An Roinn Leanaí
agus Gnóthaí Óige
**Department of Children
and Youth Affairs**

Evaluating Government-Funded Human Services

Evidence into Policy Guidance Note #3

**Prepared by the Department of
Children and Youth Affairs**
dcya.gov.ie

Research & Evaluation Unit

Purpose of the Evidence into Policy Guidance Notes

The Evidence into Policy Guidance Notes are a series of guidance notes introduced through the Research and Evaluation Unit's Evidence into Policy Programme (EiPP), a dedicated resource to support and work with DCYA policy units in driving the research-to-policy cycle. These guidance notes provide advice and information on key stages of the research to policy process, in support of evidence-informed policy making.

This guidance note is intended as a resource for those commissioning or interpreting evaluations of government-funded human services. It introduces the role of evaluation in government-funded human services, under the following headings:

1. What is Evaluation?
2. Evaluation in the Programme 'Life Cycle'
3. Designing the Evaluation: Key Considerations
4. Evaluating 'Human Services'

Key Messages

➤ Evaluations are a robust and rigorous investigation of a programme to determine its efficiency and/or effectiveness. They are used to assess how a programme has been implemented and what outcomes or impacts it may be delivering.

➤ A well-designed evaluation helps policymakers understand what programme elements work, and what may need to be improved.

➤ A commonly-used framework for evaluations is a 'logic model', which outlines the steps involved in delivering a programme from rationale through to programme outcomes and impacts.

➤ An evaluation starts with a list of basic questions that provide focus and direction. Clearly defined evaluation questions determine the choice of evaluation approach.

➤ Evaluation approaches include process evaluations, outcome/impact evaluations and 'programme theory' evaluations.

➤ 'Human services' commit to improving the overall quality of life of service populations. They are delivered by people (staff), to people (service users). Human services are a common feature of programmes funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)

➤ Evaluating 'human services' can be challenging, due to the complexity of human contexts and behaviours. However, careful consideration of evaluation methodologies can help address these challenges.

1. What is Evaluation?

As outlined in Guidance Note #1, one of the purposes of policy research is to generate new knowledge and insights that may confirm or change our understanding of a policy 'problem'. Research can help avoid or correct errors, anticipate unintended consequences and potentially reduce economic and social costs in policy formulation and implementation. Public policy evaluation shares many of these goals. It is research with an evaluative purpose.

Evaluations focus on the implementation or impact of a programme based on merit and worth. This is achieved through a systematic and robust investigation that draws on a variety of reliable social scientific methods[1]. The results of a 'good' evaluation can inform policymakers about what does and doesn't work, how things may be improved, and if a programme represents value for money. As noted in the Magenta Book (HM Treasury, 2011):

> "Evaluation is an objective process of understanding how a policy or other intervention was implemented, what effects it had, for whom, how and why"

As outlined in Figure 1 below, evaluations help build the information and knowledge base about a programme, so as to improve decision-making around programme performance. This can in turn help deliver better quality interventions, build institutional capacity, while also delivering greater accountability for public spending.

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[1] See the Better Evaluation website here for resources, information and blogs relating to the evaluation process.

Figure 1: Reasons for conducting an evaluation[2]
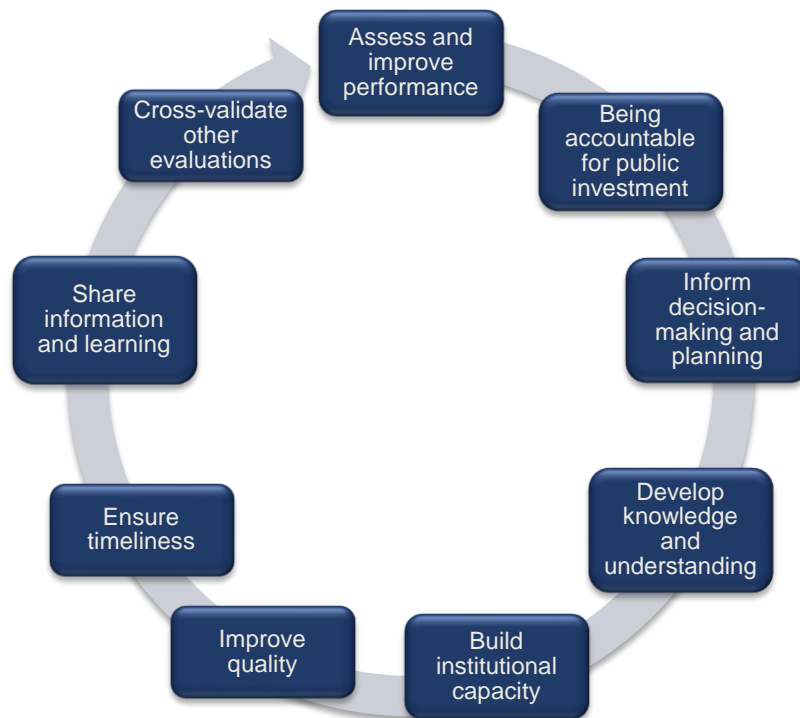
2. Evaluation in the Programme Life Cycle

