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first steps in monitoring and evaluation

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acknowledgements

inside this booklet

introduction

Voluntary organisations want to show that they are working to high standards and that they really are making a difference. They are also under increasing pressure from funders and the government to demonstrate how well they are doing and what works. But organisations may be put off evaluation by a belief that it is a job for experts, or by monitoring and evaluation jargon. People may also be worried about the risk of adding to their workload.

Monitoring and evaluation both need commitment, planning and some investment of time, but this booklet will show you that you can do them with the resources you already have. It should also reassure you that you probably already have many of the skills you need.

this booklet

This booklet has been developed particularly for small voluntary organisations and projects with little or no experience of monitoring and evaluation. The term 'project' is used throughout, for simplicity, but the principles described can be applied to any voluntary or community organisation.

The booklet uses everyday language and gives you a practical, five-step, easy-to-follow approach to evaluating your own project. We will use a family centre as an example to demonstrate each step. If you apply the five steps to your project, you will gain fresh insight into what you do. This will strengthen the whole project and improve its performance.

what is monitoring and evaluation?

Monitoring is about collecting information that will help you answer questions about your project. It is important that this information is collected in a planned, organised and routine way. You can use the information you gather to report on your project and to help you evaluate.

Evaluation is about using monitoring and other information you collect to make judgements about your project. It is also about using the information to make changes and improvements.

Why should you evaluate?

Monitoring and evaluation are important for two main reasons.

For learning and development
Monitoring and evaluating your services will help you assess how well you are doing and help you do it better. It is about asking what has happened and why – what is and what is not working. It is about using evaluation to learn more about an organisation's activities, and then using what has been learnt.

For accountability – to show others that you are effective
Funders and other sponsors want to know whether a project has spent its money in the right way. There is pressure from funders to provide them with 'proof' of success. Many projects have to respond to this demand in order to survive.

What is self-evaluation?

When an organisation uses its own people and their skills to carry out evaluation, this is known as self-evaluation. Monitoring and evaluation is built into the everyday activities of the project so that it becomes part of what you do. This booklet shows you the first steps to self-evaluation.

the five-step approach to monitoring and evaluation

Voluntary organisations have to be clear about what they are trying to achieve and need to develop specific aims and objectives. This is increasingly important for funders, other agencies and for service users. There are many approaches to evaluation. The approach this booklet describes is a model of self-evaluation that recognises this emphasis on aims and objectives.

Each of the five steps in the approach is coded using a different colour.

Step 1
What are your aims?

Your aims are the changes you are trying to achieve in the main group or groups you work with.

Step 2
What are your objectives?

Your objectives are the activities you carry out to achieve your aims. In other words, how will you bring about these changes?

Step 3
What are your performance indicators?

These are the things you check to see how well your project is doing. In other words, how will you know you are bringing about a change?

Step 4
Monitoring – how well are you doing?

You need to monitor to find out whether you are achieving your aims and objectives. Monitoring is the routine and systematic collection of information. This will tell you about your activities and whether the project is making a difference.

Step 5
Evaluation – what change have you made?

You evaluate, that is, you consider all the information you have collected and make a judgement about your project.

We will work through each of these steps in turn.

step 1
what are your aims?

It is useful to review your project's aims and objectives when you start your self-evaluation, to make sure they are clear and appropriate. It is also important to distinguish clearly between your aims and your objectives.

Aims describe the changes you want to see in your target group.

What is a target group? This term refers to the main group or groups you are working with and the people your service is intended for. For example, the target group of the family centre is the children and parents identified as most needing and likely to benefit from its activities.

The aims of the family centre describe the changes it wants for those children and parents.

It is useful to break aims down into two different parts. We can call the first part an overall aim. The **overall aim** of the family centre is '*to improve the lives of the children who use the centre*'. This describes in broad, general terms the change the family centre wants to see in its target group. Some organisations call their overall aim a 'mission statement'.

The overall aim is likely to be too broad a statement to allow you to plan your work in detail or to provide guidance on what you might monitor and evaluate. It is helpful, therefore, to break the overall aim down into **specific aims**. These are more precise statements about different aspects of your overall aim.

