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PLANNING FOR EVALUATION

This guide offers practical advice on what to consider when planning for evaluation and how to go about the planning process.

Planning for evaluation is a critical part of policy and programme development. When done well, evaluation can offer useful evidence about an initiative's success or otherwise, and can be used to improve the initiative. A high quality evaluation requires careful planning – the earlier the better. Ideally, planning for evaluation should occur as the initiative itself is being planned. In this way, the initiative can be designed so that it can be evaluated, increasing the likelihood of a successful initiative and of a worthwhile evaluation.

Evaluation skills and concepts can also be usefully applied when designing the initiative itself. For example, developing an initiative theory of change will provide a basis for evaluation, help clarify how the initiative is intended to work and can help guide its design and implementation.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO PLAN FOR EVALUATION?

Embedding evaluation into an initiative has a number of benefits:

- It clarifies from the outset the goals and expected standards of success within the initiative, supporting a clear direction for all those involved
- It allows relevant parties to agree on the purpose of the evaluation
- It helps to manage risk, which in turn provides opportunities to take on new or untested potential solutions to complex policy problems
- It gives stakeholders the opportunity to identify information needs that would support the initiative's success, supporting greater use of the evaluative evidence
- It enables the development of a realistic evaluation timeframe
- It allows for the establishment of data collection systems right from the start of the initiative, providing useful data throughout its implementation
- It enables a greater choice of methodological options that can be used to gather evidence (for example establishing systems for pre- and post-testing)
- Having a written and agreed plan can serve as a reference point if there are questions or disagreements about evaluation priorities, and is a useful tool to assist with communication about the evaluation.

WHO NEEDS TO BE INVOLVED IN EVALUATION PLANNING?

Different stakeholder groups are likely to have differing ideas about what a successful initiative looks like and what the focus of the evaluation should be. It is important to take into account the priorities and interests of these groups when undertaking evaluation planning.

Partners and stakeholders who should be involved in evaluation planning include:

- those designing and implementing the initiative
- those who will have a role in decision-making about the initiative's future
- those who are funding the initiative.

Where appropriate and feasible, it is also beneficial to involve:

- those who will deliver the initiative (such as service providers and programme staff)
- those affected by the initiative (such as programme participants)
- representatives of the intended beneficiary groups (such as community leaders)
- experts in the relevant subject matters.

Including a range of stakeholders in evaluation planning can assist with achieving good 'buy-in' to the evaluation. Once the evaluation is being undertaken, achieving good buy-in early on can enhance support for the evaluation, help facilitate data collection, increase acceptance of its findings and recommendations, and enhance the utilisation of results.

A STEP BY STEP GUIDE TO PLANNING FOR EVALUATION

Step 1: Consider the context of the initiative

The context in which the initiative takes place is likely to impact on its evaluation. It is important to identify and consider how contextual issues might affect the evaluation, and consider these while undertaking evaluation planning.

Contextual issues to consider		**Will impact on**
Where does the initiative sit within the organisation?	• Is this a standalone initiative, or is it part of a broader suite of interventions? • Where does the initiative sit within broader organisational or policy objectives? • Who within the organisation is likely to be interested in the evaluation, what are their information needs, and how do they need to be involved?	Focus of the evaluation
What are the drivers for the evaluation?	• Is the organisation motivated to undertake the evaluation due to a desire for improvement, a need for accountability, to inform decision-making, for organisational learning, or due to legislative obligations?	Focus and timing of the evaluation
What are the likely constraints (barriers) of the evaluation?	• What is the available budget? • What is the quality of the available data? • When does the evidence need to be available?	Evaluation methodology
What is the political context for the evaluation?	• Is the initiative controversial or high profile? • Is there significant political interest? • Is the evaluation likely to gain media attention?	Evaluation management

Step 2: Describe the theory of the initiative

To know whether the initiative is successful, it is important to understand how it is intended to work, moving from the current situation to the desired outcomes with the necessary steps along this path. This can be done by outlining the initiative theory, which identifies how and why a change process will succeed under specific circumstances. This is sometimes called an intervention logic.

