



Reimagining Evaluation

A guide to evaluating differently

The
Evaluation
Exchange



Introduction

Evaluation is often seen as something external—something done to people, a way to ‘measure success’ independently, from the outside. But what if we **reimagine** it? Instead of a tool for assessment and judgement, evaluation can be a shared process of learning, reflection and adaptation.

Reimagining evaluation means designing it with those involved, valuing different perspectives, and ensuring that a diversity of voices shape how success is understood.

It’s about making evaluation appropriate, inclusive, and useful—not just at the end of a project, but throughout, as a way to strengthen relationships, improve practice, and create (not just assess) meaningful impacts.

This guide is for those who want to take a different—inclusive approach to evaluation. The guide is drawn from the work of the Evaluation Exchange.

Background



Why evaluate?

Evaluation is a continuous process that helps you:

- Collect information to measure the difference your project is making.
- Learn what works, what doesn't and why.
- Report findings and use them to improve your work.

Adapted from '*Why Bother Involving People in Evaluation?*'
– Evaluation Support Scotland, 2020

What is participatory evaluation (*and why is it needed*)?

Participatory evaluation means designing, conducting and co-producing evaluation activities with those involved in and affected by a project or programme. Unlike ‘traditional’ evaluations—where an external evaluator assesses a project at fixed points—this approach ensures that decisions about the evaluation are shaped by a range of people, including those involved, and those affected by the project. This creates a learning process that includes the experiences and needs of the people involved.

Although traditional evaluations can provide useful overviews of projects (e.g. Key Performance Indicators), they are often limited in reflecting the complexities of projects and fail to capture the full range of voices and stories that make up a project’s journey. They might measure outcomes or impacts based on fixed expectations but overlook the nuances and realities of how projects unfold. Where collaboration and participation are at the heart of social impact, it makes sense to reflect this in the evaluation approach adopted too.

What is the Evaluation Exchange?

The Evaluation Exchange is delivered by a team from UCL and Compost London CIC in response to demand from community organisations and groups for more meaningful support to improve how they evaluate their work. We challenge traditional power dynamics, shifting research and evaluation away from a transactional and extractive process to an open and inclusive approach. It draws upon participatory practice, in which we support the groups and people with lived experience of the issues being researched and evaluated to take part in directing and conducting the evaluation. It offers a real-world, impactful application of students’ and researchers’ knowledge; builds new research and evaluation skills for all those involved; and fosters valuable networks between UCL, the voluntary and community sector and the communities involved.

Introduction

Our 9 Tips for 'Reimagining Evaluation'



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Tip 1

Planning in uncertainty

Projects evolve over time, making it hard to plan evaluation activities, but uncertainty doesn't mean you can't have a plan. Creating a flexible structure helps people feel part of the project's evolution and ensures evaluation remains a shared process.

Key questions to ask when planning an evaluation:

- What do we want to learn and why?
- How can we collect information in a meaningful and respectful way?
- Who should be involved at each stage?
- How do we ensure different perspectives are included?

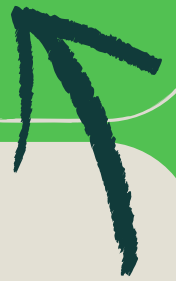
Resource

It's never too early to start talking about evaluation — we developed **'the building blocks tool'** to support evaluation planning.

The building blocks to co-produce an evaluation plan help teams consider key questions about their evaluation. The exercise aims to unearth shared ideas and potential differences between those in the team that may need to be explored and resolved, and encourage those who may have preconceived ideas on the evaluation to 're-think' if needed.

[Link to building blocks tool](#) 

Evaluation question




How?

Why?

What?

Who?

Context



“The *Deepening Practice* sessions are very helpful! Time to reflect on progress, hear about and learn from other teams and their experiences of co-production and evaluation. Felt like a lovely supportive community.”

Tip 2

Ongoing reflection and adaptation

Evaluation shouldn't just happen at the start and the end of a project—it should be part of an ongoing learning process.

A range of methods can be used to reflect and adapt along the way, such as:

- Online platforms (e.g. Miro or Padlet) for project members to log reflections.
- Regular check-ins at the start and end of meetings or activities.
- One-to-one sessions for deeper conversations.