What does the family centre mean by 'to improve the lives of the children?' It means three specific things:

- to improve the parenting skills of the parents using the centre

- to increase children's self-esteem

- to help parents give each other support.

You can now check more easily how you are doing by monitoring and evaluating in relation to each separate aim. You may wish to break your overall aim down into more than three statements. Some projects have four or five specific aims.

checklist

It is helpful to keep the following points in mind when agreeing your aims:

- **Use language that will be helpful.**
  People tend to use verbs that describe change when setting their aims, such as *to increase*, *to promote*, *to improve*, *to reduce*, *to enable* or *to develop*.

- **Be clear about your target group.**
  Who are you working with? Which group or groups will change or benefit as a result of the project?

- **Be clear about the geographical area you will work in.**

- **Make sure everyone in the project is clear about its aims.**
  Does everyone understand what each aim means? Try to involve as many people as possible throughout the project when you set your aims.

Remember that it is important to take time to discuss and decide your aims. You will find it more difficult to set the right objectives and to evaluate the project if your aims are unclear. Make sure you cover all the points in the checklist before you go on to the next step.

Once you have agreed on the change you want to bring about, the next step is to think about how you are going to do this – by setting your *objectives*.

step 2
what are your objectives?

Objectives are the practical activities you carry out to bring about a change in your target group – that is, to achieve your aims.

The family centre has four objectives:

■ to provide workshops, information and advice on parenting skills

■ to provide opportunities for play, drama and dancing

■ to run a drop-in centre with a play area

■ to organise outings for parents.

These were decided on by looking at each aim in turn. They then discussed: 'What do we need to do as an organisation to achieve this aim?'

The objectives relate to the family centre's three specific aims in the following way:

Specific aim one	Objectives
To improve the parenting skills of the parents using the centre	So they: ■ provide workshops, information and advice on parenting skills ■ run a drop-in centre ■ organise outings for parents.

Specific aim two	Objectives
To increase children's self-esteem	So they: ■ provide opportunities for play, drama and dancing ■ run a drop-in centre with a play area.

Specific aim three	Objectives
To help parents give each other support	So they: ■ provide workshops, information and advice on parenting skills ■ organise outings for parents.

There is a direct link between each aim and its objectives. In order to achieve some aims, it may be necessary to carry out several different activities. Therefore, each aim may have more than one objective and some objectives may relate to more than one aim.

It is helpful to keep the following points in mind when setting your objectives:

- **Use language that will be helpful.**
  People tend to use verbs which describe action when setting their objectives, such as *to organise*, *to produce*, *to conduct*, *to set up*, *to run* or *to provide*.

  Using different types of words for your aims and objectives will help you keep them distinct from one another.