According to the *Public Spending Code*, the document which sets out the standard rules and procedures for public spending, government-funded programmes may be categorised under four 'life cycle' stages:

1. Appraisal[3]
2. Planning/Design
3. Implementation
4. Post-Implementation Review.

As described in Figure 2, dedicated 'formative' evaluations help inform the planning/design process, by assessing the need for a programme, and/or a range of programme options based on defined value for money criteria. 'Summative' evaluations may be conducted across the implementation and post-implementation review stages.

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[2] Figure 1 was developed under the Goal Evaluation Training Programme, based on a range of sources, e.g. The Magenta Book (see above), Better Evaluation resources, the US-based W.K. Kellogg Foundation Step by Step Guide to Evaluation.
[3] Note: The Public Spending Code refers to 'ex-ante' appraisals, recommended prior to planning/design phases. Appraisal methods recommended in the Code include Multi-Criteria Analyses (where expenditure is between €5m and €20m) and Cost-Benefit Analyses (where expenditure is over €20m).

Evaluations conducted while a programme is being established, or has been newly established, assess whether it is being implemented as intended. Evaluating programme implementation can help decision-making around performance improvements in the early stages, thereby avoiding inefficiencies as the programme matures.

Figure 2: Formative and Summative Evaluations
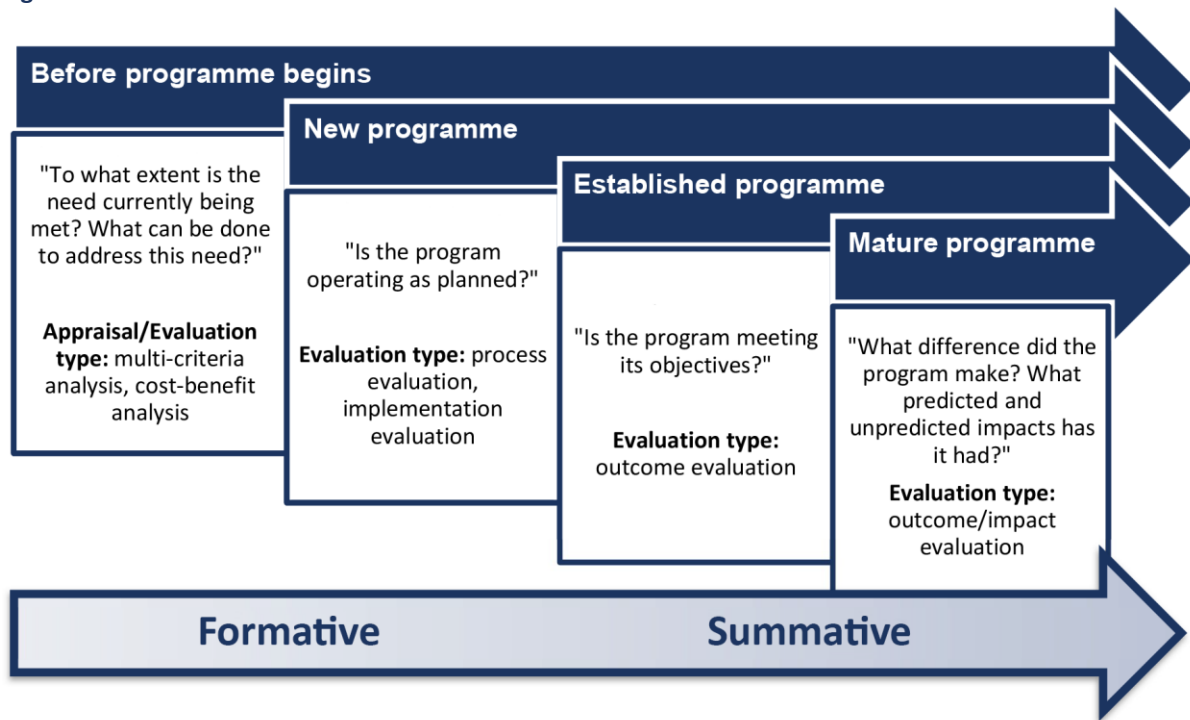
For more established programmes, 'summative' evaluations focus on administrative efficiency, policy relevance and programme effectiveness. Evaluations of effectiveness may focus on programme outcomes, based on short and/or medium-term changes to a target population. For longer-term programmes (e.g. over 5 years) an evaluation may also assess impacts on the wider community. Outcome and impact evaluations examine whether any changes to the target population may be attributable to specific programmes[4].

