Housing Benefit Initiatives: Evaluation Handbook

DWP Department for Work and Pensions

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Introduction

Most HB overpayments are caused by customer error. Statistics show that over 70% of incorrectly paid HB/CTB results from changes in customers' circumstances occurring after the start of the claim and not reported to, or picked up by local authorities (LAs).

Many LAs have introduced initiatives designed to reduce customer error by improving customer reporting of changes of circumstances – Engaging with Customers gives you ideas and examples of good practice. This guide is designed to help you evaluate the success of such initiatives to inform future plans.

An overview of evaluation

Why evaluate?

Evaluation can tell you:

- how effective your initiative was
- whether there were any unexpected effects
- how well you implemented your initiative
- whether you achieved value for money

What to evaluate and when

Ultimately you want to know if you have achieved your objectives; for example, more customers reporting changes of circumstance themselves. As well as evaluating what an initiative has achieved (impact evaluation), it is helpful to look at how it was implemented (process evaluation) so that lessons learnt can be used to inform future plans.

It is best to build evaluation into an initiative from the start. However, this is not always possible, so this guidance includes help on how to evaluate an initiative after its implementation.

What is involved?

Evaluation need not be complex or time consuming. Be pragmatic about what you want to establish - make sure that it is proportionate and focuses on what you really need to know.

Elements of successful evaluation

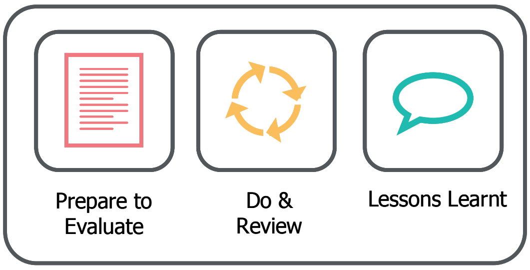
Key elements for effective evaluation are:

- agreed objectives which are clear and unambiguous and comprehensive, covering the full range of intended outcomes;
- a plan that identifies:
  - the information required to support the evaluation, and
  - who is responsible for collecting the information, how, and by when.

This will ensure that you remain focussed on what you are evaluating and why and resources are used effectively.

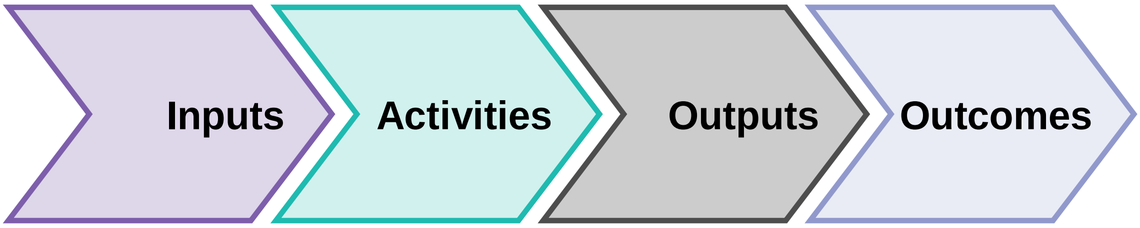
Methodology

A typical evaluation comprises three steps:



Each step is explained in detail in the following sections.

Terms used in this document



Inputs: Any resources you need to carry out the initiative. Inputs can be financial, material or human.

Activities: The main work you undertake to implement the initiative.

Outputs: The immediate results of activities. Outputs are usually measurable and are necessary for the Outcomes to be achieved.

Outcomes: The end results of carrying out the initiative, for example, changes in behaviour or attitudes that the initiative brings about. The overall outcome for the Right Benefit indicator is reduced fraud and error in HB.

Aims, objectives, measures and targets: People use these terms in different ways. Aims and objectives can indicate the general direction of an initiative, but aims are often used to indicate high level intentions, while objectives are more specific outcomes.

Measures (indicators) are used to describe how to measure inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, as well as aims and objectives. Targets specify desired measureable results.

The way in which you use these terms is not important as long as everyone is clear about their use in your initiative.

How the guidance is structured

The main text describes the evaluation methodology and provides guidance on evaluating retrospectively.

It includes links throughout to:

- two hypothetical case study examples – an information pack for new customers and a poster campaign for tax credit recipients – which provide practical examples of how to implement the process, and
- more detailed guidance sheets.

Click here to read about the case studies.

Prepare to Evaluate

Prepare to evaluate

Plan the evaluation at the same time as you plan for the initiative. This will help to ensure that you collect the data you need. You need to ask:

- what should we evaluate?
- how can we measure this?
- what do we need to do, and when?

What to evaluate

Be clear at the outset about the aims of the initiative, and of the evaluation. This will help you identify the information you need to collect. Identify your most important objectives. Click here for case study examples.

Guidance sheet

Guidance sheet 1 gives some suggestions about suitable objectives to consider for evaluation.

Developing a simple model at the planning stage can help to clarify what you need to measure. Identify key inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, and how they are linked. Click here for case study examples.

How to measure

What would have happened anyway?

In order to assess the impact of an initiative you need to compare its effect with what would have happened anyway, in the absence of the initiative. This is impossible to achieve but there are three approaches you can take:

- apply the initiative to one group of people and compare this with a similar group not involved in the initiative (the comparison group), for the same time period – the best way of assigning people to groups will depend both on the initiative and your local working practices but could include random selection from customer lists, allocation by case officer, by sheltered housing unit etc;
- look at one group of people and compare two points in time – before and after the initiative is implemented;
- compare the group of people involved in the initiative with a similar group in the past.

The first of these is generally the best. Perfect comparison is impossible to achieve, and not necessary for successful evaluation. What is necessary, is to be aware of other influences that might affect your desired outcomes, and to do your best to take account of them. Click here for case study examples.

Choosing measures

Identify what you want to measure rather than what you can. Aim to measure what you value otherwise you may end up valuing something simply because you can measure it.

Both quantitative measures and qualitative measures, such as opinions and beliefs, are useful. Quantitative evidence is likely to be more meaningful when demonstrating your success. An example of a quantitative measure is the number of changes in entitlement established each month. Qualitative information can help you to understand and interpret the results. An example of a qualitative measure would be the opinion of residents about how easy it is to report changes of circumstances.