- **Be realistic.**
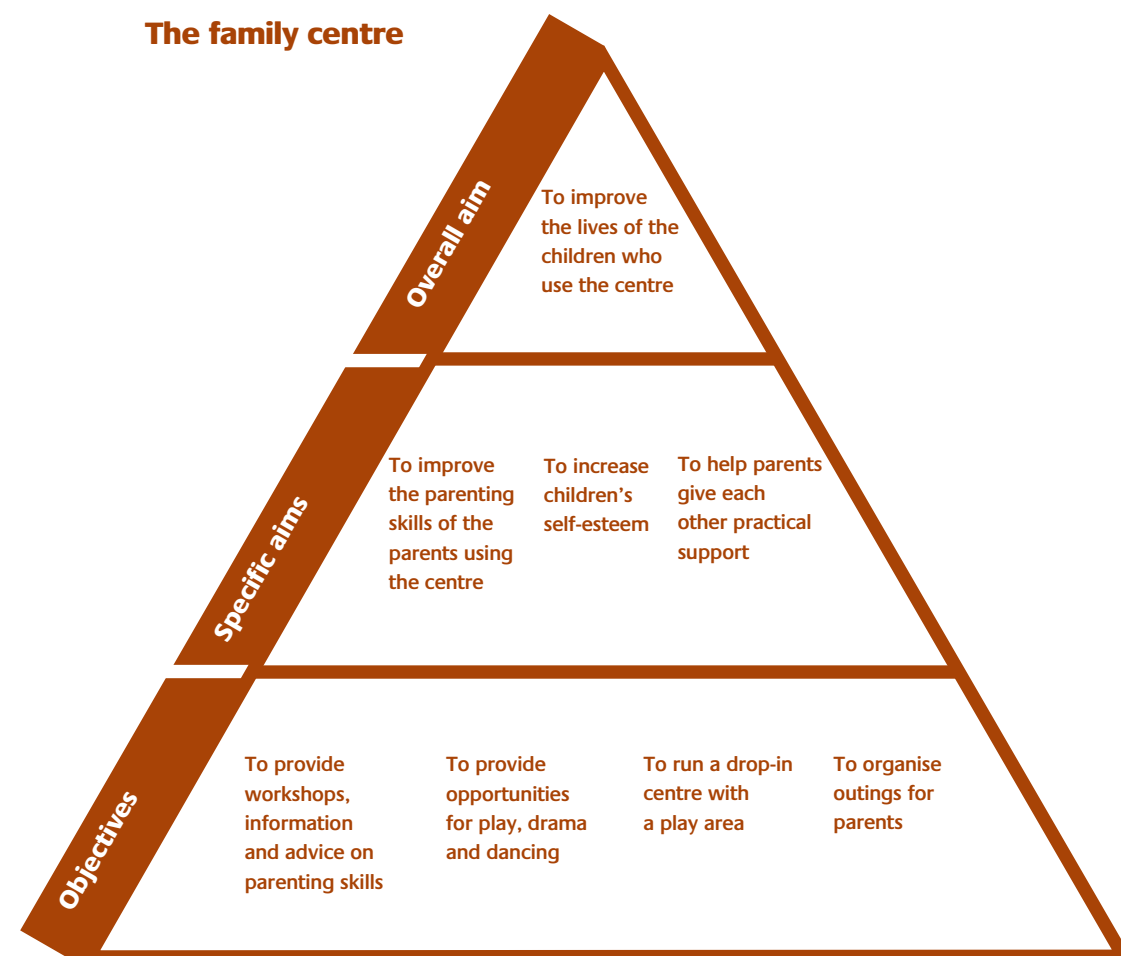 Don't be over-ambitious. Make sure you have:
  − sufficient financial resources
  − enough staff or volunteers
  − enough time to run each activity.

- **Limit the number of aims and objectives and make them as focused as you can.**

Review your aims and objectives from time to time. You may find that you need to change them in the light of new information.

The triangle diagram below shows how to organise aims and objectives. It shows how all the aims and objectives of the family centre feed directly into the overall aim. We suggest that you draw up a similar triangle for your own project.

The family centre

Overall aim
To improve the lives of the children who use the centre

Specific aims
To improve the parenting skills of the parents using the centre

To increase children's self-esteem

To help parents give each other practical support

Objectives
To provide workshops, information and advice on parenting skills

To provide opportunities for play, drama and dancing

To run a drop-in centre with a play area

To organise outings for parents

Once you have described your project in clear statements, with an overall aim, specific aims and objectives, you will be able to move on to the next step. Step 3 will help you to decide what information you need to collect and to assess how well you are doing. It is about setting *performance indicators*.

step 3 what are your performance indicators?

Performance indicators will help you assess the progress and success of the project. There are different types of performance indicator. Here are the two types that we use in this booklet:

Output indicators help you to assess the work generated by the project and to show progress towards meeting your *objectives*.

Outcome indicators help you to assess the changes that take place as a result of your project, and show progress towards meeting your *aims*.

What is an output indicator?

Once you have set your objectives, you will be able to describe your project activities in more detail and in ways that can be evaluated. The term output is used to describe the project's activities, services and products. Outputs are the work generated by the project. You will need to identify outputs relating to each objective.

Example **Objective:** To provide workshops, information and advice on parenting skills.

The family centre identified the main outputs relating to this objective as:

- workshops
- information and advice sessions
- information leaflets.

Once you have identified outputs, you can agree on indicators for them.

Output indicators may be set for the following:

- **quantity** – the number of services you run or products you deliver
- **take-up** – the number of people or organisations who use your service or products

- **access** – the type of people or organisations who use your service or products.

