



Forest Research

“Assessing the contribution of forestry grants to equal access for disabled people to recreation goods, facilities and services in Scottish Forests”

A critical review and amendment of the framework and toolkit used by commissioning bodies for the evaluation of projects for increasing access to the outdoors

Report by

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March 2007

Introduction

As part of our tender to assess the contribution of forestry grants to equal access for disabled people to recreation goods, facilities and services in Scottish forests, we undertook to review the evaluation frameworks used by public bodies that commission programmes and projects with the aim of increasing access to the outdoors. The current principles, rationale and methods of evaluation of such projects is described very thoroughly in the package '*And your evidence is?*' (Version 1.0), a framework and toolkit for the evaluation of projects aiming at increasing access of currently under-represented people to the outdoors (Countryside Agency 2005a,b). '*And your evidence is?*' was developed out of original work carried out for the countryside Agency and the Forestry Commission by ECOTEC Research and Consulting Ltd. in association with OPENSpace. The development of this evaluation framework was prompted by research for the Diversity Team (2002/3) which showed that there was very little evaluation of existing countryside and forestry projects and that some groups were highly under-represented in the countryside.

'*And your evidence is?*' package consists of two resources, an **evaluation framework**, advocating the necessity of evaluation and offering an extensive account of approaches and methods for evaluation at both programme and project level, and a **toolkit**, offering more practical guidelines for those involved in designing and implementing evaluation. Both framework and toolkit are complemented with extensive annexes.

Part 1 of this review gives a brief critical account of the current evaluation framework. Part 2 is an amended summary of the framework complemented with input from other sources (e.g. Council of Environmental Education 2004) proposed as a starting point for the development of a framework adjusted to the evaluation requirements of the Forestry Commission.

PART 1 CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE CURRENT GUIDELINES

Evaluation Framework

'*And your evidence is?*', a 45-page long document with appendix and annexes, clarifies basic terms and concepts of evidence-based evaluation at both programme and project level and offers a conceptual framework and methodological guidance. It includes detailed accounts of the concept and practice of evaluation, the planning and timing of evaluation, types of evidence required and choice of method. It then goes on to discuss evaluation at programme-level and at project-level. An appendix offers a very useful glossary of evaluation terms. Extensive annexes include a wealth of information on evidence gathering for evaluation purposes: baseline data, monitoring forms, programme and project appraisal, equality legislation and

samples of questionnaires using visual recording systems alongside traditional textual formats (e.g. Mosaic Project's National Park Visit Questionnaire). All these are clearly very useful to anyone involved with planning and conducting evaluation at programme and project level.

Although drawing upon considerations on evaluation raised during the Diversity Review, the framework contains generic material on evaluating programmes, services and projects. This material can be applicable in a wide array of project evaluation cases

Discussion of both project- and programme-level evaluation notwithstanding, '*And your evidence is?*' is designed mainly for commissioners of programmes aiming to meet policy objectives. Programme-level evaluation is discussed extensively and there is a clear emphasis on quantitative indicators that can be compared with statistical data bases (e.g. census data sets). The tone is pitched at a technical level familiar to commissioner body staff at managerial rank and the checklists provided to assist evaluation planners are explicitly addressed to commissioning body staff. A hierarchical planning process is envisaged, according to which commissioning body staff dictate programme evaluation needs and project-level managers tailor their evaluation practice to the latter.

The section dedicated to project-level evaluation, however, is much more accessible to staff likely to be involved with the day-to-day implementation of the project and most likely to be involved with collection of evidence for monitoring and evaluation purposes at project-level. It is commendable that this section places considerable emphasis on participatory approaches to evaluation; such approaches are arguably necessary in for the evaluation of projects aiming at increasing access to the outdoors for disadvantaged and socially excluded people.

The toolkit of evaluation guidance

As a practical guide to project-level evaluation the toolkit included in the '*And your evidence is?*' package is addressed primarily to project managers and staff. After the introduction of basic concepts and definitions, it presents the evaluation procedure in a series of four stages, namely setting and reviewing aims and objectives, choosing the right performance indicators, monitoring outputs and tracking outcomes and evaluation. It also includes a glossary of evaluation terms and annexes with qualitative data collection methods, examples of monitoring forms and examples of social/behavioural indicators from evaluated projects. This wealth of practical guidance is of use to anyone involved with the design of project evaluation and the collection of the required evidence.

