
- *How do you know what is a reasonable amount to spend on evaluation?*
- *How do we preserve and include the views and perspectives of staff who may know the work being evaluated well?*
- *Could foundations create a process of independent peer review of evaluation briefs?*

### Evaluators

- *What can be done to drive up the quality of supply (i.e evaluators)?*
- *How do you know where to find the kind of evaluators that you decide that you need?*
- *Is it better to conduct internal programme reviews or commission external organisations?*
- *Importance of establishing relationships with evaluators, beginning at the tender stage and then ongoing contact. What skills or training might foundation staff need for this?*

### Use of evaluation data

- *How can you aggregate different evaluations and evaluation findings to present an overall picture of your foundation's impact?*
- *How can you use the evidence from evaluations to influence practice or policy, and what level of quality of evidence is needed?*

- *What helpful evaluation products can help you speak to different audiences?*
- *What do you need in order to effectively utilise the evaluation results within your own organisation?*
- *How can you manage the unexpected in evaluation and know if and how to change course?*

## Strategic learning

- *How do you construct a strategic evaluation process when the projects being evaluated are incredibly diverse?*
- *What needs to go into the design of an evaluation whose primary purpose is not the assessment of outcomes?*
- *How can you integrate evaluation findings into other staff's work and encourage strategic learning across the organisation?*
- *Importance of building a culture of learning and openness to learning, especially at Board level*
- *How can the strategic learning approach help to counter the trend towards seeing quantitative/cost benefit data as 'better' evidence than qualitative?*
- *How to get trustee buy-in for learning/qualitative evaluations?*
- *How do you successfully communicate evaluation learning with your board to aid future programmes?*

## 3. Next steps in the adoption and development of evaluation for strategic learning

During the morning of day two, participants worked in groups on four key questions arising out of the teaching case and discussions on day one. For each of these, a number of suggestions were made about possible quick wins. More enduring and impenetrable puzzles were also highlighted.

### ENGAGING TRUSTEES

Participants spoke about the difficulty of engaging trustees in strategic learning, feeling that it can be hindered by the fact that the structure of trustee business does not lend itself to a focus on learning, with the 'primary' task of grant-making often leaving little room for strategic or reflective discussions.

A range of actions were suggested to help address this, including:

- Consider whether trustees are recruited with the right skills and motivation for a learning approach: *'Do we recruit trustees who have finished learning and just want to share knowledge?'* And, if necessary, explicitly appoint trustees who are keen to learn.
- Introduce the concept of strategic learning to trustees in a simple and practical way, which highlights its links to existing practice and the range of practical benefits.
- Change the language used when talking about evaluation and programmes with trustees – talk more about *'experimentation'*, *'trying things out'*, *'testing a hypothesis'* to emphasise that it's not necessarily about success and/or failure.
- Try to adapt the structure of trustee meetings and involvement to help them engage and ensure that as much time is spent on learning as grant-making. Use interactive sessions – focus groups, staff presentations – and remove extraneous, time-consuming items from meetings: *'Don't forget that staff have a role to play in managing this better: stop writing papers, instead present something along with questions or talking points to open up space for discussion'*.

- Present or discuss evaluation findings/learning with trustees in a way that helps facilitate a strategic discussion: *'Surface the bad news, list challenges and risks and don't make them look for it'*.
- Clearly explain the trade-offs of any new approach taken (whether to learning in general or specific evaluations/pieces of work): *'Show what they are not supporting by deciding to do 'x' – list and make clear the discounted options'*.
- A final, more radical, suggestion – *'Stop trustees grant-making!'*

## EVALUATION DESIGN

We discussed evaluation design in terms of both developing a strategic learning approach and commissioning individual evaluations. Participants concluded that the main difficulty here was the lack of evaluation frameworks to guide design, the fact that current systems are not necessarily built for learning (including tender processes) and a lack of buy-in to the underlying principle of strategic learning (namely that learning has a 'seat at the strategy table'). We also heard of the challenge of finding the right evaluators for the job.

Overall, participants highlighted the need for individual foundations to unpick *'what strategic learning means for you – and develop a shared understanding of this'*, with some adding that it was important not to get put off by the term *'strategic learning'* but to focus on what it means practically for an organisation. To do this requires being clear about your strategic goals and examining what learning/evaluation can bring to each: *'What data will you need to understand whether your strategy is successful?'*

Some ideas put forward for how to make systems and processes more dynamic and flexible included creating opportunities for feedback from projects – with participants emphasising the need to build on existing practices and embed learning into these.

With regard to finding the 'right' evaluator, some practical suggestions included starting by examining what you need before tendering (or recruiting) – *'Is evaluation always the right thing even? Maybe sometimes you need a critical friend instead'* – and exploring 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'*. Others suggested asking their evaluator to act as a devil's advocate in order to challenge assumptions and critique strategy at an early stage in development.