If an outcome is difficult to measure, think about whether there is anything associated with it that you can measure. For example, If is not possible to measure the direct impact of an initiative on the number of people reporting changes of circumstances concerning tax credits, the number of HBMS data matches relating to tax credit rules is a good proxy.

If you need to compare groups of different sizes then you will need to account for this. For example, the number of changes in circumstances that you would expect people to report will vary with the size and mix of your caseload. If the caseload mix is fairly stable, you can measure the number of changes of circumstances reported *per person*. This allows you to compare two differently sized groups, or your whole caseload at two different points in time. The number of changes you achieve per 1,000 caseload is reported on DWP's Housing Benefit Operational Database (click here to access HoBOD).

Collecting the information

Ideally you will be able to use data that you already collect – particularly if you need data going back in time. However it may be necessary to collect additional data.

You already use a number of methods to collect information from customers. It may be possible to adapt these at minimal cost to support an evaluation. For example, additional questions can be added to routine customer surveys, to the scripts or checklists used by front-desk staff and telephone staff, or to the changes of circumstances form. Amendments to systems may allow you to identify, for example, whether changes of circumstances forms returned have come from an information pack, or to enter information on how a change was identified, i.e. from self-reporting, through a HBMS match etc.

Guidance sheet

Guidance sheet 2 outlines the advantages and disadvantages of different methods of gathering data.

Click here for case study examples of choosing measures and collecting data.

What needs to be done when – the plan

It is important to document the evaluation process so that all involved in the initiative are clear about their role. If it is a large-scale project, it may be appropriate to create a formal Evaluation Plan that identifies the what, how, when and by whom of data collection and analysis. Otherwise a note to those involved outlining what you have decided, or a brief outline included in the description of the initiative should be sufficient.

In either case:

1. Confirm the final set of objectives, as they may have changed from your initial ideas.

2. Check when results are required, and when you will need to, or are able to collect data, e.g. the dates of any existing surveys that you are going to use.

3. Draw up a plan of who needs to do what, when. If you use a survey to measure the impact of an initiative, remember you do not need to include everyone in the survey. Advice on sampling is included in Guidance sheet 3.

4. Make sure that the effort and cost associated with your evaluation are reasonable and in proportion to the benefits you expect to achieve. A good rule of thumb is that evaluation should generally cost somewhere between 5-10% of the project budget.

Do &
Review

Do and review

In this step you will collect and analyse the data and review progress.

Monitor the initiative and analyse initial data at an early stage, rather than leave this until a single end point. This has several advantages. If there is a problem with the data collection process you will find out about it early, and can seek a solution. If the initiative itself is not working as intended, you can review how it proceeds, and make any necessary changes.

Collecting the data

Guidance sheet

Collect the data in accordance with your plan. Guidance sheet 3 contains detailed guidance on collecting and analysing data. Guidance sheet 4 includes advice on potential problems when collecting and analysing data.

If you use a questionnaire to gather information brief your staff so they know why the questions are being asked and can answer any customer queries. Pilot the questions as sometimes people interpret things differently and you may not get the answers you expect.

If the evaluation is to run for a long period of time, make sure you use consistent methods to collect and analyse data. This allows the results to be collated over the whole period of the initiative, and comparisons to be made over time as well as with a comparison group or against a baseline. Consistency will also give your results credibility.

Reviewing progress

Check that the initiative and the evaluation are running according to the plan. A monthly review will probably be appropriate in the first instance.

Look at the use of resources, time, money and quality of the outputs being produced. Consider whether you need to make any changes.

Make sure that information is being collected for the evaluation, that it is the sort of information you were expecting and that it is in a format you can use. Click here for case study examples of what to look for.

Look at emerging findings and decide whether additional data would improve understanding. For example, would a telephone survey of a sample of customers help you understand why they did, or didn’t, respond as expected to the initiative.

If clear conclusions are emerging decide whether the evaluation can be stopped early and the initiative rolled out to more customers.

Analysing the data

The simplest way to analyse quantitative data is to use spreadsheets – particularly for making before and after comparisons, or comparisons between different groups.

The Tracking Template may help you to analyse the data.

There are statistical tests that can help to determine the significance of any differences between groups, or changes over time – if you need to use these and are not comfortable with statistical techniques, seek advice from an expert.

It can be more difficult to analyse qualitative data, especially when the answers are freeform, from interviews or from comment spaces on questionnaires. To analyse this information you need to look for patterns or themes in the comments. In your evaluation report you can describe these and illustrate them with quotes. Click here for a case study example.

If you are looking for improvements in reporting of changes of circumstances, look for differences in both **the number** of changes reported and **when** they are reported. Measure the period of over or underpayment for each change to identify improvements in customers reporting on time.

Not finding any **evidence** of an effect is not the same as finding evidence that there is **no** effect. You may need to monitor for a longer period of time, or review the evaluation process and change how you are collecting data. If the effect you are looking for is quite small, you may need to consider looking at a different indicator measuring something associated with the change in behaviour.

If you do see an effect, always ask what else might have caused it. Doing this in a small group will give you a wider range of ideas, and help you identify if anything else could explain your results.

Guidance sheet

Again Guidance sheet 3 and Guidance sheet 4 contain more detailed guidance.

Lessons learnt

Lessons Learnt

Learning from what went well and what could have been done better will help you to plan and implement future initiatives.

Impact review

Document the conclusions of your analysis. Did you achieve improvements where you hoped to? Were these more or less significant for different groups of people or different times? Were there any unexpected or undesired outcomes? What else could have caused the effect?

Process review

Carry out a process review. Get key team members around a table to discuss what went well, what could have gone better, and what they would do differently next time. You can learn as much from things that go badly as from things that go well.

Act on the findings

If the initiative was effective, plan how to roll it out more widely, or embed it in existing processes. Consider the costs of the initiative when you do this – look at measures such as extra changes reported per £ spent, and compare with other methods of identifying changes such as following up diary dates with letters or phone calls. Update your processes to capture successful elements of the initiative. If some elements of the initiative do not appear to have been effective, determine how these elements can be improved in future

Share results

Communicate your results in order to:

- celebrate and publicise success;
- inform, motivate and enthuse staff;
- enable others to learn from your experience.