Example from practice

Within the *Measuring Success in Co-production: Learning by Doing* programme, the Evaluation Exchange coordinated the design of and led on the delivery of 'Deepening Practice sessions'. This involved supporting 8 project teams over a 12-month programme. Our sessions focused on planning and reflecting on evaluation, sharing experiences, and providing a supportive forum for discussion. The sessions were attended by approximately 25 team members across the projects. We developed a range of participatory activities to encourage reflection, including '**the reflection river**', a facilitation exercise we created and adapted. Sessions also included opportunities for skills development.

Teams appreciated the time and space the *Deepening Practice* sessions provided to come together and share their evaluation plans and activities.

Reflection river exercise 

Tip 3

Addressing power and ensuring inclusivity


Evaluation isn't neutral, it's shaped by who decides what is measured and how.

We recommend:

- Power dynamics must be openly discussed to ensure everyone feels comfortable participating.
- Technical jargon can be a barrier—simplifying language helps people engage.
- Using creative tools (e.g. videos, illustrations, and storytelling) can ensure a diversity of voices are heard.

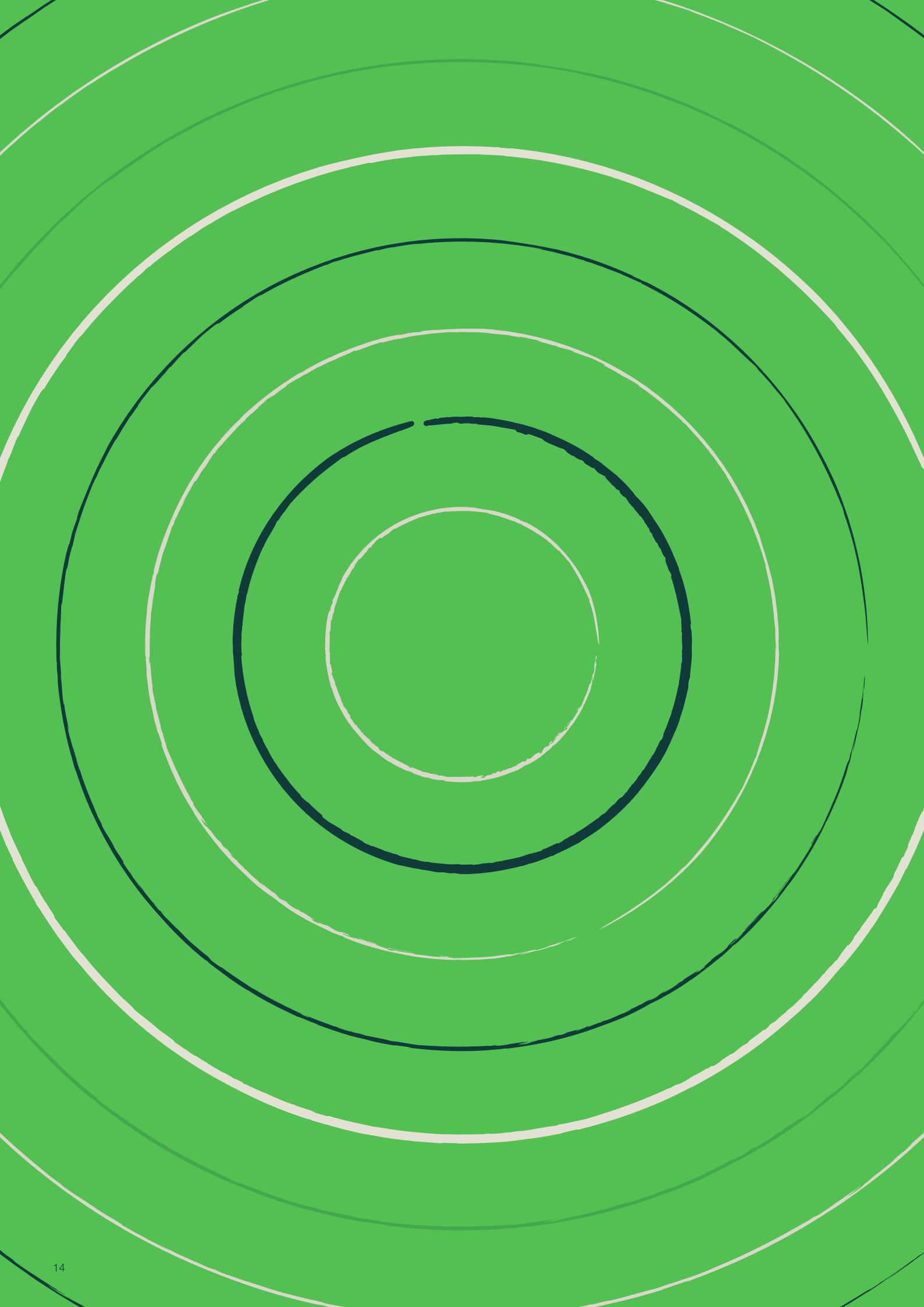
Spotlight

Within the Evaluation Exchange programme homelessness charity Caritas Anchor House (CAH) worked with a team of UCL students and early career researchers to redesign their evaluation process. They were keen to adjust their evaluation approach to be more inclusive of the people who access their services. The team used an evaluation method called Nominal Group Technique (NGT) working with residents. Through these sessions the team collected a large amount of information to inform the service that CAH provides. The NGT sessions proved to be extremely popular amongst residents.