Points of criticism and suggestions for improvement

- There is a marked emphasis on measurable, quantitative indicators. This reflects a particular philosophy not only of evaluation, but also of programme and project design: what Robotom and Hart (1993) characterise as the 'positivist paradigm'. This approach reflects the top-down decision-making processes prevalent in hierarchical institutional structures (as is often the relationship between commissioning body and project-implementing organisation). Such approaches exclude many facilitating staff and project participants from the evaluation process and would probably be inappropriate for projects aiming to extend participation and access.
- In accord with the above, there is also a marked emphasis on personnel of commissioning bodies –most likely personnel at managerial rank, as the most likely designers of the evaluation process. This is explicitly the case at programme-level evaluation and seems to be the un-stated expectation at project-level as well. In the light of this, additional emphasis is needed on the value of involvement of project staff and participants at the evaluation design (for reasons of feed back into future projects, building up of transferable experience and expertise, development of best practice among others). There is also a need for clear demarcation of commissioners, programme managers, project managers, project staff and external evaluators in the case of interventions aiming at increasing access and combating exclusion.
- For the evaluation of programmes/projects that aim to increase access the most appropriate evaluation approaches are participatory and, resources permitting, peer-led. As argued in the relevant section of the evaluation framework, evaluation procedures that involve the target population have an empowering potential and affect long-lasting outcomes in the community. In projects targeting disadvantaged people participatory evaluation can complement the project's aims and objectives it is probably worth borrowing from fields with greater experience in development and utilisation of participatory methods of project evaluation: adult education, outdoors education and social care would be some candidate fields.
- User-friendliness of the documents: in its present form 'And your evidence is?' consists of two lengthy documents; a conceptual framework and a separate practical toolkit. The wealth of information and resources contained in the package is indeed very useful; however there is scope for a shorter document of practical information, in the format of a checklist addressed primarily to project staff directly involved with the evaluation procedure. This abridged version of the current toolkit could concentrate on the practicalities of data collection and monitoring. It is possible to model such a document on existing evaluation guides from fields like environmental and outdoor education (e.g. CEE 2004)

PART 2 EVALUATING PROJECTS FOR INCREASING ACCESS TO THE OUTDOORS. AN AMENDED SUMMARY OF CURRENT FRAMEWORK AND GUIDELINES

2.1 'AND YOUR EVIDENCE IS?' CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITIONS

Evaluation is defined as '*a process through which information is collected (from a number of sources and in a number of ways), and assessed to enable judgements to be made about the effectiveness of specific interventions (policies, programmes and projects)*' (Countryside Agency 2005a, p. 12). Evaluation adds value to future practice through an assessment of present and past experience.

Programmes and Projects

Of the three levels of action (policy, programme, project) that formalised, systematic evaluation can be applied, '*And your evidence is?*' package is designed to be applicable at programme and project level. The distinction between aggregate programmes and single projects is important, as it determines both evaluation priorities and scope, and the profile, rank and outlook of evaluating professionals involved. The former Countryside Agency defines programmes and projects as follows (2005a, pp.8-9):

A **programme** is a set of organised but often varied activities (projects, measures of processes) directed towards achieving specific operational objectives. A programme is often made up by a collection of projects supported by an agency.

A **project** is a single, non-divisible intervention or activity with a fixed time scale and dedicated budget.

Conceptual framework

At the core of the conceptual framework suggested by the Countryside Agency lies the conviction that programme and project evaluation can –and should- contribute to

- evidence-based policy-making
- public scrutiny programme budgets and value for money (increasing the three E's –economy, efficiency and effectiveness)
- development of customer-responsive services (where the 'customers' are programme users, stakeholders and beneficiaries)
- effective management

Evaluation is viewed as an essential process of any programme and project. It should be systematic and fully integrated into programme and project design from the outset.

Evaluation of any planned intervention, at programme or project level, should help to answer the following questions:

- Did the programme/project achieve its aims? If not, why not?
- Did the programme/project achieve its objectives? If not why not? What worked well and what didn't?
- What else have we learned about how the programme/project works, management support, staffing, use of resources, etc.?