Feed the results back through team briefing sessions, one-to-ones and good practice submissions. It may also be helpful to present the results to regional or national benchmarking groups or on good practice websites. You can email the fraud and error policy team at fraud-error-policy@dwp.gsi.gov.uk.

Guidance sheet

Click here to see case study examples of lessons learnt.

Guidance sheet 5 contains some questions to help you use the results of your evaluation.

Retrospective evaluation

Sometimes it is not possible to plan evaluation in from the start of an initiative. There will always be occasions when an initiative that is already underway, or even completed, needs to be evaluated.

Difficulties you may encounter

Retrospective evaluation is easier to accomplish the closer you are to the starting point of the initiative; it becomes progressively more difficult as the initiative matures.

The most difficult task will be to establish credible and practical measures of success when systems to gather data have not been set up early in the initiative. There may, for example, be:

- no baseline data against which to measure improvements;
- no control group, and so no easy way to identify and strip out the effect of other initiatives that were underway at the time; or
- no mechanisms for collecting and recording relevant information as implementation proceeded.

Despite potential problems, there is always useful information you can gather, perhaps in less detail, to inform the design and implementation of future initiatives.

Practical solutions

Planning the evaluation

Make sure you have a clear understanding of the aims and objectives of the initiative. Speak to people who were involved at the outset, and try to populate an inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes framework. Make sure you are clear about why are you evaluating the initiative, what you want to measure, and how you can measure it. What data are available? Is there sufficient time to collect any new data? Can you find baseline data?

Choosing a basis for comparison

With no comparison group set up before the initiative, you will have to look elsewhere for a baseline. You may be able to choose a group to compare with retrospectively from a period before the initiative, or look at the behaviour of the same group of customers at a different point in time. Alternatively, you may have to look for general changes over time. Click here for an example from case study 1.

If you use a comparison group from a point in the past, remember that as well as your initiative, other things may have changed. For example, an increasing focus nationally on benefits fraud might affect people's behaviour, or you may have introduced new wording on claims forms. You may be able to quantify the effects of some of these factors. If you cannot, your evaluation should comment on what factors might affect the results, and indicate the general direction of any effects that you might expect.

Collecting the information

You may find that standard reports from your HB system contain all the information you need to measure the important aspects of the initiative. However, if measures were not developed at the beginning, some information may not be available. Click here for case study examples.

Guidance sheet

Guidance sheet 2 provides information on different ways of collecting information. You can use questionnaires and interviews to collect information retrospectively, although you should bear in mind that people's memories are not always accurate.

Process review

Finally, remember that a process review can still yield valuable information to inform future initiatives.

Case study examples

Introduction

Case Study 1: New customer information pack.
An LA has decided to send an information pack on changes of circumstances to all new customers. After analysing existing data, the LA establishes that few new customers have changes to report until at least eight weeks after their first payment, so decides to send out the pack at that eight week point. The pack includes a standard leaflet on changes of circumstances, together with a 'changes of circumstances' form and a pre-paid envelope in which to return it to the LA.

Case study 2: Poster aimed at tax credit recipients
Another LA receives a high number of HBMS data matches on tax credit rules, highlighting a particular issue with customers failing to report changes in tax credits. The LA plans to display posters aimed at those customers in a variety of locations, including the Housing Benefits office, local health centre waiting rooms, and leisure centres.

Return to Introduction

Prepare to evaluate

What to evaluate - objectives

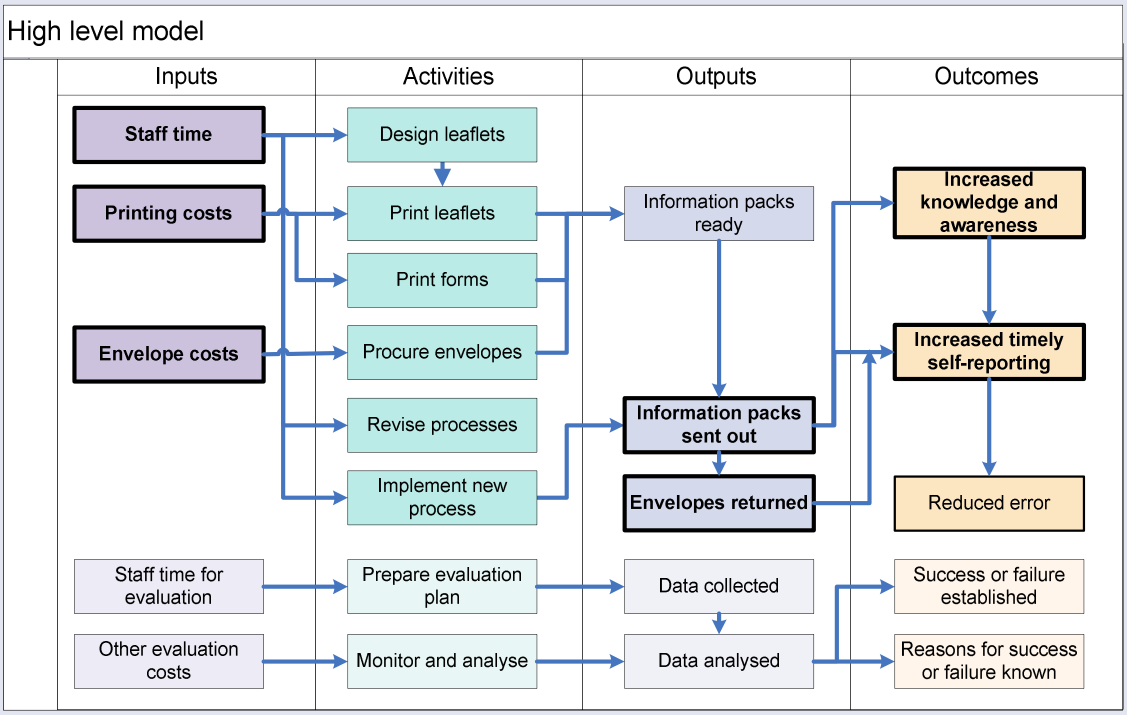
Case study 1: New customer information pack
The key objective for the initiative is to enhance knowledge and awareness among new customers and so increase the numbers of changes they self-report, and the speed with which they report them. This is expected to lead to reduced overpayments and reduced error in the LA caseload. The evaluation aims to establish whether the initiative improves self-reporting of changes of circumstances.