Output indicators will help you answer important questions about your outputs. For example, the family centre wanted to know:

- the number of workshops and advice sessions the centre had run in a year and the number of information leaflets (quantity)
- the number of people coming to workshops and advice sessions (take-up)
- the profile of people attending, for example, their age, ethnic background and the proportion of men to women (access).

For the family centre staff, an assessment could then be made about how the workshops and the information and advice services were running.

You can ask similar questions about quantity, take-up and access in relation to each objective.

checklist

It is helpful to bear in mind the following points when setting your output indicators:

- **Be realistic.**
  Don't set too many indicators. Think about your existing workload, your financial resources and the staff and volunteers available to help you run your activities.

- **Choose the most important indicators.**
  Limit their number so that you collect only the information you need most to answer your evaluation questions.

Knowing if or how you are achieving your objectives is only half the story. It is also important to know whether you are actually bringing about the change you wanted. In the case of the family centre, are the lives of the children using the centre improved?

What is an outcome indicator?

Outcome indicators will help you measure whether you really are bringing about the change you want.

First, you need to break down your aims into all the different changes or benefits that you hope will take place as a result of project activities. These changes are known as outcomes.

Example **Aim:** To increase children's self-esteem

In order to decide on the outcomes, the family centre needs to think about what it means by 'increase self-esteem'. What different changes will show the family centre that the children have increased self-esteem?

The family centre can identify three main changes that will show this. The children would be more:

■ able to make their own choices

■ confident with other children and adults

■ comfortable about doing things independently.

When you are clear about the outcomes you want, you can then identify indicators for each outcome. These will show you, or indicate, if changes have occurred. On the next page is a list of what the family centre thinks might happen that will show that the children's self-esteem is increasing.

Specific aim: To increase children's self-esteem

Outcomes	Outcome indicators
Children are more able to make their own choices	How often children initiate play with other children and adults
Children are more confident with other children and adults	Levels of interaction with other children and adults
Children are more comfortable about doing things independently	How often children choose to do things without their parents

Break down each of your specific aims into their outcomes and outcome indicators, working through the process shown above.

Take each of your aims and ask, 'What changes (outcomes) do we want to see in our users and what signs (outcome indicators) will show us that the change we hoped for has happened?'

checklist

It is helpful to bear in mind the following points when you are setting your outcome indicators:

■ **Limit the number of indicators, so that you only collect information that will help you evaluate the project.**
There is no point collecting information that you don't need.

■ **Make your outcome indicators user-friendly.**
Will it be easy, or even possible, to collect the information you need against the indicators you have chosen?

When you have agreed your performance indicators, you need to keep a regular check on both your output and outcome indicators to see whether you are achieving them. The next step is to collect information about them. This will help you answer your evaluation questions.

step 4
monitoring

Once you are clear about your aims, objectives and performance indicators, you can check systematically on progress. This checking process is known as *monitoring*.

When you monitor, you can collect information on a wide variety of things relevant to the project. You are most likely to need information on:

- **your outputs** – how your activities are running, and progress towards meeting your objectives

- **your outcomes** – to check the changes resulting from your activities, and progress towards meeting your aims.

Monitoring outputs

To see how they were meeting the objective '*to provide workshops, information and advice on parenting skills*', the family centre asked:

- How many workshops and advice sessions were run?

- How often were the workshops and advice sessions run?

- How many people attended the workshops and advice sessions?

- What was the proportion of men and women attending?

- Where did those attending come from?

To collect this information, the family centre used three different methods:

- A register taken at the beginning of each session showed how many people attended the workshops and advice sessions.

- A diary was used to record how often and how many workshops and advice sessions were run over one year.

- The sex and home address of each participant who attended the workshop and advice sessions were collected and entered onto a database.

By monitoring this information, the family centre could see whether it needed to make any changes in the way it was running the workshops and advice sessions. The staff discovered that fewer people attended the Friday morning workshops than the Saturday morning ones. When they asked why, they found out that the Friday morning sessions clashed with the mother and baby clinic. So they changed the workshop to a Wednesday afternoon instead.

It is important to collect information about your outputs, for example, about whether your activities are running as planned. However, you also need to monitor outcomes to find out whether the changes you hoped for have happened, and whether there are any unexpected results.

Monitoring outcomes

You may find collecting information about outcomes more difficult, as it could involve collecting information about people's behaviour and attitudes.