“We did then invest in things as a result of what they wanted. It changed our relationship with the service users from one that was just provider of service/receiver of service to something slightly different and more equitable.”

Caritas Anchor House (CAH)



Tip 4

Tailoring evaluation so it is appropriate for your context

No single evaluation method works for every project or group. It's important to tailor your approach to suit your project and the people you're working with.

This could include:

- Adjusting surveys to include visual elements (e.g. 'bullseye' tools for feedback).
- Using creative methods like drawings, poems, or video diaries.
- Conversation-based approaches rather than written forms.

You can adapt how you collect data depending on your audience, but core evaluation questions should stay the same to allow for comparison.

Resource

The best evaluation approach is the one that works for your team and project. We developed the **'methods cards'**, which we use in training and support session, to provide some methodological options for project teams and organisations.

The exercise is used to help teams, partners, organisations and all those involved in the evaluation, including beneficiaries and users, to explore the method cards together and discuss which evaluation methods will work best for them and the project.

[Contact for method cards](#) 

Tip 5

Valuing different knowledges

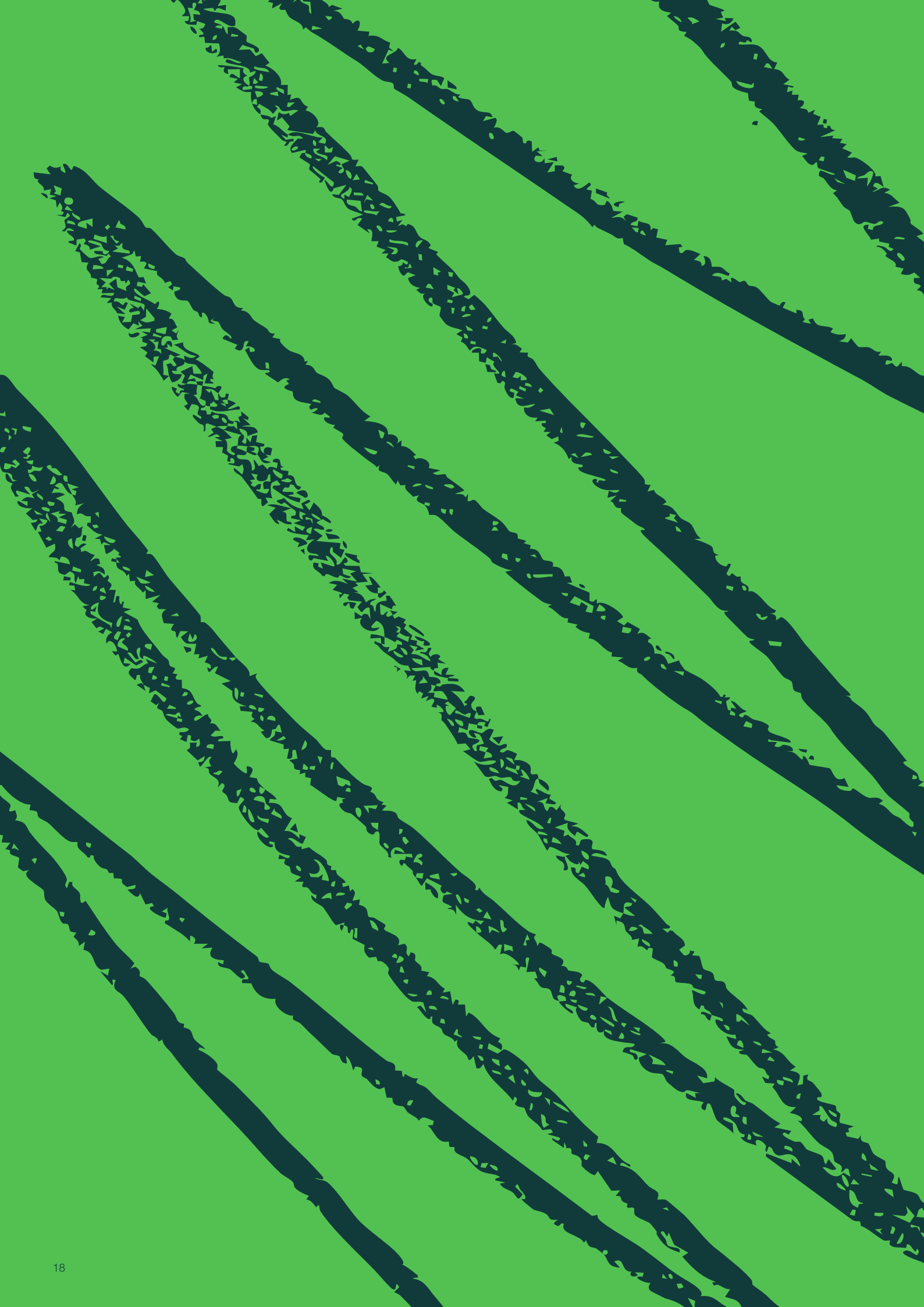
Evaluation can provide the opportunity for diverse forms of knowledge to come together. Every individual involved in a project brings their own unique perspective and expertise—whether it's practical knowledge, academic insight, or lived experience, each form of knowledge plays a vital role in shaping how we understand the project's or activities' processes and impacts.