Case study 2: Poster aimed at tax credit recipients
The key objective is to make customers aware that they must report changes in tax credits, and encourage them to report these changes on time. The evaluation will determine whether the posters are effective – do awareness and knowledge improve, and are more changes in tax credits reported on time?

Return to What to evaluate

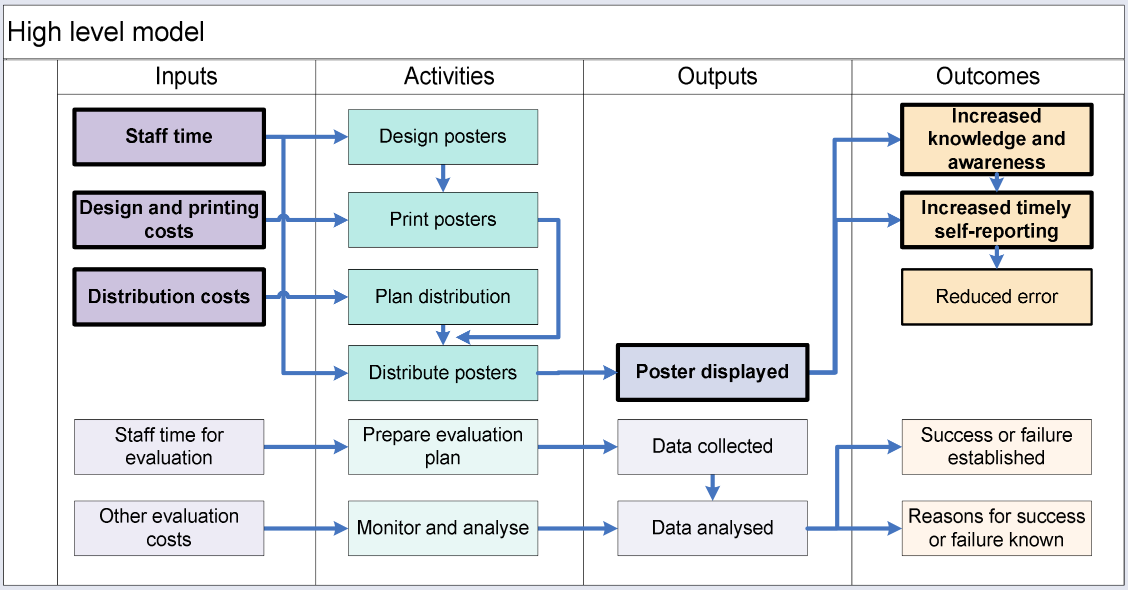
What to evaluate - inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes

Case Study 1: New customer information pack
This shows a high level model for Case Study 1. The pale boxes are the evaluation activities. .The boxes in bold show where the LA has decided it needs to measure what is happening.



It needs to know about costs, especially the costs of the licence paid envelopes, about information packs sent out, and the desired outcomes.

Case study 2: Poster aimed at tax credit recipients
Your model does not need to be complex.



[Return to main document.](#)

[Return to retrospective evaluation.](#)

How to measure comparison - what would have happened anyway?

Case Study 1: New customer information pack – control group

The LA here considers two options.

1. They could divide all new customers into two groups and send information packs to one group (the initiative group) while doing nothing for the other group (the comparison group). They can then compare the number of changes reported by each group over a period of time.
2. They could send information packs to all new customers, choose a similar group of new customers from several months previously, and compare the number of changes reported by each group over a period of time.

The LA adopts Option 1 as both groups will be subject to the same external factors, making it easier to see whether the initiative has a real effect. If new customers are assigned randomly to case officers then the groups can be assigned on a case officer basis.

If early indications are that the initiative works well, they may decide to start sending the packs to all new customers

The LA will run off weekly reports to find new customers and will then allocate them at random to control and intervention groups, using diary dating to prompt them to send out the information pack to the initiative group.

Case study 2: Poster aimed at tax credit recipients – baseline

Using posters means the LA cannot identify a group of customers that will not see the posters as a comparison group. They choose the locations to make sure that a large number of people see the posters.

Instead, the LA decides to measure the number of HBMS data matches it receives relating to tax credit rules. This is a good proxy. If this decreases following introduction of the posters, it will imply that more customers are reporting changes when they happen, rather than waiting for them to be discovered by the LA. They can analyse past data and look at trends over time to see if the posters have had an effect on the number of unreported changes.

Return to How to Measure

How to measure – choosing measures and collecting information

Case Study 1: New customer information pack

Measuring inputs

The LA wants to measure staff time, printing costs, and envelope costs.

To measure staff time, the manager asks staff to keep a log of how much time they spend sending out the information packs.

Measuring outputs and outcomes

The outputs and outcomes of interest are: information packs sent out, increased knowledge and awareness, and increased self-reporting leading to fewer overpayments and more correct claims.

Information packs sent out: the LA needs to know who they have sent a pack to, and when it was sent, to ensure that the initiative is proceeding as planned and enable them to determine whether the initiative has made a difference. They use their workflow system to record that a pack has been sent. (Alternatively, it would be relatively easy to set up a spreadsheet to record the name and claim reference number of each new customer who is sent a pack.)

Forms returned: Forms included in the information pack are stamped with a code so that staff can tell if a pack form has been used to report a change.

Measuring **increased knowledge and awareness** may be difficult. They could consider asking all customers who report a change at the benefits office "what prompted you to report this change?" and monitor the responses over a period of time.