The evaluation process can take many forms:

- **Formative evaluation**, attempting to identify best strategy for a programme or project and often used while the programme or project is being developed
- **Process evaluation**, focusing on the way the programme or project is delivered
- **Summative evaluation**, looking at the progress of a programme or project towards meeting its objectives, used at key points of the programme's or project's life and after its completion
- **Impact evaluation**, focusing at the link between the programme's or project's outcomes with its original objectives and its intended impact.

These forms of evaluation can be used in succession, before, during, and after the programme's or project's life, as shown on Figure 1



Figure 1. Types of evaluation before, during and after the lifetime of a programme or project.

The ROAMEF cycle

'And your evidence is?' suggests that evaluation should be fully integrated within a programme/project's life cycle as one of the six stages of the ROAMEF (Rationale, Objectives, Appraisal, Monitoring, Evaluation, Feedback) scheme. Figure 2 shows an ideal ROAMEF cycle.

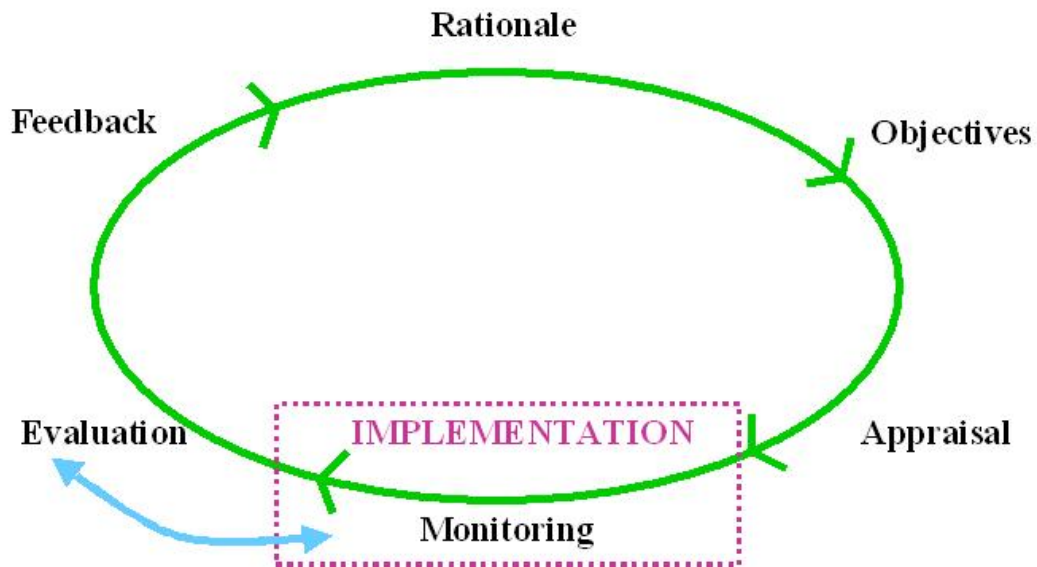


Figure 2. Evaluation as part of ROAMEF cycle. Note that evaluation is a process distinct from monitoring, although it utilises evidence collected for monitoring purposes during implementation of a programme/project. Also note that evaluation can take place during, as well as after the life of the programme/ project as shown in Figure 1.

Rationale of the evaluation framework and toolkit

'And your evidence is?' evaluation framework places a marked emphasis on quantitative approaches and quantifiable indicators. Although mention is made to qualitative information ('soft data') throughout the text these are ascribed with a secondary, complementary role.

The suggested evaluation framework is that of Defra (2004). A programme or project is a planned systematic intervention that aims to change a baseline state of affairs. The programme's/project's aims are achieved by means of objectives designed to produce desirable outcomes. These outcomes result from the investment of planned inputs to produce expected outputs (Figure 3). The evaluation process entails collection of evidence on programme or project inputs, outputs and outcomes.

