

Commissioning Evaluations

Commissioning Evaluations: Tips & Traps

A resource was initially developed in June 2016 based on Family and Child Evaluation Community of Practice (CoP) members' shared experiences with commissioning evaluations. This information has been updated and incorporated into this fact sheet to include more recent information and discussions from a 2018 CoP session. The fact sheet outlines tips and considerations for key stages of commissioning and managing evaluations. Agencies should also refer to their agency specific procurement and contracting policies and procedures.

WHAT TO CONSIDER BEFORE COMMISSIONING

- Follow your agency's procurement guidelines at all times.
- Consider your evaluation needs at the beginning of program planning to ensure adequate data can be collected and costs to cover evaluation activities can be allocated.
- Use the *Queensland Government Program Evaluation Guidelines* to ensure you plan the evaluation thoroughly and appropriately.
- Engage with all key stakeholders and decision-makers through the design, development, implementation and dissemination of evaluation findings.
- When preparing for an evaluation, consider what is already known about the program so you can utilise your resources wisely.
- More expensive evaluations may involve more extensive procurement requirements.

1. Planning for an evaluation

Where possible, evaluation planning should be incorporated into the process of program planning. With early planning, a robust evaluation can be built into the design of the program (e.g. providing training for staff responsible for data collection, ensuring the program has clear aims and objectives to measure). Having a supportive governance framework for research and evaluation may assist with early planning.

In planning for an evaluation, it is useful to begin with a clear understanding of your program's objectives and how it is intended to work. This may form your **program logic**. A program logic will help you determine what to evaluate (including evaluation scope, possible key questions and data) and allow you to articulate this information clearly to potential suppliers.

2. Before commissioning an evaluation

When to commission

The need and ability to commission an evaluation of a program may depend on the maturity of your program/initiative, extent and quality of your data, risks and sensitivities associated with program participants and staff, level of scrutiny for the program and the evaluation, and available resources and budget.

While some evaluations can be completed in-house, commissioning an external evaluator may be useful when there is a need for technical evaluation expertise or an independent assessment of the program. Deciding whether an evaluation should be conducted internally or externally will likely depend on your program as well as your agency's policies, capacity and resources.

Benefits of engaging external evaluators

- Objectivity and independence
- Subject-matter or technical expertise
- Capacity

Challenges of engaging external evaluators

- Finding the right evaluator
- Lack of program and policy knowledge
- Procurement requirements
- Demands of contract management

EVALUATION FACT SHEET



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Preparing an evaluation brief

An **evaluation brief** provides a concise description of the program and proposed evaluation. This should be provided to potential suppliers so they know what they are expected to deliver. This will be particularly important when planning to engage an external provider who has limited knowledge of your program.

When preparing your evaluation brief, clearly outline the specifications of the evaluation, but allow some flexibility for potential suppliers to explore other methods or approaches.

Contingency planning

Developing a contingency plan will help you manage unforeseen circumstances proactively. Some issues to consider include:

Delays	Delays may occur with procurement processes, accessing participants, ethics approvals, approvals for release of agency data, etc. Consider a 10-15% time allowance.
Budget	Make allowances for unforeseen expenses. Consider 5-10% of the total project cost.
Integrating feedback	Work rarely goes according to plan; the supplier may require feedback on their work. Allow time for internal staff to review project work and the supplier to incorporate feedback.
Personnel changes	(internal, or for the supplier) – These can be hard to predict, but will frequently occur. This reinforces the need to allow for project delays.

WHAT TO INCLUDE IN YOUR BRIEF

Your evaluation brief may include:

- a description of the program and program logic
- purpose and scope of the evaluation (focus on the key issues)
- key evaluation questions
- policy context and rationale for the program and its evaluation
- key stakeholders and their interest in the evaluation (i.e. those involved in delivering the program, clients or program participants, and evaluation audience)
- any ethical requirements (i.e. privacy of participants and informed consent). The *Australasian Evaluation Society* provides guidelines for ethical conduct of evaluations and a code of ethics for evaluators on their website
- a realistic investment, including financial and staffing resources commensurate with the scope and scale of the program and evaluation
- any relevant contextual factors, including policy risks or anticipated scrutiny of the evaluation.

3. Procuring evaluation services

Preparing a Request for Tender (RFT)

An RFT should provide prospective evaluators with enough information to decide if they can conduct the evaluation and to inform them of the relevant contractual requirements. The RFT will include the information contained in the evaluation brief, and should clearly establish:

- available resources
- a sample of data that the evaluator will be working with, including a guide to interpreting data (particularly where you are engaging an external evaluator)
- budget range
 - inclusion of budget may be dependent on the individual program and evaluation (find a balance between getting value-for-money and managing expectations)
- time frames including milestones and reporting requirements, factoring in time for feedback stages

- expected standards for evaluation design and implementation that are feasible, ethical and reflect scale/budget/time frame of project
- reporting requirements, including format, target audience, content (i.e. methods, recommendations) and how findings should be disseminated
- ethical considerations including storage and disposal of information
- intellectual property and issues of copyright
- extent to which you may edit the final report
- contract provisions
- clear instructions for how proposals should be submitted (i.e. length, content)
- evaluator selection process and criteria (i.e. qualifications, skills/experience, understanding of program purpose) and timeframes for the tender selection process.