Lessons learned

Evaluation practice in the voluntary and community sector must reflect the unique needs, challenges, and complexities these organisations face. There's growing emphasis on participatory, collaborative and transformative approaches, but putting evaluation knowledge into practice remains difficult. People may understand the '**know-how**', yet struggle with the '**how-to**'.

The Evaluation Exchange aims to bridge this gap by connecting expertise with practical application. By matching postgraduate students and researchers with community organisations, the programme offers hands-on experience in applying research skills in real-world contexts. Participants work in a truly transdisciplinary environment, gaining insights into both academic and community sectors. Our structured learning programme helps turn understanding into effective practice.





Tip 6

Capturing the process, not just the outcomes

Evaluation isn't just about whether a project succeeds; it's also about how the work is done.

A reimagined evaluation can focus on things like:

- Individual contributions and personal growth.
- Team relationships and challenges faced.
- How participation itself evolved over time.

Resource

Evaluation isn't just about numbers—stories, relationships and emotions matter too! Within the **Trellis programme**, the Evaluation Exchange ran a series of training sessions for the artist-researcher collaborations to build confidence and capabilities in evaluation.

The conversations at these sessions revealed a tension regarding the requirement to capture the importance and value of work i.e. 'success', and its uncomfortable nature of 'judging' such collaborations. To overcome this tension the focus of the evaluations was not only on the outputs (i.e. evaluating visitors' experiences of the artwork) but also the process. Furthermore, creative methods were used to allow people to tell their stories more easily. For instance, a graphic illustrator captured the reflections from the collaborators.