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[4] See, for example "The Green Book- Central Government Guidance on Appraisal and Evaluation", HM Treasury, 2018. Available here.

3. Designing the Evaluation: Key Considerations

From the outset, it is important to consider the following, which will determine your evaluation scope:

- Evaluation team resources and capacity (including expertise)
- Budget of the programme being evaluated[5]
- Project timelines
- Nature and scale of the programme

Another key design consideration is the evaluation audience. There may be a wide range of stakeholders who will be interested in the evaluation project. The audience may include policymakers, programme managers, front line staff and beneficiaries. While the composition of the audience may influence how results are presented, the results themselves should be free from stakeholder bias.

While every evaluation will be different, there are a number of steps which can help clarify the appropriate design for your project. These include:

- Developing an Evaluation Framework
- Agreeing your evaluation questions
- Deciding on your evaluation approach
- Considering what data is available

Based on these, it will be possible to consider your evaluation approach and methods.
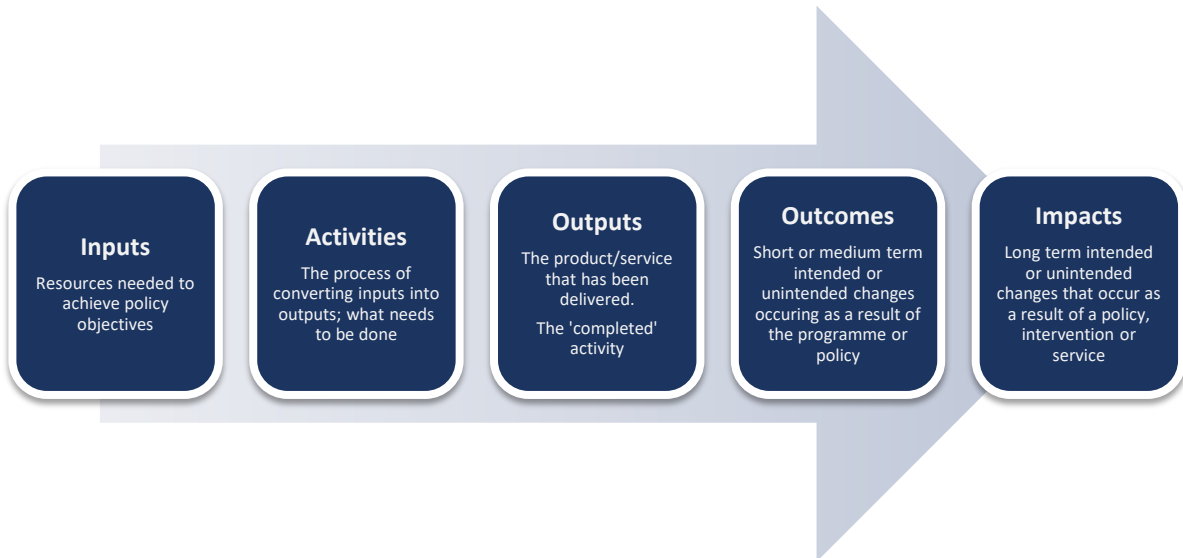
Developing an Evaluation Framework

It may be difficult for policymakers to adequately track and evaluate programme delivery from Department to end-user levels. This is especially true where there are multiple layers of governance. A logic model can provide a useful conceptual map to describe the relationships between the components of programme delivery, from rationale through to outcomes. Logic models are often used in evaluations, to provide a step-by-step structure for how a programme might be achieving its

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[5] As noted on BetterEvaluation.org: "Organizations often use a "rule of thumb" to specify considerations in making a budget estimate. Common budget estimates range between 5 – 20% of program costs". The purpose and scope of the evaluation will need to be considered when deciding on the evaluation budget. For more information, see here.