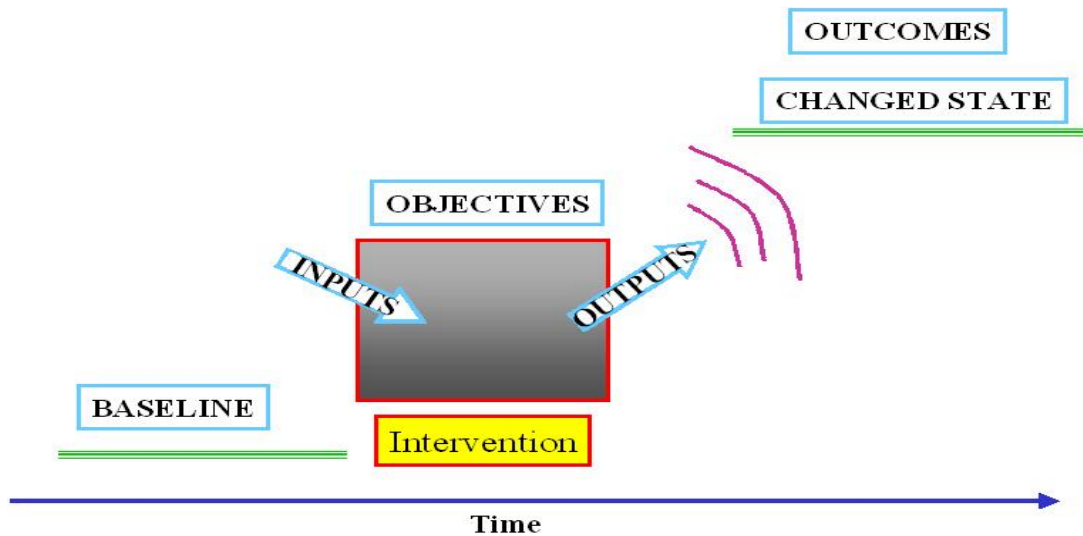


Figure 3. Conceptual framework of a programme or project to be evaluated. Evaluation will be based on evidence on inputs, outputs and outcomes (Defra 2004).

- **Aims** (or mission statements) of the programme/project are the long-term goals and the reasons for setting up the project. It is helpful if an overall aim is broken down into no more than three specific aims.
- **Objectives** are the practical activities designed to achieve the aims of the programme or project. They are set at the outset of the programme/project. It is important that they are SMART –Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-Bound.
- **Inputs** comprise the total programme or project cost, in terms of money (capital and revenue), personnel involvement and, possibly, environmental and other resource expenditure, at commissioning body as well as project level.
- **Outputs** are the services and facilities that are delivered by the programme or project and measures of the people benefiting from the latter. Output indicators measure
 - **Quantity** (number of services offered by the programme/project),
 - **Take-up** (number of people who use the services offered)
 - **Access** (type of people/organisations who use the service)
- **Outcomes** are the effects and changes that happen as result of the programme or project implementation and can be assessed by quantitative and qualitative indicators. The term **impacts** refers to longer-term effects from the synergistic outputs of aggregate programmes.

Outputs and outcomes have to be assessed against the state of affairs prevalent before the planned intervention of the programme or project. This is the **baseline** (Figure 3). Evaluation procedures often need to include

collection of baseline data before the commencing of the programme or project.

2.2 EVIDENCE FOR EVALUATION: INPUT, OUTPUT AND OUTCOME INDICATORS

As evaluation aims at evidence-based judgement, evidence collection is central to the evaluation process. It is important that **indicators**, categories of evidence that will form the basis for evaluation, are specified from the outset of the programme/project and evidence gathering procedures and times are planned. Evidence can include both quantitative and qualitative data.

Quantitative ('hard') indicators can include

- **Inputs:** costs of the programme/project (in money, personnel, resources, etc.)
- **Outputs:** how many activities, how many participants, characteristics of participants, added value, number of people who benefit indirectly, etc.

Output data should be compared with compatible baseline data, collected as part of the baseline survey, or, in the absence of this, relevant data sets from census databases.

For purposes of comparison or programme/project outputs with wider data sets (e.g. national census) it is advisable to use categories compatible with census data sets when planning the data collection strategy. Compatibility of output data with wider data sets facilitates integration of many project evaluations into larger-scale evaluations of programme-level interventions.

Programmes/projects targeting under-represented groups should reach numbers of participants from these groups equivalent or larger than their proportional representation in the local population.