Commissioning Evaluations

Procurement

Contract
management

Quality evaluation

Tips for choosing the best evaluator

It can be difficult to make any generalisations about evaluators and their competency based on their agency size, or whether they are based in a consultancy or university.

Some of the following tips may help you choose the right evaluator for your program:

- Consider any limitations or conflicting interests.
- Use an impartial selection panel – you may consider engaging an external person on the panel.
- Use robust, suitable and clear criteria to assess tenders (i.e. SWOT analysis).
- It can be difficult to assess tenders when you are unfamiliar with their work. Look at potential evaluators' previous reports and seek referees to discuss deliverables as well as feedback on the evaluation process (i.e. delays, how evaluators responded to feedback).
- Nominated referees are almost guaranteed to provide a positive reference. If possible, talk to previous clients that the evaluator hasn't nominated.
- The type of tender process you use will typically depend on your organisation's procurement policies and procedures. If possible, requesting detailed quotes and tenders from at least three evaluators is a useful and informative practice.
- The Australasian Evaluation Society website has a Consultants Directory of members who provide commercial evaluation services and a tender listing service.

Presentations by potential suppliers are a useful way to assess tenders in more detail.

Some potential questions to ask evaluators include:

- What strategies would they use to address the key questions?
- How would they handle challenges or respond to emerging issues?
- Who will conduct each stage of the work – project planning and management, data collection and analysis, report writing, liaising with the contract manager? (i.e. senior or junior staff)
- How/when will findings from the evaluation be communicated?
- How will resources be used to complete this work?
- What else do they need to know to design an evaluation for this program?
- Request example evaluation plans and reports.

4. Contract management to deliver a quality evaluation

Once an evaluator has been selected, it may be useful to hold an inception meeting, to:

- reiterate the evaluation aims and objectives
- review timeframes
- explore the strengths and shortcomings of your brief and adapt the evaluation plan as needed
- provide any information needed by the evaluators
- agree on communication protocols
- agree on a schedule of deliverables.

This meeting will also be an opportunity to establish any other contractual arrangements.

High quality evaluations are the product of the interaction between well-informed clients and responsive and skilled evaluators.



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Don't just sign the contract and hope for the best, a considerable amount of your time and effort is still needed to manage the evaluation process.

Developing a meeting schedule for progress updates with the evaluators will facilitate communication on the achievement of milestones, allow issues to be identified and resolved early and provide opportunities for feedback on work.

At a minimum, you should be monitoring:

- timeliness of deliverables
- quality of deliverables
- adherence to specifications
- opportunities for improvement
- stakeholder satisfaction.

5. After the evaluation – learning from the commissioning process

The processes and results of the evaluation project should be reviewed as an opportunity to learn more about commissioning evaluations successfully.

Reflect on the evaluation process to determine whether your needs were met or what aspects could be improved in future.

Consider the following questions:

- Did we choose the right evaluation team?
- Who didn't bid that we would have liked to bid?
- How well did the evaluation meet our needs?
- Did we get well-reasoned and evidenced answers to our questions?
- What aspects of the evaluation could have been improved?
- Were the evaluation recommendations actionable? What has been implemented so far?
- How well did we support the evaluator to understand the context of the program and fill gaps in knowledge?
- To what extent was the evaluation value for money?

Also consider approaching those who didn't bid for the work to assess potential shortcomings of your evaluation brief and RFT.

SOURCE DOCUMENTS

Australasian Evaluation Society (AES) website:
<http://www.aes.asn.au/>

Commissioning Better Evaluations (AES seminar – Duncan Rintoul and Vanessa Hood, 24 March 2015)

Commissioning Evaluations (QFCC internal presentation, 22 April 2015)

Doing evaluation: How to deliver great work to drive policy development (AES seminar – Anne Edwards, 31 March 2016)

Evaluating government programs (Queensland Treasury):
<https://www.treasury.qld.gov.au/economy-and-budget/queensland-economy/evaluating-government-programs/>

Lessons learned: Procuring and managing external evaluations (CoP presentation, 19 April 2018)

New South Wales Government *Evaluation Toolkit*: <https://www.dpc.nsw.gov.au/tools-and-resources/evaluation-toolkit/>

Queensland Government Procurement Resources:
<https://www.forgov.qld.gov.au/procurement-resources>

Queensland Government Program Evaluation Guidelines, November 2014:
<https://www.treasury.qld.gov.au/resource/queensland-government-program-evaluation-guidelines/>