To collect information about whether the aim 'to increase children's self-esteem' was being met, the family centre asked several questions. Here are some of them:

- How aware were children of different options and how often did they make positive choices between them?

- Who did children talk to and play with? How often?

- How often and when did children initiate activities?

- How dependent was each child on others for different things?

To collect this information the family centre staff did the following:

- observed the children and recorded in a **log-book** when the children initiated play with adults and other children

- observed and noted in a **log-book** the levels of interaction with adults and other children

- asked the parents, using a **questionnaire**, whether they thought their children chose to do more things without them over a period of time.

The log-book showed that most children did initiate play with adults and other children more often the longer they came to the centre. The feedback from the questionnaires filled out by parents showed occasions when the children still relied on them. It also showed that many children became increasingly comfortable about talking and playing with other children and adults after spending some time at the centre. There were differences between individual children.

When you have collected the information about each of your aims and objectives, you will need to look back and make judgements about your project. Step 5 is about *evaluation*.

checklist

It is helpful to bear in mind the following points when you are deciding how to collect monitoring information:

- **Think about ways of collecting information that will fit best with your project.**

  - **You may want to collect information by carefully observing your activities. The family centre staff observed the children's behaviour when they were playing to see whether any changes occurred over a period of time.**

  - **Asking questions: You could use a written questionnaire or hold group or individual discussions to find out whether any changes have occurred.**

  - **Using records: You could use log-books, registers, databases, case notes or diaries to collect and record information.**

  Try to think creatively of other ways of collecting information.

- **Be clear about who will collect each piece of information and when to do it.**

- **Make sure you explain to people collecting information why they are doing it and how you will use it.**

- **Make sure that monitoring records are completed fully and accurately, and stored safely and confidentially.**

- **Once your system functions well, write it down and make it part of your project procedures.**

step 5
evaluation

Evaluation is about making sense of the information you have collected and making a judgement about your project.

The work you do when you carry out the first four steps will help provide a basis on which to make informed judgements. You will have:

- **clear aims** – the changes you want to see

- **clear objectives** – the activities you carry out to bring about the changes

- **output and outcome indicators** – guiding you on the information to collect to make judgements

- **a monitoring system** – to collect relevant information.

You can use the information you collect to help you answer the following questions:

- **Did the project achieve its aims? Did it make the changes you hoped for? If your project did not achieve its aims, why not?**

- **Did the project achieve its objectives? Did its activities run as planned? If not, why not? What worked well and what not so well? Did you reach your target group?**

- **What else have you learnt from the evaluation? What else has it told you, for example, about the way the project works, your management support, staffing and other resources?**

Take time to consider what the information is telling you. The answers to these questions will feed into your planning process, helping you to identify the developments you want to make to future work plans.

Remember also to learn about how your monitoring and evaluation worked. Think about how you might do it differently next time, if necessary.

Reporting the results

How you share and use the results of your monitoring and evaluation is very important. Think about who would be interested in the results and how that information should be reported.

You are likely to need a written report for your funders. However, there may be many other people interested in the evaluation, such as your users, your trustees, staff and donors. So take these different groups of people into account when thinking about how to report your evaluation.