Tip 7

Embracing multiple perspectives

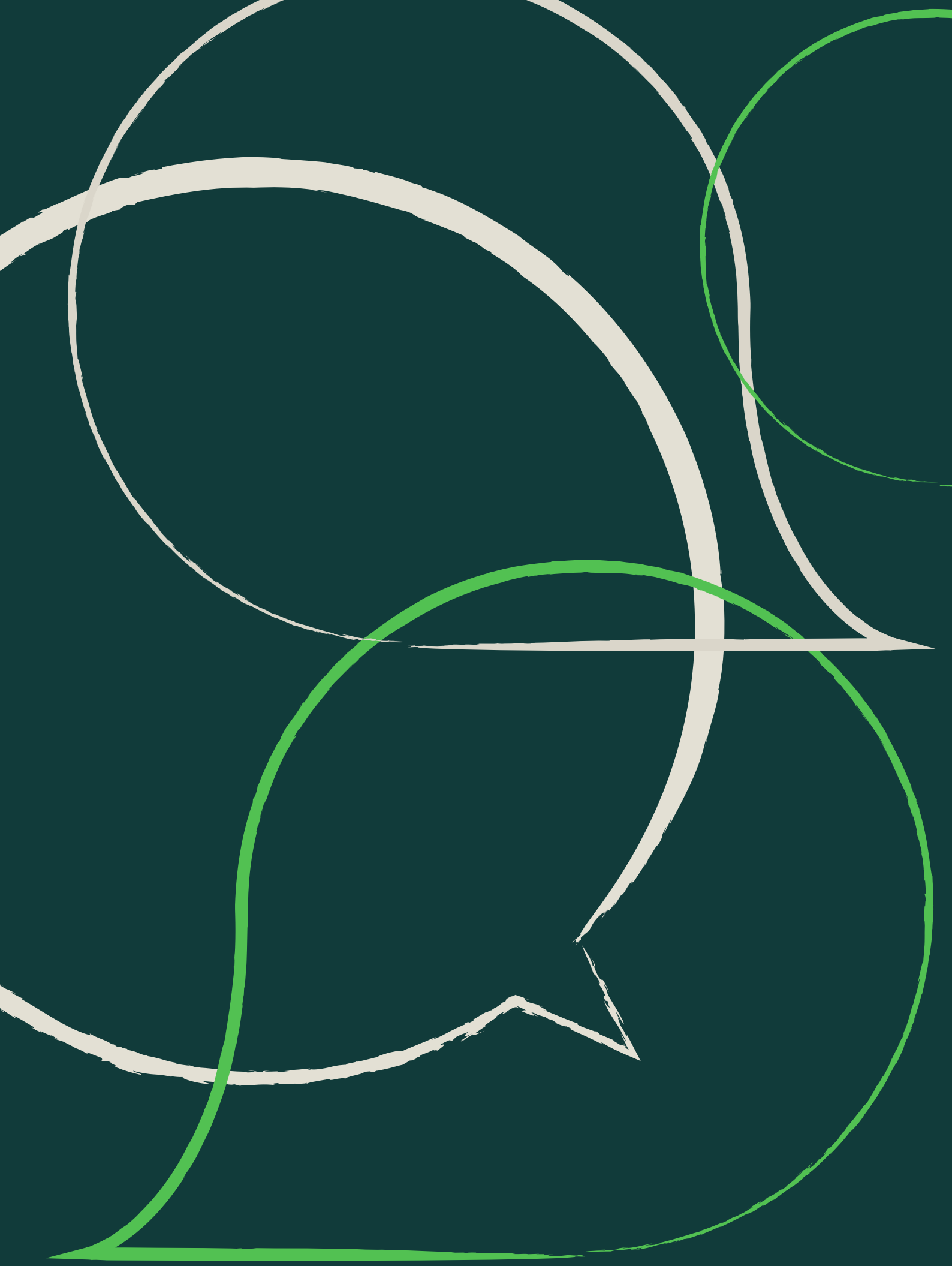
Evaluations open up the space for those with different experiences, viewpoints, or preferences to shape how the evaluation process is conducted. Evaluations of projects can often unearth ‘multiple truths’, e.g. contradictions or tensions in how people experience something.

Ways to deal with this:

- Use visual elements instead of a single written report.
- Question the feedback you receive.
- Create spaces for open discussion about different views.

Tip

Contradictions are normal. What's important is making space for all voices. Tools like Most Significant Change (MSC), Appreciative Inquiry or Ripple Effect Mapping engage stakeholders in reflecting on their experiences, allowing people with different perspectives to shape the evaluation process and identify key themes or changes.



“As a very small organisation, we all tend to be obsessed with getting the myriad of daily tasks done and rarely, if ever, stand back to look at the bigger picture. The Evaluation Exchange enabled us to look at the organisation as a whole, put it into context in terms of its progress over time and to identify strengths and areas for development.”

Forest Gate Community Garden



Tip 8

Time and resources matter

Participatory evaluation can take more time than traditional approaches because it involves more people.