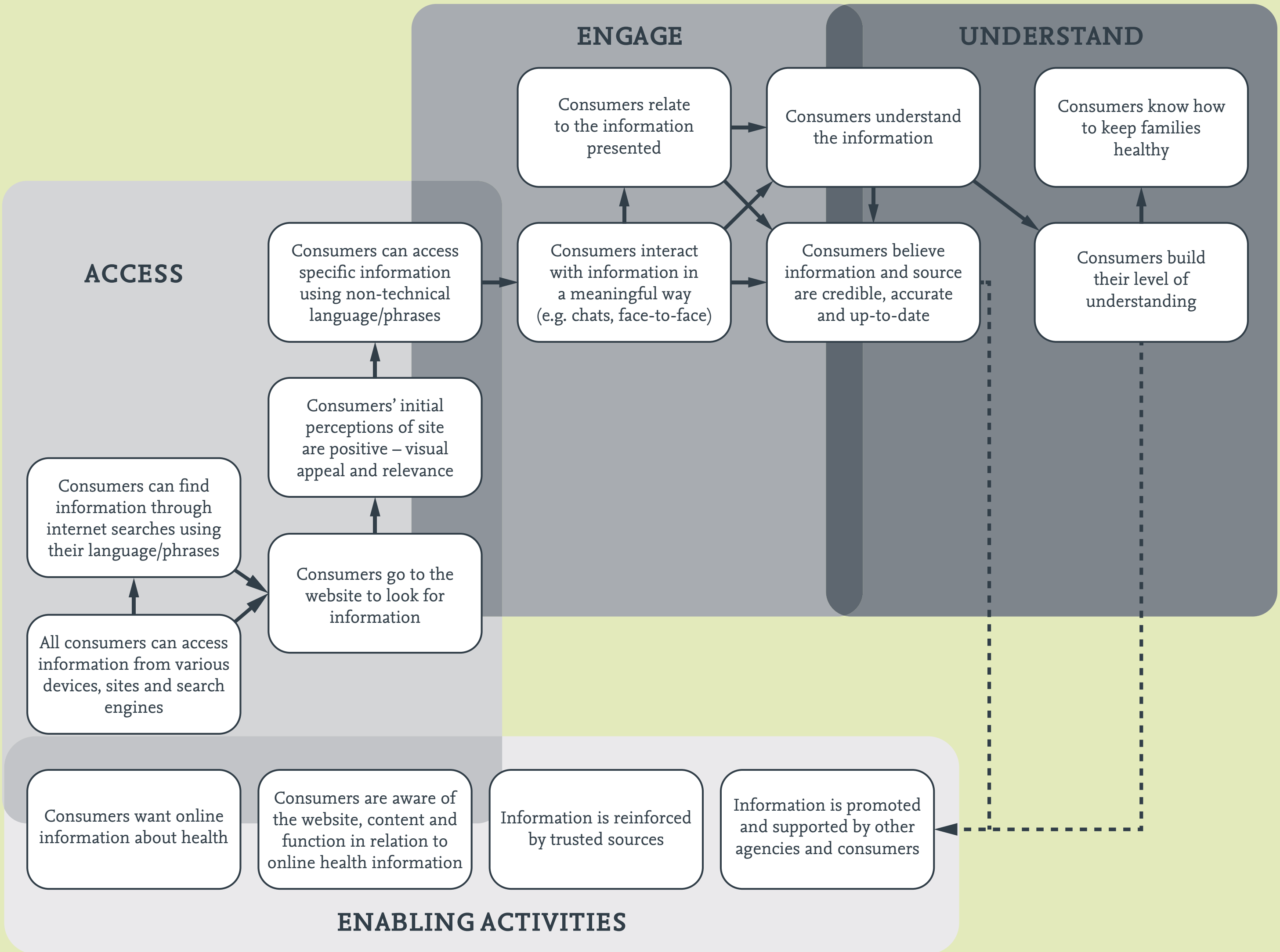
Describing and making the theory explicit is a useful planning process to undertake upfront when designing the initiative. It identifies expected goals and allows for monitoring progress towards their attainment. It can be a useful tool for those implementing the initiative. The intervention logic also provides a foundation for evaluation, providing clear direction on how the success of the initiative can be measured.