The LA needs to measure **the number of changes of circumstances reported** by all new customers, including the comparison group. Because the timing of reporting may be important, the LA needs to know about any change that a customer reports, and when it was reported. The evaluation includes considering the amount of any overpayment or underpayment so this information must be gathered as well. The LA's benefit system allows the assessment officer to enter information on how the change was identified, including self-reporting. As all the other information needed is recorded – the date on which the change was reported, and the amount of any over or underpayment, existing system data can be used in the evaluation.

Case study 2: Poster aimed at tax credit recipients

Measuring outputs and outcomes

The LA wants to measure how effectively the posters are displayed, and increased knowledge and awareness of tax credit recipients.

The LA negotiates with a number of partners to display posters in their offices as well as its own. They inspect the posters in their various locations to make sure they are displayed properly so that, if evaluation suggests that they have had no measurable effect, the LA has an understanding of why this might be. They develop a simple checklist covering the condition of the poster (is it torn, vandalised?), whether it can be seen easily (is it at eye level, obscured by a pillar, covered by another poster, or on a wall that is not passed by customers?), and whether it stands out (are there other posters next to it with more impact, are there many posters and leaflets so that none of them stand out?) and use this every month for the duration of the campaign.

The LA sets up a graph to monitor the number of matches received every month for each tax credit rule. Data from the start of the year sets the benchmark level, and monthly measurements throughout and after the poster campaign show the trend in unreported tax credit changes. In addition, the manager decides that as they accept reports of changes by telephone, she will prepare a brief script to ask customers what prompted them to report the change, and whether they have noticed the posters.

Return to main document

Do and review

Reviewing progress

Case Study 1: New customer information pack

The LA manager checks that staff are keeping track of the time they are spending on the initiative. He finds that some people are keeping track of the numbers of hours they have spent, while some are recording the fraction of their week that was spent on the initiative. He briefs staff to ensure that they use a standard method to aid analysis later.

He checks that the recipients are being correctly identified on the computer system. In addition, he runs a report to see how many changes have been self-reported by the comparison group and initiative group, and finds out how many of the forms have been used. He checks that the number of customers in each of the two groups are roughly equal, as planned. He discovers that some forms have been returned saying ‘no change’, and he decides to record this, analyse the information and consider amending the information pack.

Case study 2: Poster aimed at tax credit recipients

The LA manager checks that the posters have been correctly displayed at the locations.

She included in the telephone script the question “Why did you report this change?” Testing found that several respondents initially gave answers such as “well, my pay went up”. The question was adjusted to “What prompted you to tell us about (e.g. your pay rise)?”, and the telephone staff were briefed to ask if they had seen or heard something that reminded them they should if necessary.

Return to Reviewing Progress.

Analysing data

Case Study 1: New customer information pack

After two months, the LA finds that there appears to be a small increase in the number of changes reported by the customers who received the packs, but decide that they would like more evidence. Many of the new customers to date have been in low risk groups, and so few changes would be expected, and indeed, few have been reported. They decide to continue monitoring for another two months, and to carry out a telephone survey of a sample of the comparison and initiative groups to establish whether there is any difference in knowledge and awareness between the two groups.

Case study 2: Poster aimed at tax credit recipients

The LA manager here found that 25% of tax credits customers suggested that the LA could help them remember to report changes by writing to remind them. She added targeted mailshots to the list of initiatives to be considered.

Return to Analysing Data.

Lessons learnt

Case Study 1: New customer information pack

The evaluation shows that the initiative improves self-reporting of changes of circumstances across most risk groups. However, the process review highlights that using the same leaflet for all customers was confusing for those on pension credit. Many pension-age customers sent the form back, writing “no change” on it, resulting in additional work for the assessment team.

The LA decide to develop a different leaflet for customers on pension credit, detailing the specific changes they need to report.

Case study 2: Poster aimed at tax credit recipients

The LA finds that monthly HBMS statistics show a reduction in tax credit data-matches, suggesting that more customers are reporting these changes when they happen.

However a review of the costs shows that printing costs were higher than anticipated, so the LA decide to develop a more general poster on the importance of reporting changes of circumstances. By ordering larger quantities, the unit cost is reduced.

The new poster can be displayed at a wider range of locations, and the LA can use the survey results from the current evaluation as a baseline measure for comparison with a future survey after the new posters are distributed.

Return to Lessons Learnt.

Retrospective evaluation

Choosing a basis for comparison

Case Study 1: New customer information pack

Assuming that the initiative was rolled out to all new customers, with no time to plan evaluation, it is not possible to use the comparison group discussed above. However, the LA could use a comparison group comprising new customers from a point starting 12 months before the initiative.

Return to Retrospective Evaluation.

Collecting the information

Case Study 1: New customer information pack

Comparing under and overpayments over different time periods is not straightforward because of annual uprating and other changes in rates and allowances. However, it is possible to compare the numbers and timing of changes of circumstances reported by new customers a year ago, with equivalent data collected during the initiative period.

Return to Retrospective Evaluation.

Analysing data

Case Study 1: New customer information pack

No specific data collection systems were set up to collect additional information, and so there is no record of how many of the change of circumstances forms in the packs were returned. However, the LA has information on the costs incurred for the use of licence paid envelopes, and so can calculate how many envelopes were used, as a proxy.

Case study 2: Poster aimed at tax credit recipients

HBMS data on tax credit data matches should be available for any period, but the main problem will be the effect of annual increases on these statistics. No records have been kept of whether and how posters were displayed but a general customer survey could establish what prompted people to report changes, and whether they saw the posters.

Return to Retrospective Evaluation.

Guidance sheet

Guidance sheets

Guidance sheet 1 – Setting evaluation objectives

Guidance sheet 2 – Summary of collecting information

Guidance sheet 3 – Detailed guidance on collecting information

Guidance sheet 4 – Common problems collecting and analysing data

Guidance sheet 5 – Acting on the evaluation

Guidance sheet

Guidance sheet 1 – Setting evaluation objectives

It is essential that all evaluations have objectives that are:

- **clear:** unambiguous in interpretation
- **comprehensive**: covering the full range of intended evaluation outcomes
- **concentrated**: on the evaluation purpose.

Avoid long ‘shopping lists’ of objectives. These lead to an unfocused evaluation and may introduce conflicting priorities.

