Research notes

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The
Countryside
Agency

Diversity Review evaluation framework and toolkit

Summary

The Rural White Paper, *Our countryside: the future* (2000) committed Government to a review of the diversity of countryside visitors. The Countryside Agency commissioned scoping research (CRN 75 February 2004), which found a lack of evidence of the type, level and amount of countryside access by under represented groups, plus a lack of evidence of the benefits of countryside access. The review has addressed these evidence gaps with national research aimed at answering key questions about both visitor diversity and perceptions, plus provider awareness of the needs of under represented groups. Action research projects are testing ways of generating a sustained increase in visitor diversity.

The evaluation gap has been addressed through the development of a framework and toolkit. This research note reports on these, addressing the need for guidance for project and programme managers within the countryside recreation sector, and related sectors such as forestry.

The evaluation framework draws out the variety of approaches to evaluation that are available. Systematic monitoring and evaluation is being applied to all elements of the Diversity Review. At project level, the 'critical friend' approach has been applied. The practical implementation of monitoring and evaluation at project level is covered by the toolkit.

Main findings

Methodology for the research

The purpose of the research was to develop a framework for monitoring and evaluation based on best practice. An initial literature review assessed the variety of materials on monitoring and evaluation that are currently available. The most appropriate methods of evaluation for the sector are included in the framework.

The framework is designed to be practical and workable within a sector largely inexperienced in evaluation methods, with two projects providing illustration:

- Mosaic Project, which explored the development of relationships between black and minority ethnic groups and National Parks; and
- Chopwell Wood Pilot Health Project, which is exploring activities within the woodland sector with the aim of assessing the impact of walking in woods and forests to improve mental and physical health.

Working for people and places in rural England

The types of evaluation used by these two projects highlight the strengths and weaknesses of particular evaluative approaches. Other worked examples of evaluation are also included in the framework.

Two consultation seminars during the course of the research enabled a variety of agencies to be involved in the development of the evaluation framework. The need for very practical guidance was stressed – as project managers often lack the tools to carry out evaluative activities – which led to the development of the toolkit. It describes monitoring and evaluation in practical terms at project level and introduces tools for self-evaluation.

The framework contains generic material on evaluating programmes, services and projects, whatever their focus, though it was developed with projects and programmes working with under-represented and socially excluded groups as their users and participants in mind. Any organisation engaged in increasing countryside access and recreation should be able to use the material. It should be especially helpful for commissioning bodies distributing grants and funding programmes or engaged in policy development.

The purpose of evaluation

Evaluation takes place at project, programme and policy levels. It is important because it enables judgements to be made regarding the effectiveness of specific projects and services, programmes and policy initiatives. Evaluation can:

- inform policy formulation and interventions through the provision of evidence of what works;
- support the public scrutiny of value for money;
- allow managers of programmes and projects to reflect objectively on what is working well, and what could be improved; and
- provide valuable information on the impact on participants' quality of life.
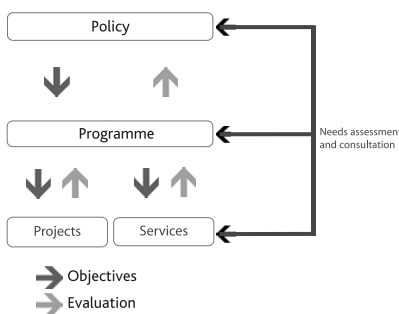
Evaluation adds value through the assessment of current or past experience and, when done well, is a learning and development tool.

Good evaluation is made easier and more effective if monitoring is built into project management. Monitoring involves collection of data on outputs as a continuous and systematic process.
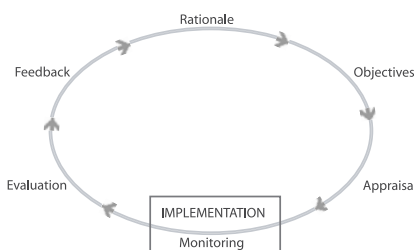
Policy driven evaluation

In the policy context, evaluation can be viewed as a set of structured objectives passing down the chain from policy, to programme to service/project level. These are then evaluated and fed back up to the policy level. This means that the imperative for evaluation is reflected at every level of activity within the commissioning process. Key to effective evaluation is the setting of clear objectives (SMART) at each level. Evaluation is the assessment of whether the objectives have been met – or not – and the story behind their achievement.