The intervention logic may be a written description and/or a diagram(s). It may include some or all of the following elements:

- a description of the problem(s) that the initiative is intended to address
- a description of the initiative
- identification of inputs (resources), activities (what is done as part of the initiative), and outputs (things the activities are expected to deliver)
- identification of intended outcomes and impacts
- a description of the relationship between the inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impacts
- an indication of the timeframe over which the outcomes and impacts are expected
- identification of contextual factors that might influence the initiative and its ability to achieve results
- identification of assumptions on which the initiative design and theory is based.

It is good practice to ensure that a range of stakeholders are involved in the development of the intervention logic, making clear the expectations of what success looks like for all those involved (see the 'Who needs to be involved?' section above).

An example of an intervention logic is provided below. The example shows a sequence of events (starting from the bottom of the diagram and moving in a clockwise direction) expected from a health-related website (the initiative), where it is expected that the target audience will access the website, engage with the information, and, as a result, improve understanding about how to keep families healthy.



Step 3: Consider priorities for evaluation

Evaluation priorities, including information needs and the values of the organisation(s) and individuals undertaking the initiative, will help frame how the evaluation might best be conducted.

The type of evaluation often depends on the purpose for which the evaluation is being conducted and the information needs at different stages of an initiative. During the early stages of the initiative, a **formative evaluation** may be undertaken for the purpose of improving aspects of the intervention such as its structure, management or method of implementation. **Summative evaluation** supports an overall judgement about the value of an initiative to help funders determine whether it was successful or whether it should continue or not.

It may be important to take a particular theoretical approach to the evaluation, based around the programme's or organisation's values. For example, you may choose a **participatory approach** if close collaboration with various stakeholders is an initiative priority; a **utilization focused approach** if the primary focus is to generate use of the findings; a **developmental evaluation** if the initiative is still being developed and real time feedback is required to support development decisions; approaches centred on **culturally appropriate methodologies**, such as kaupapa Māori research and evaluation, that align with the cultural context of the organisations and communities in which the initiative operates; or embed **randomised controlled trials** if quantified measures of impact are a key requirement. Talking to an evaluation professional can help to determine what approach will be useful in your specific situation.

Step 4: Determine what you want evaluated

Evaluations typically focus on issues such as the way that the initiative was implemented (**implementation evaluation**), processes associated with its ongoing delivery or operation (**process evaluation**), an analysis of the outcomes it has achieved (**outcome evaluation**), and the long-term effects attributable to the initiative (**impact evaluation**).

Across these focus areas the evaluation sets criteria against which the initiative is going to be judged as successful or not. Some typical criteria are that the initiative is, for example, effective, appropriate, equitable, efficient, coherent, and sustainable. These criteria are then underpinned by specific themes for exploration, which may be written as questions. For example:

Evaluation criteria	Focus	Sub questions / themes
Efficiency	Was the initiative delivered economically?	• Were the key costs associated with the initiative acceptable? • Were the initiative resources adopted and used efficiently? • Could the same results have been achieved for less; or better results for the same cost?

Step 5: Identify information requirements and establish data collection systems

Planning for evaluation allows you to identify information needs and set up systems to collect useful data. This may involve developing measures which identify the data that will provide evidence of success according to the different steps in the initiative theory. The specific measures that data are collected against will depend on the areas of focus you have identified for the evaluation. Typical measures include:

- inputs, such as staff and volunteer time and initiative expenditure
- outputs, such as training days, publications or number of service users
- data that can contribute to an assessment of outcomes, such as tracking the incidence and/or prevalence of a specific health issue or tracking educational achievement for a particular demographic group
- stakeholder perceptions of the value of the initiative, such as the effectiveness of its implementation or the appropriateness of its design.