objectives[6]. The specific format of a logic model will depend on the evaluation purpose, as well as the individual programme structure. The following is a commonly used logic model template:

Figure 3: Programme Logic Model Template[7]

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Outcomes	Impacts
Resources needed to achieve policy objectives	The process of converting inputs into outputs; what needs to be done	The product/service that has been delivered. The 'completed' activity	Short or medium term intended or unintended changes occuring as a result of the programme or policy	Long term intended or unintended changes that occur as a result of a policy, intervention or service

A logic model can help clarify what a programme is meant to do, and how. Logic models provide a useful launch point for evaluation projects, by helping to establish clear programme objectives that are understood by all stakeholders. However, care should be taken to avoid presenting an overly simplified picture of programme implementation[8]. This may be addressed by ensuring the involvement of all relevant stakeholders in model development, and by potentially developing multiple logic models for more complex programmes.

What are your evaluation questions?

Defining your evaluation questions is an important first step in an evaluation project. Some common evaluation questions include:

- Does the programme have a clearly defined rationale? (and is this rationale still relevant?)
- Is the programme achieving its objectives?
- Was the programme delivered as intended?

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[6] "The Magenta Book: Guidance for Evaluation." HM Treasury, 2011. Available here
[7] See the US-based WK Kellogg Foundation's logic model guide for additional information
[8] See: https://fyi.extension.wisc.edu/programdevelopment/files/2016/03/lmcourseall.pdf

- Does it represent value for money?

- What impact(s) has the programme delivered?

- Has the programme been responsible for any unintended consequences?

Clearly defined evaluation questions help determine your evaluation approach.

What is your evaluation approach?

There are many ways to approach an evaluation. It is helpful to describe three main evaluation approaches: process evaluations; outcome/impact evaluations, and programme theory evaluations. An evaluation may require elements from more than one approach.

Process Evaluations – to assess how a programme was implemented, by examining administrative processes, systems and governance structures. The primary reason for undertaking a process evaluation is to determine whether a programme is being delivered as intended[9].

Outcome and Impact Evaluations – to examine the extent to which an intervention is achieving its intended objectives. Outcomes are measurable changes in the target population that may be attributed to a programme intervention[10]. Longer-term outcomes may also be referred to as impacts. Impact evaluations can include assessments of changes to the wider community or society[11]. Outcome and impact evaluations examine how an intervention has contributed to these outcomes/impacts.

Programme Theory Evaluations - to investigate programme outcomes/impacts, but also how and why these outcomes/impacts occurred[12]. This approach is often used where traditional outcome/impact evaluation approaches are not feasible. This may occur where a programme is operating in complicated social contexts, where there are a range of competing factors affecting population outcomes. Programme theory

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[9] See, "The Green Book- Central Government Guidance on Appraisal and Evaluation", HM Treasury, 2018, page 52. Available here.

[10] See, for example, "An Evaluation of the Back to Education Allowance." Kelly, McGuinness & Walsh, ERSI, 2015, Available here. See also, "The evaluation of DEIS: monitoring achievement and attitudes among urban primary school pupils from 2007 to 2016." Kavanagh, L., Weir, S. and Moran, E., Educational Research Centre, 2017. Available here.

[11] See: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, (Undated), 'Outline of Principles of Impact Evaluation'. Available here.

[12] The 'Better evaluation' website provides additional information on the development of programme theory evaluations. Available here.

evaluation approaches begin with the development of a logic model and/or a theory of how a programme brings about change. This model, or theory, is then tested using qualitative and quantitative methods. The contexts within which a programme is delivered are openly acknowledged and factored into outcome/impact assessments.

The Importance of Data

Some evaluations require a wide range of data in order to generate meaningful insights, or to enable statistical analyses. The amount of data required will depend on the evaluation questions, approaches and methods, as well as on programme scale. In practice, the evaluation may have to be designed in a way that takes account of data limitations.

Data may or may not be readily available. Before beginning an evaluation, it is important to consider what is currently available (and accessible), what other existing data you may need to access (and how long this might take), and what new data you may be able to collect. Existing data often includes routine monitoring data and/or financial and administrative records. Good quality data that has been collected for routine monitoring and administrative purposes can greatly assist in the evaluation process, helping to produce more robust evaluation results. Conversely, poor monitoring and administrative data can make the evaluation process more difficult, leading to time delays and increased evaluation costs. It may be noted that an evaluation of programme outcomes can be integrated from the very beginning of the programme life cycle, by building in appropriate data collection instruments at the planning and design stage.

