Evaluating community projects
A practical guide

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These guidelines were initially developed as part of the JRF Neighbourhood Programme. This programme is made up of 20 community or voluntary organisations all wanting to exercise a more strategic influence in their neighbourhood. The guidelines were originally written to help these organisations evaluate their work. They provide step-by-step advice on how to evaluate a community project which will be of interest to a wider audience.

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All about evaluation

What is evaluation?

Put simply, evaluation by members of a project or organisation will help people to learn from their day-to-day work. It can be used by a group of people, or by individuals working alone. It assesses the effectiveness of a piece of work, a project or a programme. It can also highlight whether your project is moving steadily and successfully towards achieving what it set out to do, or whether it is moving in a different direction. You can then celebrate and build on successes as well as learn from what has not worked so well.

Why evaluate?

Although evaluation may seem like an unnecessary additional task if you are already short of time and resources, it can save you both time and resources by keeping participants focused on, and working towards, the ultimate goal of the project. If necessary, it can refocus activity away from unproductive or unnecessary work.

Evaluation can help you to:

- learn from your experience;
- record what you have learnt, and share it with other stakeholders;
- check your progress;
- check whether what you are doing is still what local people want or need;
- identify strengths and weaknesses in your project;
- create a basis for future planning;
- demonstrate whether you have used your resources – time and money – effectively;
- explain to funders, and others involved in your work, what you have achieved and how successful it is.

Key principles of evaluation

Evaluation is most effective when:

- it is a continuous (not just one-off) process informing planning and delivery as the project develops;
- it involves all those with an interest in the project in defining the questions they want answered;
- it uses imaginative and creative approaches, which engage those involved;
- it helps projects to be more accountable to the wider community;
- it is used to challenge discriminatory and oppressive policies and practice, and to overcome inequality and disadvantage;
- it highlights and celebrates successes and achievements;
- it encourages an honest appraisal of progress, so that you can learn from what hasn't worked as well as what has.

How to evaluate: a step-by-step approach

Step 1: Review the situation

Evaluating a project is like taking a journey. First you need to plan your journey – you need to decide where you want to get to; then work out how you are going to get there, and what you need to equip yourself with for the journey; you will also need to look out for the signposts and milestones that will tell you whether you are on the right road and whether you are likely to get there on time.

When starting to evaluate a community project, it is helpful to begin by writing down how you are going to tackle each stage of this journey.

> **Annex A** (pages 8-9) is a table reflecting the range of community empowerment issues being faced by projects in the JRF Neighbourhood Programme. It was produced to help projects think about what they were trying to achieve,
>
> **Annex B** (page 10) is a blank, expanded version of the same table. It can be used by any project, tackling any issue. It provides the framework for your own evaluation process. The best way of using it is to bring together a small group – say project staff, some board or committee members and any other key players – to discuss it and fill it in. It is a way of gathering the views of other people involved in the project, to see if their expectations are similar or different.

To complete Annex B you will need to ask yourself the following questions:

What problems are you trying to solve?

Before you can evaluate your progress, you need to be clear about what you are trying to achieve. Community projects usually want to solve one or more local problem. What are these problems?

What would make change happen?

What needs to change if the problem is to be solved, and why? Think about what might have caused the problem, and what needs to happen to make a difference.

How do you plan to make change happen?

What can you do to solve the problem? Look at your answer to the last question and think about what your project can do. Try to be as precise as possible. Break your broad or long-term goals down into short- and medium-term goals. What actions are you going to take to achieve these goals? What resources will you need?

What results do you want to see?

How will you know when you have achieved your short-, medium- and long-term goals? What will be different about the original problem at the end of the project, if you are successful? Try to be as precise as possible about what you want to achieve. The achievements should all be related to the original problem you wanted to work on.

How can you measure progress?

In order to know whether you are on the right track to achieve your goals and how far you have got, you will need to decide on a few key questions, and collect evidence to answer them. What will tell you whether you are on the right track? What signs, milestones or 'indicators' should you be looking for?

Step 2: Gather evidence for the evaluation

This is a key part of the evaluation process. You need to find evidence to show whether or not you have reached the goals you set yourself in Annex B (be they short-, medium- or long-term).

> **Annex C** (page 11) will help you to plan what information you will need to gather in order to judge the project's progress, and so support decisions about what needs to change.
>
> For each measure of progress (indicator), 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.

Different types of evidence should be collected:

- numbers (for example, the number of people you have reached, the number of people getting work, the number of good stories in the press, changes in crime levels);
- people's opinions, views and experiences (for example, people's stories about their experience on the programme, photos of the area 'before and after', people's views on whether they think they have more power);
- who has benefited and who has not.