Some of these data may be available through existing sources, such as national health or education datasets. Others will require setting up new data collection systems, such as developing a reporting template for those who deliver the initiative to complete.

An example of a framework of evaluation measures is provided below.

E.g. Does the target audience access online information related to health?

Expected outcome	Measures	Methods / Information source
Improved access to online health information relating to the initiative	• The number and types of internet behavioural flow statistics	• Analysis of web statistics
	• Ability to access site and information	• User-trials with target audience • Online survey or survey built into webpage

Step 6: Consider evaluation resource and time requirements

While the evaluation's resource requirements and timeframe will be refined when the evaluation is implemented, it is useful to begin considering these during the planning stages.

The **resource requirements** for the evaluation will depend on the size and scope of the initiative, how comprehensive an evaluation is required, what methods are used, the level of existing knowledge about the initiative, the availability of existing information and data on the initiative, how the information will be used, and whether the evaluation is conducted internally or externally.

Planning should determine how much internal and/or external resource will be required to conduct the evaluation, assess what types of skills and capabilities will be needed, and assign an estimated evaluation budget.

The available resources may restrict the number of evaluation questions or criteria that can be focused on, or may influence the evaluation design, approach, choice of data collection methods or sample size. Early planning for evaluation can ensure that the cost of evaluation is included in the initiative's budget.

Considering the **timing of the evaluation** is also an important part of planning. The time at which the evaluation is conducted will depend on:

- the purpose of the evaluation (for example, a unique and innovative initiative may require rapid, real time information to enable it to adapt and improve its implementation)
- the methodological approach to be taken by the evaluation (for example, if pre- and post-testing is required to measure the initiative's impact, the evaluation will need to commence prior to the initiative's implementation to collect baseline data)
- when the findings are needed (for example, findings required at a specific decision point to determine whether the initiative will continue to be funded)
- when the information is available to gather (for example, certain datasets needed for the evaluation may be released annually, key stakeholders may only be available at certain times).

It is important to note that a high quality evaluation takes time. The evaluation will need sufficient time to accomplish the planned evaluation activities (such as undertaking interviews or implementing a survey) and analyse the evaluative data in order to answer the evaluation questions. A small scale evaluation of a simple intervention is likely to take at least two months, while evaluations of more complex initiatives may take a year or longer, sometimes with multiple cycles of information collection and reporting.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER WHEN PLANNING FOR EVALUATION

- **Plan for evaluation early**, ideally in tandem with the design of your initiative
- **Involve a range of stakeholders** to achieve greater buy-in and relevance
- **Take into account the broader context** for both the initiative and its evaluation
- **Agree how the initiative is intended to work**
- **Frame the type, approach and focus of the evaluation around its purpose**
- **Decide what information you will need to collect** to answer the evaluation questions
- **Allocate resources** to implement the evaluation and **decide when it is best to do it**

Finally, **document the outcomes of your evaluation planning** to ensure that you capture relevant information on the initiative theory, the purpose of the evaluation, priorities and focus areas. An effective evaluation plan is a dynamic 'living document' that should be revisited and updated on a regular basis to reflect changes made to the initiative, different priorities for its evaluation, emerging contextual factors or changes in information needs or availability.

SERVICES PROVIDED BY ALLEN + CLARKE

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Our approach to evaluation is underpinned by national and international evaluation practice standards and codes of ethics informed by principles of utility, feasibility, propriety and accuracy, and cultural responsiveness.

We take a bespoke and up-to-the-minute good practice approach – ensuring our evaluations are made to fit the needs and preferences of each client, and the intended use of findings.

We enjoy seeking answers to our clients' most important questions and tackling the 'so what?' and 'what next?' questions. This makes our evaluation findings actionable and meaningful for our clients' policies and programmes.

Our evaluation services are provided by a small team of specialists, backed up by our wider team of policy professionals and supplemented by external partners.

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