Finally, participants thought that a register of evaluators would be helpful, though there was uncertainty about how this might need to be categorised in order to be useful e.g. by field; expertise; experience; etc. Some also suggested that there may be useful learning to be gained from bringing together evaluators from across the trust and foundation sector.

## MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS

The challenges of managing relationships were one of the most pressing concerns amongst Roundtable participants. Relationships with trustees; external evaluators; grantees – all require thought, time and careful cultivation in order to be useful and productive.

Participants spoke of the difficulty of building trust in relationships, especially where the power dynamic comes into play, e.g. between an evaluator and client (the funder) or between funder and

grantee. Specifically, there was discussion about the need to foster relationships in which both grants staff and grantees can be more open about 'failure' without fear of blame or loss of funding. To encourage this, one foundation gives staff an award for the 'least successful grant'; another suggested giving grantees a range in terms of targets and outcomes to meet and not worrying about their achievement of these as long as they are reflecting and acting on learning as they go along. Others talked about the importance of cultivating a reputation as a grant maker that makes it clear that honesty is valued. Some participants – finding it hard to manage working in partnership with grantees alongside a grants management role – had used their trustees to play the role of 'bad cop'.

Other suggestions to minimise power differences in relationships included:

- Set aside hierarchies and create programmes around shared objectives which emphasise that everybody brings something to the table.
- Request feedback via an independent third party to create the opportunity for dialogue and interrogation of assumptions/ideas.
- Create a confidential space for an evaluator and grantees to meet without the funder.
- Require grant applications to include building relationships as a more formal part of project planning and then properly resource it.
- Get the 'right' person (evaluator) who shares your values and do it early enough so that they are not entering a pre-existing set of relationships, but can be '*in at the beginning*'.

To foster an environment in which trusting and productive relationships can be developed, participants made a number of suggestions:

- Organise 'start up' days to develop a collective idea of what the evaluation will look like before finalising the design.
- Employ peer reviewers, as used by Paul Hamlyn Foundation, where grantees critique each other's applications without the grant maker involved. (But be aware that, in Hamlyn's experience, it takes time for grantees to feel comfortable about giving constructive criticism.)
- Offer residential or learning network events (with travel expenses paid) – for example the LankellyChase Foundation runs residential which are also supported by an electronic discussion board.
- Create opportunities for sharing using social media – for example, Local Trust uses an online 'basecamp' amongst people supporting grantees to share documents, information and have discussions.

Finally, it was felt it might be helpful to capture the journey of relationships as work progresses. This can be done by video diary, journals, board papers/minutes and provides '*a record of how wisdom and practices have developed*': '*Document the path you take. Knowing that you've done it is important in terms of accountability – being clear about where you started and how it's different to where you end up. It's easy to forget the journey and evolution*'.

## MAKING USE OF DATA

Finally, participants discussed the challenges and opportunities for making the best use of data, both in their individual foundations and in the funding field more generally. Three aspects were key here: building a learning culture; getting the right mix of data; and hiring evaluators.

Participants felt that making best use of data primarily required shifts in the culture of an organisation (and its partners/grantees). This included helping both internal and external



stakeholders to understand evaluation as an ongoing, non-linear process that is *'not just for impact but also for data and learning'*. To do this it would help to:

- Include questions about *'what we've learned and what hasn't gone so well'* into annual reviews. This would be best done *'as a team first where you can break it down into small practical ideas'* in order to build evaluation capacity gradually over time.
- Reframe difficult findings – *'remove the emotive language so you aren't talking about good or bad but just learning'*.
- *'Challenge ourselves more'* – e.g. have staff play the devil's advocate role or use external facilitators.
- Embed data/learning at all levels of an organisation and also understand that *'we are accountable to those who have collected data, therefore we need to inform them what we've done with it'*.

Following this, there is the need to understand what data you require for your purposes as an organisation. Participants identified, first, the importance of being clear about the questions that need to be asked and involving those who will be collecting data in this process (as well as users) – *'ask those who collect what is relevant to them'*. Second, that it is vital to build understanding about the different types of data available and what each means in terms of answering questions. Third, the need to make data work for different groups was highlighted: *'Make it appealing to those who are using the data. Help them engage with it by setting aside time for reflection, for example in meetings or using infographics. Recognise that different audiences will value and respond to different types of data'*.