Establish a baseline

Be as clear as you can about where you are starting from. If you know where you are starting from, it will be easier to assess the distance you have travelled during the project. What information do you already have? Make sure you have collected together in a central file material that will be useful to you later.

Relevant paperwork for creating a baseline might include: the programme proposal, past research reports and any statistical data you have on the area, press reports and, if relevant, minutes of key preliminary meetings.

Set up systems to gather data on a regular basis

Clarify what information you will require to help you to answer or explore the questions set out in Step 1. Think about the records you will be collecting anyway as part of your project management that will provide some of the information you need.

Relevant paperwork that should be gathered on a regular basis might include: action plans and work programmes, minutes of meetings, reviews and reports, and records of attendance at groups and events.

Decide what additional information you will gather specifically for the evaluation, and how you will gather it

The following menu lists ways of gathering information. You should choose two or three methods in order to get a rounded picture. Also, different ways of gathering information will suit different projects. Which you choose to use, and how much time you spend gathering data, should by tailored to the capacity of your organisation.

Ways of gathering additional information: a menu

- ***A questionnaire survey***

A questionnaire survey can be used to find out more about the views and experiences of users, the wider community, agencies, etc. Use tick-boxes or questions that can be answered with a yes or no if you want to survey a lot of people, or ask a lot of questions. Questions that allow people to say more than just yes or no will give you more detailed information, but they take longer to fill in, a lot more time to analyse, and fewer people will fill them in. Responses to questionnaires are often low so think about offering a prize.

- ***In-depth interviews***

It is usually best to limit the number of in-depth interviews to those people whose involvement with the project gives them particular insights or valuable experience – but try to talk to a range of people who are likely to have different perspectives and views on your project.

- ***Feedback forms***

You can find out whether people have found your training and other events useful by asking them to fill in a short form. Ask them, for example, what they found most and least useful; what they might do differently as a result; what could be improved.

- ***Focus groups and round tables***

A 'focus group' gathers together about half a dozen people who are broadly similar (for example, they are all single parents with young children) to discuss themes or questions you want to address in the evaluation. A 'round table' discussion is a similar idea, which brings together people with different perspectives (for example, teenage parents, teachers, health visitors).

- ***Diaries***

Ask key people to keep diaries of their involvement with the project.

- ***Press reports***

Gather and review press reports on the area (for example, you could see whether positive reports about the area are increasing).

- ***Observation***

Take photographs of your area over time, to see if you can observe any changes. Observe who contributes to meetings or comes to your centre, and see whether this changes over time. This will give you an idea of which types of people you are reaching (men, women, younger, older) and which of these types of people are playing a more confident role in the project.

- ***Case studies***

In order to make the evaluation manageable, you might want to pick a few pieces of work (case studies) to explore in detail, rather than trying to explore everything. Pick pieces of work that illustrate your main objectives.

- ***Evaluation workshops and review meetings***

Hold special workshops/review meetings of people who are involved in your project and use pictures, photographs or models, as well as the spoken word, to get feedback from participants.

Step 3: Analyse the evidence

You will now have gathered together quite a lot of information. Working out what it is telling you is the next stage. Does the information you have gathered show that you have reached your goals? Does it highlight any achievements? Does it show up any problem issues that need to be tackled? Be alert to unexpected outcomes, both desirable and undesirable.

For example, evidence of good community cohesion might be that events have been organised which draw together people from across the community or groups who were previously in conflict. Other evidence of community cohesion might be recording stories of how conflicts have been resolved, or the views of formerly distant groups now working as partners. The views of different people involved in, or affected by, the project (including those taking part and service users) can often be as important as numbers in providing evidence of change.

Don't collect too much information or you will be overwhelmed when you come to pull it together and write up your notes. Allow plenty of time to pull the information together. Even if only one or two people initially do the work, it is worth feeding the initial findings back to a wider group of stakeholders to add their insights.

Step 4: Make use of what you have found out

If there are goals or objectives you have not met, or if you haven't got as far as you had hoped, you need to think about why, and what you can learn from that. There could be a variety of explanations. Here are a few ideas to consider:

Problems with external circumstances

- The environment in which you are working has changed or worked against you (for example, local or national policies have changed, or a major employer has closed down).

Problems with carrying out your plans

- You have departed from your original aims.
- You didn't allow enough time or resources.
- Changes in your organisation have meant that you have not been able to do what you said you would do (for example, a key worker left).
- The quality of performance of your organisation has been lower than expected (for example, workers or members have not completed tasks they said they would do).