As well as a written report, think creatively about other ways of reporting information. Here are some ideas:
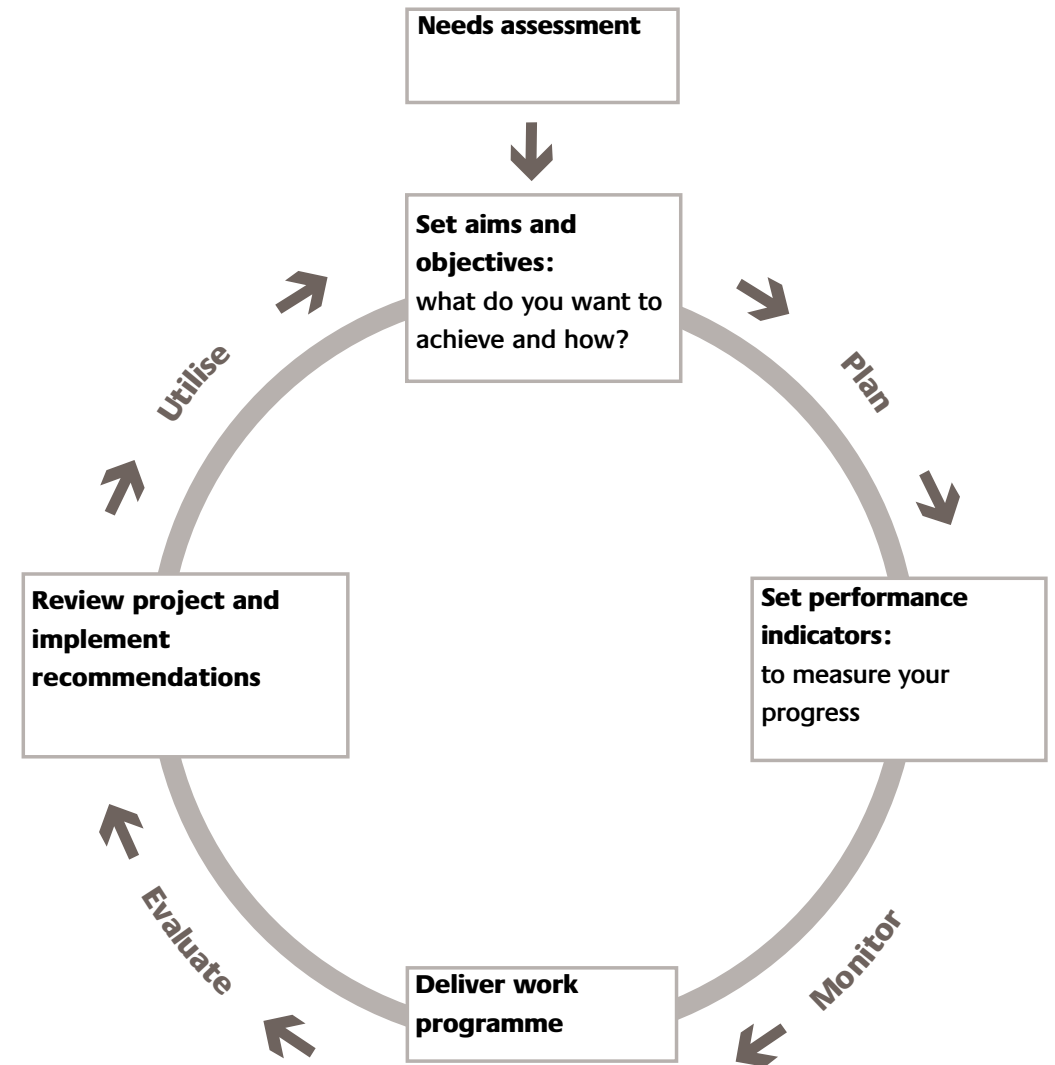
- annual reports

- training events

- conferences

- meetings

- videos

- newspaper articles

- radio interviews

- your website

- newsletters.

When you are deciding on how to report your results, think not only about who your audience is, but also about how you want to use your evaluation findings. Remember that evaluation is meant to be used.

the self-evaluation cycle

Once you have carried out all the five steps of the self-evaluation process, you will have reported your evaluation findings. However, the process should not stop there. Most important, you now need to agree how to feed back your learning into your daily work and the project's future development.

The cycle of self-evaluation on the next page shows how evaluation should be a continual process which is built into your annual work plan. This will help your project to remain healthy and to provide services that are of the highest quality. Above all, it will help the work you do make a **real difference**.

Needs assessment

Set aims and objectives: what do you want to achieve and how?

Plan

Set performance indicators: to measure your progress

Monitor

Deliver work programme

Evaluate

Review project and implement recommendations

Utilise

Now that you have reached the end of this guide, you may want further guidance. _Practical monitoring and evaluation: a guide for voluntary sector organisations_ is also published by CES. This has been designed to take you from the first steps through to a more advanced level of evaluation. It includes a practical toolkit with guidance on collecting and analysing information, and writing reports.

about
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Charities Evaluation Services (CES) is an independent charity with unrivalled expertise in monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance systems in the voluntary sector.

CES produces a range of publications, including PQASSO, the quality system specially designed for small and medium sized voluntary organsiations.

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