This type of information can be collected with the use of monitoring forms, questionnaires and surveys. A large numbers of examples that can be readily adopted to the needs of specific projects are found in the annexes of '*And your evidence is?*' (Countryside Agency 2005a,b).

Qualitative ('soft') data can include

- **Outcomes:** improvements in health and wellbeing of individuals and communities, increased individual or community confidence, improved life skills, changes in attitude, improved social capital (e.g. organisational skills in the community), skills and knowledge in individuals and community, etc.

There is a wide array of methods for collecting qualitative information for evaluation purposes, including focus groups, in-depth interviews, case studies, observations, surveys, each requiring a different level of staff training and investment of time and resources.

2.3 REPORTING EVALUATION RESULTS

Evaluation results offer transferable lessons for improving economy, efficiency and effectiveness in similar programmes/projects and are an indispensable aid to development of best practice. They are thus meant to be shared among programme/project staff, stakeholders and commissioners.

The ways to communicate evaluation results depends largely on intended audience. Reporting formats include, among others:

- Written reports
- Annual reports
- Training events
- Conferences
- Meetings
- Videos
- Newspaper articles
- Radio interviews
- Websites
- Newsletters

2.4 PROJECT-LEVEL EVALUATION

Evaluation of projects, planned, non-divisible interventions (see above), is of central importance. Programmes consist of projects and any evidence for the effectiveness of larger scale intervention comes from the aggregation of evaluation at project level. The generic guidelines summarised above are mainly applicable at project level.

Project evaluation is usually carried out by project managers and staff and can –and arguably should, also involve project participants and stakeholders. Project evaluation should be based on evidence on inputs, outputs and outcomes as specified above. This evidence should be compared with baseline evidence collected either before the start of the project (baseline survey), or, in absence of this, available in wider data sets (e.g. census data sets).

At the project level evaluation should concentrate on (Countryside Agency 2005a, p.38):

- **Information on project outputs and outcomes.** This will be used to evaluate the project impact for stakeholders and commissioning agencies
- **Demonstration of efficiency, effectiveness and economy** (value for money) in the day-to-day running of the project, staff and services performance and use of resources. Evidence for this is derived from regular monitoring and self-evaluation

- **Feedback** on the acceptability and quality of the project's services. This evidence will be collected in appropriately user-friendly and empowering ways from partners, project participants and service users

Across projects that combine to constitute a wider programme there are often standard calculations of inputs and common monitoring systems. Development of project-specific systems of evidence collection is also possible, however. There is not a single recipe for project evaluation method; best choice depends on the project's remit and available resources, time and expertise. Since each evidence gathering method collects specific types of evidence, a 'pick and mix' combination of appropriate methods to record a wider range of project's outputs and outcomes may be appropriate. The toolkit included in the '*And your evidence is?*' package (Countryside Agency 2005b) contains a wide array of project evaluation examples and evidence gathering strategies and methodologies.

Participant involvement in project evaluation

Involvement of project participants in the evaluation process is desirable; it can be argued that such involvement is essential in projects targeting disadvantaged or socially excluded groups. On the basis of their affordances for participant involvement the wide array of available strategies and techniques for project evaluation can be distinguished into **programme-driven**, **contributive**, **participatory**, and **peer-led** approaches (Figure 4):