Why are you carrying out the evaluation?

- The initiative costs a lot and you need to justify the expenditure
- There is a legislative requirement to evaluate
- You want to monitor the effectiveness of your own work
- Evaluation reports are a good way of sharing good, or bad, practice

What are you measuring?

- The impact of an initiative – the outcome or end results
- The processes, systems and structure of an initiative
- The cost of the initiative

Who is the evaluation for?

- Internal – colleagues or managers, other departments, elected members
- External – partner organisations, auditors, other Local Authorities

What is the timetable?

- Agree when the final report is required
- Decide how often data and information will be collected

Return to main document

Guidance sheet

Guidance sheet 2 – Summary of collecting information

This table outlines some of the different methods that can be used to gain information. Guidance sheet 3 provides more information on how to undertake each of these methods and provides specific information on sampling.

Methods and uses	Advantages	Disadvantages
Existing systems	Low cost, as information is already recorded for other purposes.	May require systems input to extract the data required in a useful format.
Activity sampling is where a record is kept of people's work activities at set times or the time take to undertake specific activities. For example, staff might be asked to record the time taken to carry out a particular communication activity	Is useful for monitoring whether initiative inputs are happening at the right times and taking about the amount of time expected and whether outputs are being produced as expected Is useful for evaluation at pre-planned points Can be used to check whether inputs are having an effect on outcomes.	Can be unreliable if people do not record activity accurately.
Observations are the process of watching what happens or what the environment looks like.	Useful for gaining basic background information that may not be found in written materials Can be used in range of settings including observing meetings, behaviours, locations or situations Is directed by other background data	Information may only be relevant to the time the observation occurs Can be influenced by researchers own perceptions Participants may well change their behaviour if they know they are being observed
Desk research means using existing sources of information, for example published statistics or information from the internet, to measure the effectiveness of an initiative. You should be cautious about material from the internet as it is not always trustworthy.	Can be useful if a comparison with similar initiatives is needed Information can be easily available Low cost.	The researcher may not know what resources are available or select the wrong ones Available data might not be an exact match with the current initiative.

Methods and uses	Advantages	Disadvantages
Postal Questionnaires can be a useful way of collecting information. They need to be well laid out and instructions for completing them have to be clear.	Useful for collecting data from a large number of people Can be flexible and can be designed to meet any requirements Cost effective to produce and administer Anonymity and confidentiality can be maintained.	Can be time consuming to collate If completion is voluntary a high percentage of responses can't be guaranteed You may not get a representative sample to enable broad conclusions to be drawn.
Telephone surveys are a useful way of gathering quantitative and qualitative information from people. Before you carry out a telephone survey you should pick your sample carefully and make sure you have a structured set of questions to ask.	Can collect information from a large sample Can be flexible Able to ask supplementary questions and clarify what the interviewee means. Can be targeted on a particular group of customers or issue.	Can be expensive if lots of long interviews are needed High refusal rate if "cold calling" Interviewer can influence the responses and distort the data May not be a representative sample of the target group.
Face to face interviews are an excellent method of gaining people's views and getting qualitative information. Interviews can be structured, with a set of questions, or unstructured, when the interviewer is able to be flexible about what is discussed.	Useful for exploring people's views and feelings in depth Interviewer is able to clear up any ambiguities in the interviewee's response Can be used with individuals or groups.	Time consuming for the interviewer and interviewee High costs if interview rooms are needed.
Focus groups are a useful way of eliciting people's views as they interact with each other.	Allow you to explore issues in depth as a group People are more comfortable expressing their views as they are with other similar individuals	Time consuming to set up and record information Require a skilled facilitator to ensure information received is worthwhile

Return to Collecting the Information

Return to Retrospective Evaluation

Guidance sheet

Guidance sheet 3 – Detailed guidance on collecting information

This checklist is designed to provide you with guidance on the various data collection methods introduced in Guidance sheet 2. This sheet also provides general advice on sampling and question design.

Use this worksheet to help design your own analyses or assess the quality of proposals put forward by others.

Data from systems and activity sampling

Existing systems

Your existing systems already record and store much information that will be useful. For example, the data provided for Single Housing Benefit Extract will contain a lot of information that could aid in the evaluation of initiatives. Useful data may also be available from HoBOD and HBMS.

However, you could also get more information from your system since it records a great deal of information about the claim and changes of circumstances that occur. You may decide that you would like to track your customers depending on the types of customer contact that you have made, and to generate subsequent reports on this basis. To do this, you may need to make amendments to your system to enter information on how a change was identified, i.e. from self-reporting, through an HBMS match etc. This may involve collecting and then recording more information at customer contact points in order to allow you, for example, to identify whether changes of circumstances forms returned have come from an information pack.

You may find the Tracking Template a useful means of recording and analysing information to aid evaluation. The workbook provides a template for monitoring the outputs for specific activities that count towards the Right Benefit indicator. It also allows the overall cost and the cost-effectiveness of each activity to be estimated. More guidance on data sources and analysis can be found in Best Mix.

Activity sampling

Activity sampling is useful for measuring inputs to an initiative, for example the proportion of time spent on implementing a new activity, where existing systems do not provide the information. It can also be used to record the number of outputs (e.g. information packs sent out, or posters displayed).

Designing the data collection

- Be clear at the outset which activities you are measuring. For example, how long it takes to fold leaflets and put them in envelopes.
- Log the information on a standard template such as a simple spreadsheet or database – this is important if more than one person is carrying out the activity. .
- You can either ask everyone involved in an activity to monitor their time or you can use a sample.
- Give participants the opportunity to comment on how the processes they are undertaking can be made more efficient.

- Try to make sure that participants complete the activity analysis as they go along otherwise people tend to forget how long they actually spent undertaking the individual tasks.

Analysing Responses

- Analyse the responses by calculating the amount of time spent on each activity – this will help you plan timescales if you decide to repeat the initiatives.
- By calculating hourly rates of pay, you can get an idea of the cost of carrying out that part of the initiative. Remember the cost of an initiative includes time taken to carry out tasks that are not part of your team's normal routine.
- If the timescales and milestones are not being met then you should use this information to explore the reasons and if necessary to re-design the timescales or project activities.
- Again Tracking Template may provide a useful means of recording and analysing information gathered through activity sampling on a month by month basis.