The importance of the Rationale, Objectives, Appraisal, Monitoring, Evaluation, Feedback cycle (ROAMEF)

Policy makers emphasize the need to provide evidence of whether activities are achieving their aims and objectives. The Rationale, Objectives, Appraisal, Monitoring, Evaluation, Feedback (ROAMEF) cycle has been promoted by government departments to ensure there is a robust evaluation process.

The ROAMEF cycle stages allow for feedback from the projects to the programme managers, and then to policy makers. It is the favoured approach for gaining and structuring feedback from evaluations to government departments.

Evidence-based policy making

The ROAMEF cycle

Programme level evaluations

Programme level evaluation collects together information on individual projects to give an overall assessment of progress towards the aims of the programme. It also allows the commissioning body to reflect on its own performance, and that of its programme managers. Determining the value of a programme involves review of all the factors involved, including the resources used, the benefits to projects and participants during the programme, as well as the longer-term benefits

Programme level evaluations ensure there is sufficient public scrutiny of publicly funded activity. Commissioning bodies need to have a set of key evaluation principles at this level, to which they adhere. These include:

- independence – evaluation by a team external to the programme:
- understanding of the policy context – at the outset of the programme and as it may have changed over time;
- engaging with key players.

Project level evaluations

At project level, managers need to collect input, output and outcome data, with commissioning bodies providing guidance and materials on how to do this. The toolkit is an example of such guidance. Projects with a concern for equality and diversity should always collect data on the personal characteristics of their participants, including gender, ethnicity, age, postcode and disability status. It is vital to record the situation at the beginning of a project – usually referred to as the 'baseline' – as without this information it will not be impossible to be precise about what projects have or haven't achieved.

As well as providing information to funders, project managers can get very useful feedback on the efficiency and effectiveness of their use of resources, their activities and their staff's performance through evaluation. This allows project managers to take corrective action where projects are not reaching their objectives or their target participants.

Information for the evaluation must always be collected in a sensitive way. Using methods that are appropriate and accessible for participants will ensure that impacts on participants lives and their learning experiences are captured. The wheel of participation categorises four approaches. Each approach has its merits, and each project can utilise a mixture of these.

Evaluation methods and timing

There are various types of evaluation method available. The choice of method should be based upon:

- the information required by commissioning bodies, funders and organisations hosting projects;
- the needs of project managers;
- the needs of project participants; and
- the resources available.

The timing of the evaluation is also important. 'Pre-project' appraisal takes place before the start of activities. Evaluation part way through a project is 'mid-term' or 'formative'. Evaluation at the conclusion is called 'final' or 'summative' evaluation.

There is value in also commissioning evaluation one, two or more years following the conclusion of a project in order to assess the longer-term impact.

Sources and references

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Internal or external evaluation (or both!)

Commissioning bodies should decide whether they want projects they fund to self-evaluate, or whether they commission external evaluation, or a mix of both. If external evaluation is required, the commissioning body should ensure there are sufficient resources for this.

External or independent evaluation ensures a dispassionate scrutiny of activities, and provides feedback to commissioning bodies on efficiency, effectiveness, economy and equity.

Self-evaluation is when the project staff and participants carry out their own evaluative activities. Self-evaluation can be effective because project staff know the project aims and objectives well, and have the trust of participants. However, it does not provide independent scrutiny.

A 'critical friend' approach, where a quasi-independent evaluator is involved with a project, is being increasingly used to advise on setting objectives, monitoring against them, and supporting data collection and analysis.

Types of data

Understanding the baseline situation is essential, as without this understanding it is hard to assess progress. Therefore, processes to measure the baseline must always be put in place before a project starts. Quantitative data is always required to evaluate how much activity has been carried out, or the outputs of the programme. Qualitative data may indicate how well an activity has been carried out, as well as revealing the values and meanings of those involved. Both quantitative and qualitative evaluative techniques are required to provide a rounded evaluation.

Evaluations should collect data on inputs, outputs and outcomes. Inputs are the resources used on the programme. Outputs are the numbers of activities, people and quantifiable changes made. The outcomes are the impacts or changes made through the life of the project and beyond.

Outcome indicators tied into other, existing data, such as the census, allow for programme activities to be assessed against national and regional data, making the comparative evaluation of a programme more meaningful.

Conclusions

The framework provides an overview of evaluation in its various forms, and illustrates the theory of evaluation with living examples from a variety of sectors. Within the Diversity Review, the 'critical friend' approach has been adopted for the evaluation of action research projects. External evaluators were engaged at the start of the projects and will be retained beyond the projects' lives. The toolkit, *And your evidence is? Toolkit of evaluation guidance for projects,* is being used with these projects and covers the practical aspects of monitoring and evaluation of projects.

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