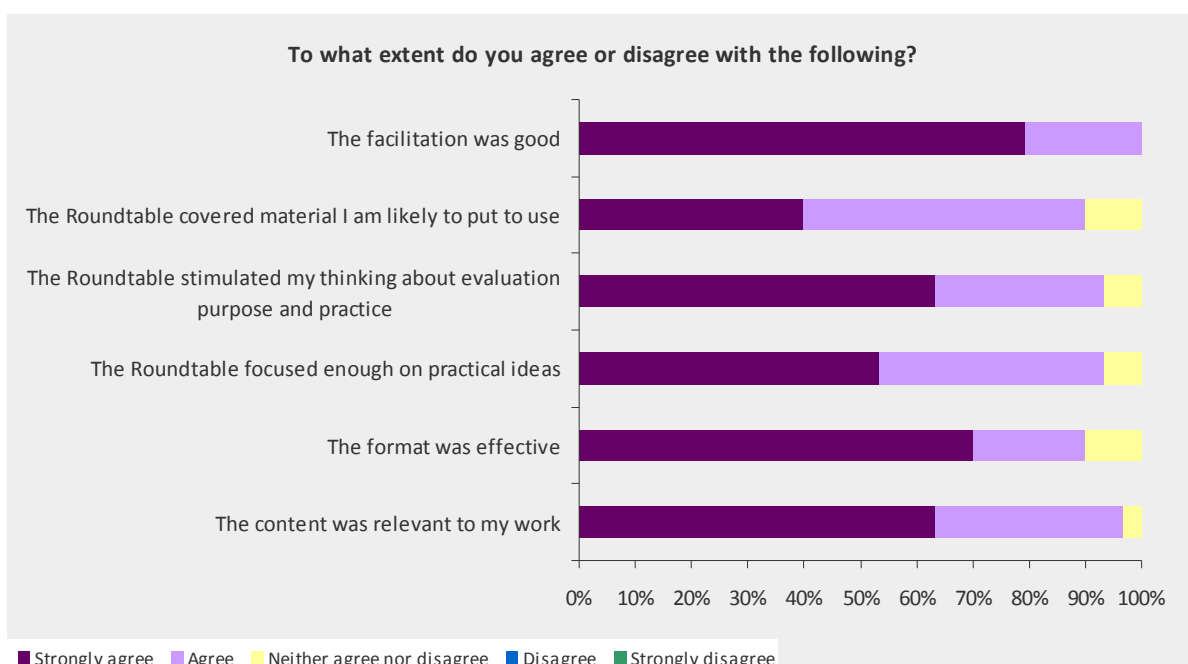
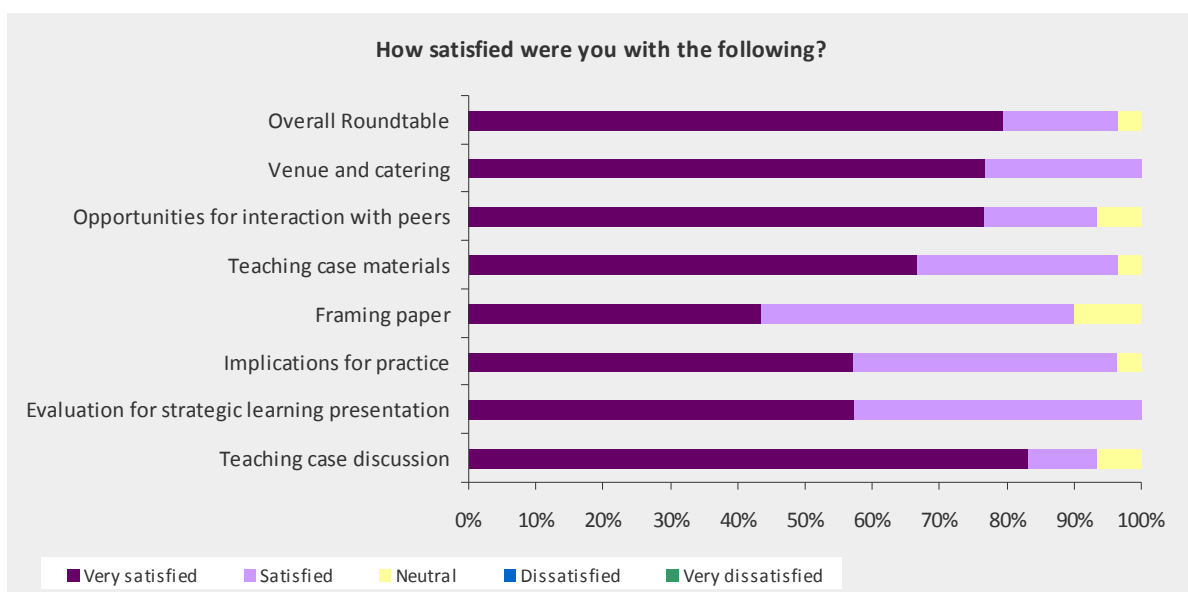
Finally, reflecting points raised in earlier sections, participants felt that there may be a need for an evaluation *'collaborative'* in the trust and foundation sector to help influence the market in terms of supply, innovation and sharing learning: *'It's a shame to grapple in isolation'*.