We recommend:

- Budgeting for evaluation activities is essential (including people's time!).
- Accepting that plans often need adjustment as plans change.
- Asking for a flexible funding environment to help test and refine evaluation methods.

Tip

Plan for extra time and resources — reimagining evaluation is a deeper, more involved process, which can also help tackle the big questions!

Tip 9

Support and guidance

Evaluation can feel overwhelming, but you don't have to do it alone!

Remember:

- Learn from others who have tried participatory approaches.
- Experiment with different evaluation tools and see what works for your project, programme, organisation and team.
- Create the culture for learning, sharing and adapting.

There's no 'right way' or 'one-size fits all' approach to evaluation—there are lots of resources out there.

Tip

As part of the Evaluation Exchange programme, we make sure every project team has access to structured support, for example, setting up 'buddies' between teams to share learning, and scheduling regular catch-ups to discuss progress, challenges and reflections.

Get in touch

If you're unsure where to start or want to explore different approaches, please get in touch. We would be happy to discuss your ideas and think through what might work best for you, your project or organisation.

→ www.ucl.ac.uk/evaluationexchange

→ evaluationexchange@ucl.ac.uk





Conclusion

This guide highlights how collaborative, relevant and appropriate evaluation can enhance the impact of projects and programmes, whilst providing tips, examples and resources to do it.

There are principles that underpin such an approach:

- Evaluation is about learning, not just measuring.
- Different knowledge and voices bring more insights.
- Ongoing flexibility and reflection make evaluations more meaningful and useful.

Reimagine your evaluation as a learning journey, not just an assessment. Start from where you are, involve a range of knowledges, and create a comfortable space where learning is prioritised. Taking this approach will help shape your next project or activity.

Building blocks to co-producing your evaluation

Aim of activity: This activity helps you reflect on the context you're working in: your available time, resources, skills, and experience. There's no point in collecting data you can't realistically use. The goal is to focus on information that's meaningful, manageable, and fits with the way you already work with people.

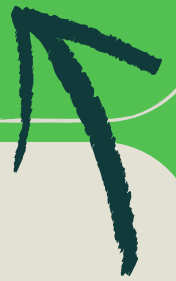
This will help you to consider:

- **Why** you want to capture learning.
- **What** you want to know.
- **Who** it's for, and how they'll be involved.

These reflections shape how you collect information. If it's important that people feel heard, an anonymous survey might not be the best fit — a more personal, conversational approach could work better. They also help clarify your evaluation questions: Are you exploring impact? The value of your approach? What could be improved, or how to make your work more inclusive?

Working through this with your team builds shared understanding. Different motivations or perspectives are fine — this process helps surface them so you can stay focused and find common ground. It may generate lots of ideas, but the next step is to simplify and focus on what's most useful and manageable.

Evaluation question



How?

Why?

What?

Who?

Context

Resource

Part 1: The why, what and who

Evaluation drivers

Why do you want to learn from your project?

Evaluation motivations

What do you want to learn?

People/Partners

Who is the evaluation for? Who needs to be involved in the development and implementation of activities and why?

Reporting

Who do you need to tell, how and when?

Part 2: The context

Resources, capacity and capabilities

What resources, capacities (e.g. person time) and capabilities (e.g. skills or experience) do you have for the evaluation? Which do you not have that you should bear in mind?

Existing evaluation processes and systems

Are there ways that you already capture information, reflect and learn? What information are you already capturing that could be useful?

Opportunities and challenges

Are there particular opportunities or challenges you need to be aware of as you plan your evaluation?

River journey reflection activity

Aim of activity: To encourage teams to reflect together on progress so far, identify obstacles and begin to identify next steps.

Using the metaphor of a river, map your process and progress via a 'River Journey'. This should identify critical moments along the way.

Consider:

- Has the flow been smooth, slow or fast?
- Are there rocks or boulders, obstacles, falling into your river?
- Where are the bends and turns when your situation or perspective changed?

Reflecting on your learning— are there points at which it flows powerfully and purposefully or slows to a trickle?

Ask yourself:

1. What have you done?

2. What went well?

3. What has been challenging?

4. **Next steps:** what does it look like ahead? Where is it flowing to? What obstacles or opportunities do you see?

Contact

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