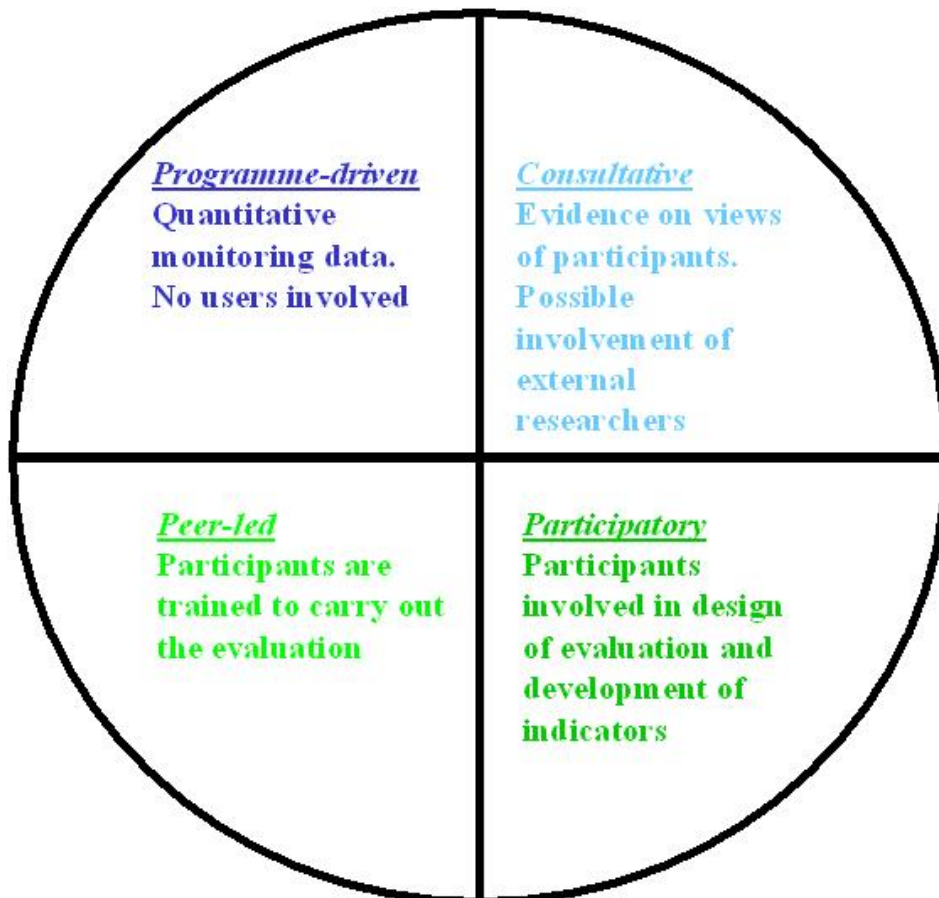


Figure 4. The wheel of participation: the continuum of less and more participatory approaches to project evaluation. Degree of project participants' involvement increases clockwise from top left.

- **Programme-driven** approaches are quantitative. They use standardised tools to allow aggregate project data to feed into wider programme evaluation; these data are usually compatible with wider sets of statistical data (e.g. census data sets). This there is no input by participants.
Strengths: establishment of baselines, progress checks, little input from external sources, low cost.
Weaknesses: standardised, unpopular to staff, time consuming, fitting the project into evaluation system rather than vice versa, weak at measuring outcomes and impacts
- **Consultative** approaches gather qualitative information on participants' views by means of qualitative research methods (questionnaires of opinion, surveys, interviews, focus groups). External researchers could be involved, but project staff should be involved in questionnaire design. Non-text based evaluation tools can be used for participants with language or literacy difficulties
Strengths: tried and tested, user-friendly techniques, measuring outcomes and impacts
Weaknesses: (perceived) lack of objectivity, not suitable for all disadvantaged groups
- **Participatory** approaches involve participants in the development of evaluation criteria. Participatory evaluation can utilise both quantitative and qualitative indicators.
Strengths: facilitation of communication between project staff, evaluators and participants, empowering for disadvantaged participants, cost-effective, easy to implement
Weaknesses: possibilities of political ramifications, risk of marginalisation
- **Peer-led** approaches are becoming increasingly popular in the UK. They involve the training of project participants to evaluate the project. Professional support and mentoring is offered for lay researchers to develop the tools, techniques and strategies and to gather the information utilised for project evaluation.
Strengths: capacity building in disadvantaged communities, effective where professional interventions are counter-productive
Weaknesses: requires preparedness of commissioning bodies to give up some of the control over the project, political ramifications, expensive, resource-intensive, ethical considerations regarding the position of lay researchers after the evaluation

A checklist for commissioners

The following checklist is suggested for commissioners planning the evaluation of commissioned projects (Countryside Agency 2005a, p.44):

- How can you ensure that project level managers see the importance of evaluation and their role in gathering data?
- Are you clear about the data you need to collect, who is to collect it and at what intervals? Are those responsible for gathering the data sufficiently resourced to undertake this work? Do those gathering the data understand and accept the ends to which information they gather will be used to ensure compliance with?
- Have you considered the range of participatory approaches to gathering data?