## Feedback from Roundtable participants

Feedback from 30 participants following the event suggests it was highly valued and thought to occupy a worthy place on the event calendar for trusts and foundations interested in learning. 100% of participants would attend a future Roundtable.

Below we summarise highlights from our feedback survey:

- 97% of attendees thought the Roundtable was relevant to their work and 94% felt it provided opportunities to interact with their peers
- 100% agreed or strongly agreed that the event was well facilitated
- Importantly, 93% felt that the Roundtable had stimulated their thinking about evaluation purpose and practice and 90% said they would use material covered at the event.



Comments regarding what people found useful about the event included:

*“The facilitation from all three leads was outstanding. The case study freed everyone else up to be honest about their own practice, and the critical attention to textual detail really made you think about what was going on. It was unusual to have the opportunity to talk solely about evaluation, and it triggered a lot of thoughts more widely. It was great to hear from so many foundations, and it felt like we were actually influencing each other.”*

*“It served to clarify certain existing ideas about 'evaluation' and to stimulate others about the strategic value of evaluation within a grant-making body.”*

*“The emphasis on learning over impact - much more inclusive of all types and levels of practice and strategies amongst the different foundations in attendance.”*

*“Not just talking about concepts of 'learning' but actually putting them into practice by the way you organized and facilitated the sessions ... coming up, in a relatively short time, with practical ideas, some of which I will start implementing already. Having a dialogue with colleagues with similar preoccupations, and moving away from the 'oh impact measurement is so difficult', avoiding pedantic debates about which measurement methodology is best, but actually having a meaningful dialogue, contributing to a culture shift around M&E that to me is very, very welcome. Liberating!”*

Participants also had some thoughts on how a future Roundtable might be improved. These included views on the format as well as the audience, with suggestions about engaging with trustees and reducing the size of the delegate group. Finally, there was some mention of a need to cover the basics of strategic learning and focus on the practice of evaluation, in recognition of the varying degrees of experience in the room.

## List of participants

**Peter Argall** | Comic Relief  
**Denise Barrows** | Paul Hamlyn Foundation  
**Amanda Beswick** | Oak Foundation  
**Jessica van Bossum** | Porticus UK  
**Caroline Broadhurst** | The Rank Foundation  
**Sioned Churchill** | Trust for London  
**Gina Crane** | Esmée Fairbairn Foundation  
**Julian Corner** | LankellyChase Foundation  
**Jonathan Dunbar** | The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust  
**Amelia Fitzalan-Howard** | The Henry Smith Charity  
**Maureen Grant** | Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust  
**Christopher Graves** | The Tudor Trust  
**Jemma Grieve Combes** | City Bridge Trust  
**Kieron Kirkland** | Nominet Trust  
**Rachel Kyle-Barclay** | Northern Rock Foundation  
**Debbie Ladds** | Local Trust  
**Anne Lane** | The Tudor Trust  
**Matt Little** | The Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust  
**Barbra Mazur** | John Ellerman Foundation  
**Bridget McGing** | Pears Foundation  
**Berni McGlew** | Porticus UK

**John Mulligan** | Esmée Fairbairn Foundation  
**Debbie Pippard** | Barrow Cadbury Trust  
**Michael Pitchford** | Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust  
**Nicola Pollock** | John Ellerman Foundation  
**Nissa Ramsay** | Comic Relief  
**David Sanderson** | The Rank Foundation  
**Matthew Smerdon** | The Legal Education Foundation  
**Jane Steele** | Paul Hamlyn Foundation  
**Nicola Steuer** | Cripplegate Foundation  
**Emma Stone** | Joseph Rowntree Foundation  
**Craig Tomlinson** | BBC Children in Need  
**Dan Vale** | LankellyChase Foundation  
**Tim Wilson** | City Bridge Trust

## Next Steps

In the first instance, we want to focus on two follow-up tasks: discussion of the teaching case and Roundtable materials with other trusts and foundations; and work to address some of the ideas and concerns expressed by Roundtable participants. We hope that this will include:

- June** Workshop with Paul Hamlyn Foundation trustees, staff and advisers on the Learning Away teaching case and implications for future practice
- July** IVAR attendance at the US Evaluation Roundtable in Montreal
- September** Production of an IVAR/Center for Evaluation Innovation discussion note on the 'strategic' aspect of 'strategic learning'  
Circulation of materials from the US Roundtable to UK Roundtable network
- October** Workshop at Association of Charitable Foundations Annual Conference
- November** Workshop for members of London Funders
- January** Beginning of conversations with Roundtable participants about possible focus for September 2015 UK Roundtable.