Problems with the ideas behind what you want to achieve

- The plans you came up with initially to make things happen have not been successful.
- Your original aims were inappropriate (perhaps they turned out to be not what people wanted).
- Different people involved in the project were working against each other and towards different goals.

Step 5: Share your findings with others

Sharing your findings with others is important because it can help other people in the project, or associated with it, to recognise any problems or issues that are preventing the project from making progress. It can help everyone to learn from any mistakes that have been made, or pick up on any successful ideas that have been put into action. Remember that sharing findings can provide an opportunity to celebrate success as much as to learn from difficulties.

- Think about who you are sharing your findings with, and how best to communicate with them.
- Is there going to be a written report and/or other ways of reporting the findings of the evaluation? Try to ensure that any report uses clear, plain language, and follows a logical order.
- Will you need to report the findings to different audiences using different formats? It may be necessary to produce both a comprehensive report of the evaluation exercise and a much briefer report or summary of key findings.
- How will you ensure that the findings inform practical changes in your project's work plan? For example, you could hold a special meeting or workshop for those involved in the project at which you both feed back key findings and also collectively consider future action plans in the light of these findings.

JRF Neighbourhood Programme

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation Neighbourhood Programme offers a range of 'light touch' support to 20 groups and projects in England, Scotland and Wales.

These resources include: access to facilitation support from a team of regionally based facilitators; access to small amounts of credit; national and regional networking opportunities; a website; brokerage; the opportunity to share effective practice and learning more widely.

The programme includes cross-cutting studies on funding, community involvement, diversity and community cohesion, and changing relationships with power holders. Evaluation of the programme was built in from the start and has been carried out by Marilyn Taylor and Derrick Purdue (UWE) and Mandy Wilson and Pete Wilde (COGS). This document, and a summary based on the Interim Evaluation of the Neighbourhood Programme, 'Lending a hand', are both available from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation website (www.jrf.org.uk).

About the authors

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Annex A Reviewing the situation (step 1) – example

What problems are you trying to solve?	What would make change happen? (Rationale)	How do you plan to make change happen? (Aims and Objectives)	What results do you want to see? (Outcomes)
Analysis No one has analysed local problems and assets Lack of direction – activity tends to be reactive rather than proactive	Consultation is needed with local communities to identify their needs and plan action	Profile community needs and assets Draw up an action plan with short- and medium-term objectives to guide work	A plan of action that local communities feel a part of
Engagement People are not engaged, little activity is going on locally to tackle problems	Community development is needed to encourage people to engage with the project	Set up community development and outreach projects Develop a strategy to communicate with people and tell people what the project is all about	Local communities are engaged in a variety of activities and tackling local problems
Capacity Lack of leadership; lack of organisational ability; low level of skills; low level of resources	Sustainable leadership and organisational ability are needed to plan and co-ordinate action and raise funds	Provide opportunities to develop: • leaders and organisations • management skills • team building and accountability • fundraising skills	Effective and sustainable organisations and accountable leadership Sustainable funding and assets
Cohesion The community is divided and fragmented	Common ground, mutual respect and understanding between communities and individuals	Develop negotiating, mediation and conflict resolution skills Hold events and meetings to bring different groups together	Local communities acting effectively together

What problems are you trying to solve?	What would make change happen? (Rationale)	How do you plan to make change happen? (Aims and Objectives)	What results do you want to see? (Outcomes)
Power and influence Those who have power ignore the needs of the community; policy is not geared to local need and the community is not involved in decision making	People in power need a greater understanding of the needs of the community and the skills to communicate effectively with local people Confidence and community-owned assets, rather than local authority-owned assets, can give the community greater power	Develop political, promotional and negotiating skills Develop greater understanding and rapport with statutory bodies and other partners Capacity building with statutory bodies and other partners so that they engage more effectively with communities Develop the skills and resources to build up community-owned assets and services	Be taken seriously by power holders; work more effectively with them; make changes in policy and practice Effective management of community assets and services

Annex B Reviewing the situation (Step 1) – a record sheet for projects

What problems are you trying to solve?	What would make change happen? (Rationale)	How do you plan to make change happen? (Aims and Objectives)	What results do you want to see? (Outcomes)	How can you measure progress? (Indicators)

Annex C Evaluation planning table

Indicators	What information do you already have?	What additional information will you need?	What methods will you use to gather the additional information?	Who will take responsibility for gathering this information?	When do they need to do it by?

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