Surveys, focus groups and interviews

Types of Questions

Throughout this checklist we refer to open and closed questions and to structured and semi-structured questions. Open questions allow the respondent many different ways to respond whereas closed questions allow only set answers, such as yes or no. The more structure you put into questions asked in interviews, the more closed questions you will have. Responses from closed questions are easier to analyse, open questions provide richer information.

Sampling

It is not usually possible to interview everyone affected by your initiative, so to capture a representative view use sampling. This is where you consult a smaller group of people, and treat their views as representative of the whole population.

There are two different ways you can approach sampling:

- Simple random – choosing people from a list purely at random
- Stratified random – the original list is spilt into different categories such as tenancy type, or passported status and you select at random from within these categories to make sure you cover every customer group involved in the initiative
- Boosted sample – you may decide to include additional people from one group of the sample either because you want to know more about this group or because you feel they are less likely to respond

Larger samples will give better results but only up to a point. The following table provides a guide of what statistical reliability can be placed on different sample sizes.

Sampling tolerance at 95% confidence interval for different %age responses to a question			
Sample size	**10% or 90% response**	**30% or 70% response**	**50% response**
50 respondents	± 9 %	± 13 %	± 14 %
100 respondents	± 6 %	± 9 %	± 10 %
200 respondents	± 4 %	± 6 %	± 7 %
500 respondents	± 3 %	± 4 %	± 4 %
1000 respondents	± 2 %	± 3 %	± 3 %

This means that if 70% of the respondents in a sample of 200 answer yes to a question we can be confident that in 95% of cases this result is within +/- 6% of what the whole population would answer if we could ask them all. The table shows that the margin for error declines steeply to 1000 respondents. After this there is little change until your sample gets to around the 10,000 mark.

Source: Skelcher C., (1998), Research Skills for Busy Managers, University of Birmingham

Return to What Needs to be Done When

Postal questionnaires

Postal questionnaires are a way of getting feedback from a large number of people at a reasonable cost. If you make the postal questionnaires anonymous, you may get more honest opinions than those provided in face-to-face or telephone interviews. However it can be difficult to achieve good response rates. As with other research methods you need to plan carefully the content of the questionnaire, how you will gain responses and also how you will analyse the results.

Preparation

- Decide the objectives of the questionnaire as this will influence the questions you ask and who you send it to, then decide who you will send it to and how many - are you aiming for a cross-section of customers, or customers with particular characteristics?
- Postal questionnaires normally use closed questions with multiple choice answers as they are easier to analyse and are quicker for respondents to answer. If you include some open questions, be aware that free text answers take more time to analyse.
- Make sure that questions are laid out in simple language, without ambiguity and do not lead the respondent to answer in a particular way. You should ensure that any options to questions provided are not biased towards one end of the spectrum. For example do not provide “superb, excellent, very good, good, fair, and poor” as the possible answers.
- Provide an even number of possible responses to questions or people will be more tempted to select the middle answer.
- Avoid asking hypothetical questions and focus on facts.

- Keep questionnaires short by only asking questions that are directly relevant to the information you require.
- Make sure it is clearly presented and easy to read.
- Before sending it out, test it on a small number of people to check how long it takes to answer, if the questions are clear and whether the instructions are easy to follow.

Questionnaire instructions

- Include either a cover sheet or paragraphs at the start of the questionnaire to explain why you are undertaking the survey, how long it should take to complete, who will see the results and how the results will be used. Reassure people that their replies are confidential and inform them when they need to reply. Provide a contact number for queries.
- Instructions should make it clear how to answer questions, for example tick boxes, ring answers or fill in circles.

Improving response rates

You will get a better response if you:

- make the questionnaire short and relevant
- enclose pre-paid return envelopes
- send reminders to people who have not responded by the date given

Analysis

- Simple analysis of closed questions such as totals, percentages, averages and splitting answers by age or gender can be done using a package such as Excel.
- You may have to code the answers, for example yes as 1 and no as 2 etc.
- Summarise the key findings and points that you want to follow-up in more detail.
- Summarise any recommendations made by respondents.

Telephone surveys

Telephone surveys are a quick and cost-effective way of gathering qualitative and quantitative information from a wide range of people. The key to success is thorough planning and preparation to make maximum use of the time available. Allow around 6 weeks for the whole process, including analysing the results.

Planning

- Decide the approximate number of people you want to consult and select your sample, including their telephone number.
- Decide who/how many people will carry out the survey and when it will take place.
- Produce a pro forma questionnaire, with details of the contact, organisation etc. at the top and boxes in which to write the response to each question. This provides a consistent structure for the information you collect and makes it easier to analyse the results.

Carrying out the survey

- Telephone each person, explaining the purpose of the survey and inviting them to participate. Tell them how long the interview is likely to take – you may want to make an initial call to book an appointment for the survey at a later date. Describe who will see the results and how the results will be used. Reassure people that their replies are confidential,
- Try not to run over the time allocated for the call as this will affect the whole day's appointments.
- Try to keep people focused on the question and, if they do start to stray, thank them for the additional information and remind them tactfully of the original question.

Analysing the Survey

- Collate the responses to each question, if necessary by category of respondent..
- Simple analysis of closed questions such as totals, percentages, averages and splitting answers by age or gender can be done using a package such as Excel.
- You may have to code the answers, for example yes as 1 and no as 2 etc.
- Summarise the key findings and points that you want to follow-up in more detail.
- Summarise any recommendations made by respondents.

Face-to-Face Interviews

Face-to-face interviews are a rich source of information and can be used to augment a postal or telephone survey. You can use interviews at the end of your initiative, or to consult people at various points during the initiative. It can be useful to meet 3-4 people working from a partner organisation to gain a broader perspective of the initiative. As with other consultation processes, you need to define clear objectives before beginning the interviews.