The form that any new data collection takes will depend on your evaluation approach and methods. Some common data collection tools include survey questionnaires, one-to-one interviews and focus groups[13].

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[13] "The Green Book: Central Government Guidance on Appraisal and Evaluation." HM Treasury, 2018. Available here.

4. Evaluating 'Human Services'

'Human services' have been defined by the US-based 'National Organization for Human Services' as:

> "meeting human needs through an interdisciplinary knowledge base, focusing on prevention as well as remediation of problems, and maintaining a commitment to improving the overall quality of life of service populations".

Human services are delivered across the Irish civil and public sector and are a common feature of programmes funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA). Evaluating how a programme might improve citizen well-being may at times be complicated by people's personal contexts. Likewise, service delivery by staff introduces interpersonal and organisational dimensions that may influence the experience of a programme by beneficiaries. In addition, government-funded human services in Ireland are often implemented in communities where complementary or competing interventions have been provided over a number of years. For children and young people this may include education, child & family services, and health service interventions delivered by a mix of publicly-funded and not-for-profit organisations. As a result, measurable changes to beneficiary well-being may be difficult to attribute to a single intervention.

Evaluating the Outcomes/Impacts of 'Human Services'

The approaches and methods adopted for human services outcome/impact evaluations should take reliability and feasibility into account, based on programme context. Methodologies employed may be experimental, quasi-experimental, or non-experimental[14]. These methodologies can account for complexity in human services with varying degrees of success. It may also be possible to cross-check results from an evaluation (or evaluations) based on two or more evaluation approaches and methods, to help strengthen reliability.

In terms of experimental methods, randomisation of 'treatment' and 'control' groups within a randomised control trial can usefully isolate the effects of a single

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[14] For more detail on evaluation methods see "The Magenta Book: Guidance for evaluation." UK Treasury, 2011. Available here

intervention. However, this approach may be costly and raise ethical concerns (e.g. delivering a beneficial intervention to some children, but not others). Where randomisation is not feasible, quasi-experimental studies of comparison groups can help assess the effects of an intervention, albeit with less certainty than through randomisation. Non-experimental approaches can provide weaker evidence for an intervention's effects based on, for example, a study of correlations between target and non-target populations, set against a defined range of naturally occurring variables.

Alternatively, it may be appropriate to consider a Programme Theory approach (see Section 3 above) which explores the how's and why's of measured effects on target populations. A Programme Theory approach will account for co-contributions to outcomes/impacts by other factors within the programme context. Common methods used in Programme Theory evaluations include 'realist'[15] evaluations and 'contribution analysis'[16].

A Note on Evaluation Challenges and Solutions

In conducting or commissioning a programme evaluation, due consideration must be given to the challenges that may occur during the project. Challenges may arise at the planning stages, during the evaluation, or in the post-evaluation period. In Autumn 2019, the Research and Evaluation Unit of the DCYA will publish a Guidance Note focusing on challenges commonly faced when conducting evaluations, along with a range of suggested solutions.

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[15] For more information on realist evaluations, see: Pawson, R., Tilley, N. (2004). Realist Evaluation. Available here.

[16] For more information on contribution analysis, see: Mayne, J. (2008). Contribution Analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect, ILAC methodological brief. Available here.

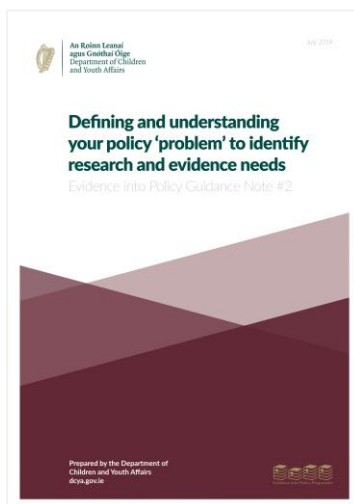**Evidence into Policy Guidance Notes**

EiPP Guidance Note #1

The Need For Research

Publication Date
January 2019

EiPP Guidance Note #2

Defining and understanding your policy 'problem' to identify research and evidence needs

Publication Date
July 2019

Would you like more information? Would you like to register your interest in participating in our next 2-day Evaluation Training Programme?

If so, please contact the REU Evaluations team on dcyaresearch@dcya.gov.ie, or phone Ruadhán Branigan (01 6473196) or Ciarán Madden (01 6473123).