A checklist for project staff

A similar checklist for project facilitators, managers and other personnel (and also participants if a participatory approach is followed) involved in the planning of evaluation and evidence collection is also pertinent. The following checklist is derived from the adaptation of evaluation guidelines for project staff involved with evaluation of environmental education projects (Council of Environmental Education 2004, pp. 2-3). As reflected on their tone, these guidelines follow a more staff-led approach than that informing the checklist suggested by Countryside Agency. What is envisaged is projects where project staff and facilitators have a say, or even the major say, in how they are implemented and evaluated. In addition, there is a marked interest in increasing involvement of project participants in evaluation. This less top-down approach is more empowering for both staff and participants and thus more appropriate for projects whose explicit aim is the improvement of the position of disadvantaged groups.

What is the purpose of your evaluation?

- Do you want to focus on outcomes of the project, the whole process of the project or both?
- Do you want to gather information during the programme to review progress and make adjustments as you go along (formative evaluation)? Or only to make judgements about the overall effectiveness of the programme (summative evaluation)?
- How will your evaluation be linked to your partners' and funders' interests and requirements?

What do you need to find out?

Information about the project's inputs, outputs, outcomes, impacts

Who will be involved in evaluation?

Staff, facilitators, participants, volunteers, partners, end users, others

What kind of data do you need to collect?

What methods will you use?

- Are you involving a wide enough range of people in order to obtain different perspectives?
- Is your approach user-friendly, time-efficient and cost-effective?
- Are you in danger of collecting data you don't need?

How are you going to analyse your evidence?

- To what extent were your aims and objectives achieved? How do you know? What evidence do you have?
- To what extent did participants meet their own objectives?
- To what extent did your partners meet their objectives?
- To what extent were the project's approaches and activities appropriate?
- What else did you learn?
- What else happened that was significant?
- What might you do differently?
- What will we do next?

How are you going to communicate the results of the evaluation?

- What achievements should you communicate (including how you overcame unforeseen problems) and to whom?
- What are the compelling stories to get you noticed and engage the media and other groups?
- What are the best mechanisms to have an impact on those who influence and support projects that aim to increase participation in the outdoors (policy makers and others)?
- How can you make the language accessible to your audiences?

What is next? How your evaluation modifies and improves your programme?

- What are the strengths of your programme and how can you build on this?
- What new areas of work are needed?
- Do you need to review priorities and resources (staff, budget, training, etc)?
- Do you need to set up, continue or extend partnerships (link to a new audience, gain funding, develop resource)?

- How will you review your project in relation to what has been learned and what is needed?

2.5 PROGRAMME-LEVEL EVALUATION

The evaluation framework (Countryside Agency 2005a) offers a number of guidelines for the evaluation of programmes. The envisaged audiences are commissioning body staff at managerial level who are not likely to be directly involved with the implementation and facilitation of the projects that constitute the programme. These guidelines are also of interest to managers and other staff involved in constituent projects who would want to get a view of the evaluation rationale and priorities at programme level, of how evaluation of their project contributes to a bigger picture and of what is expected by them.

Programme evaluation is viewed as an inductive process, where evaluation of individual projects that constitute a broader programme contributes aggregate evidence about the workings and effectiveness of the programme

A checklist for commissioners

The following checklist is suggested for commissioners who are involved with the planning of the evaluation of commissioned programmes (Countryside Agency 2005a, pp.14-15, 27):

- Are you clear about the policy aims your programme seeks to meet?
- Do you know what the evidence base for setting the policy is?
- Are you clear about what you hope an evaluation will achieve for your programme?
- Have you considered whether the ROAMEF model provides an appropriate model for your programme?
- How will you assess value for money? Are there ways in which you can assess whether you would secure the same results without the programme you are planning? Are there any additional benefits (beyond your own policy objectives) that the programme may contribute to that may be worth measuring?
- Have you considered different forms of evaluation? What approach is best suited to your project? When does this need to take place and who will do?

Programme objectives, set either through top-down or bottom-up approaches, are always linked with political aims and objectives. Programme evaluation, therefore should be viewed within its broader political and cultural context.

To ensure objectivity and credibility, programme-level evaluations should be carried out by independent, professional evaluators, often affiliated with a public body external to that commissioning the programme.

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