Preparation

- Identify your objectives for carrying out the interviews and how the results will contribute to the wider evaluation process.
- Draw up a list of who you intend to consult and what they can contribute.
- Contact each person, explaining the purpose of the interview and inviting them to participate. If they are unable or unwilling to meet, ask them to suggest alternative contacts.
- Agree a date, time, place and approximate length of the meeting. Confirm this in writing, together with an overview of the initiative and the objectives of the consultation.
- Produce a template of what you want to cover in the interview. This could be a structured questionnaire or simply key headings. Keeping it more open-ended will allow the interviewee(s) to focus on issues they are most knowledgeable or concerned about.
- Decide whether you intend to use a tape recorder during the interviews. It can be difficult to carry out an in-depth interview and make comprehensive notes at the same time. However, some people can find it inhibiting being recorded, and it is time consuming to listen through tapes and make notes afterwards, especially if you are conducting a number of interviews.

The interview

- Begin by reiterating the purpose of the consultation and an overview of your initiative. Confirm how you will use the information provided during the interview and whether or not their responses will be confidential. If you have prepared a structured questionnaire, give a brief overview of the areas you intend to cover.
- If you wish to record responses always ask if this is acceptable to the interviewee.
- If you have prepared set questions and are not taping the meeting, use your template to record responses.
- Use open questions i.e. why, when, where, to probe people's responses more deeply.
- Give them time at the end of the meeting to ask questions they may have about the initiative and the evaluation process.
- Summarise the key points they have raised to check you have correctly interpreted their views. Confirm again how the results of the interviews will be used and ask if they would be happy to be contacted again at a later date if required.
- Thank them for contributing to the consultation and alert them to any future activity that may interest them.

Analysing responses

You can collate the information in several ways:

- Individual meeting summaries, highlighting interviewees' perspectives, the main issues raised, recommendations for future action.
- Summaries of non-attributable responses to specific questions across the series of interviews, perhaps indicating the source's type of agency or organisation.
- Identification of consistent messages that have emerged, together with any contradictory views and areas for further investigation.

Focus groups

Focus groups are an effective way of gathering qualitative information and anecdotal evidence from a wide range of interested parties. Typically they involve a group of between 8-10 people meeting with a facilitator for 1 –1½ hours. The facilitator must be skilled in managing group dynamics and keeping the discussion focused on the issues s/he is investigating. Focus groups are often used to augment and support other evaluation processes, for example, testing initial findings from postal or telephone surveys.

Preparation

- Identify your objectives for the focus group and how the results will contribute to the wider evaluation process.
- Decide if you need to convene groups with a specific profile – all working age, standard cases, or a generic group.
- Over-subscribe the group by 3-4 people as not everyone will attend on the day.
- Hold focus groups in the evening or at weekends according to people's availability.
- Choose a venue where you can meet without interruption that is convenient for group members e.g. local community centres.

- If you are capturing key points on a flipchart or notes, a scribe makes it easier for the facilitator to concentrate on developing and steering the discussion.
- Prepare a framework of headings and questions to give the meeting structure.

Running the group

- Begin by explaining the purpose of the focus group and give an overview of your initiative. Confirm how you will use the information from the focus group and that their responses will be non-attributable. Run through the general structure of the meeting.
- Note the number of people attending, their gender, age group(s) and other relevant criteria.
- Start by asking for views on broad, relevant issues and then move into more specific areas for discussion. Use open questions i.e. why, when, where, to probe peoples' responses more deeply.
- Make sure that everyone has the opportunity to contribute their views - there will usually be a few people who have a lot to say. Whilst their views can be valuable, it is important not to let them dominate the group and exclude others. Give people time at the end to ask questions they may have about the initiative and the evaluation process.
- Summarise the key points they have raised to check you have correctly interpreted their views and confirm how you will use the information.
- Thank participants for contributing to the focus group and alert them to any future activity that may interest them.

Analysing responses

- Summarise the key points raised during each focus group under the headings in your framework, including recommendations for future action. Identify if views were predominantly expressed by particular categories of participants. Use quotes, if possible, to illustrate points raised.
- Draw out the consistent messages that have emerged across the groups, highlighting any contradictory views and areas for further investigation.

Return to Collecting the Information

Return to Analysing the data

Guidance sheet

Guidance sheet 4 – Common problems collecting and analysing data

This guidance sheet gives you information about common problems you may encounter when gathering and analysing data. Use this checklist to ensure that you collect high quality data and assess it effectively.

Collecting data

There are some issues that you should be aware of when collecting data as they will make your evaluation less effective. These include:

- **Logistics:** make sure that everyone knows what is expected of them and that the information to be collected is realistic given the scale of the initiative.
- **Unclean data:** data often contains errors, for example, misspellings. If data is being provided from elsewhere you need to ensure that such errors are corrected so that important information is not missed.
- **Too much information:** people engaged in the process can provide too much information, resulting in time and resources wasted analysing it. Keep to the evaluation plan and only analyse information that will measure what you have set out to do.

Analysing and Interpreting Data

- **Underlying trends:** Use normalisation to account for factors such as changes in caseload.
- **Identify other initiatives** so that you can try to account for the effects in your evaluation. For example, while you are running a publicity campaign, there may be another campaign relating to reporting changes of circumstances being run by another agency, or a neighbouring LA. If you cannot estimate the effect quantitatively, you can discuss qualitatively the likely effects.
- **Unexpected outcomes:** although you should always be measuring against your objectives and targets do not be blinkered from looking for things that occurred that were unexpected. Consider both beneficial and adverse unexpected outcomes.

Return to Collecting the Data

Return to Analysing the Data

Guidance sheet

Guidance sheet 5 – Acting on the evaluation

This guidance sheet lists some questions to ask after you have undertaken your evaluation. It will help you to decide how to use the results.

You can complete this worksheet by yourself or as a group. Ensure you provide as much information, and are as objective, as possible.

- Should the initiative be continued in the same format?

- Should the initiative be repeated elsewhere or for additional customer groups?

- How should the initiative be adapted to take account of weaknesses?

- What are the new priorities of the broader policy area?

- What is the problem/issue we are now trying to solve?

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