Evaluation Framework 2015

Background

1. This framework sets out, at high-level, the steps the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) will take to evaluate our strategic investments in projects and programmes.

2. [i]The framework was first endorsed by the SFC's Investment Committee in January 2011 (Circular SFC/07/2011) and was updated in September 2015.

What is evaluation?

3. In the context of SFC, evaluation seeks primarily to examine:

   - Whether or not our investments have made a positive difference.
   - Whether the difference made is the difference intended, be it social benefit or economic impact.

4. Other lessons may also be drawn from an evaluation, including on the success of approaches to achieving change and to managing different styles of projects.

5. An evaluation report will explain, and illustrate, the changes or effects that have happened as a result of the SFC investment (the Outcomes) as well as considering its activities and products (the Outputs).

Evaluation framework

Focus

6. A project or programme will go through several forms of assessment in its life-cycle. This framework focuses on (iii) to (v) below:

   (i)   pre-award assessment to inform the funding decision.

   (ii)   lifetime monitoring to confirm whether progress is as planned.

   (iii)   (in some cases) mid-term review, to confirm funding for a further period (typically in year three of a potential five year award).

   (iv)   end of award review to confirm outputs and specific results of activity.

   (v)   impact evaluation to assess outcomes and longer term influence of activity.

7. Monitoring and mid-term reviews will contribute formative (or developmental) evaluation, to inform the ongoing management and implementation of the supported activity. End-of-award review and later impact evaluations are

summative, seeking to identify the overall effectiveness of the activity in achieving its aims, and addressing its desired outcomes, including social benefits and economic returns.

Principles

8. The following principles will apply:

    (i)   we will evaluate to assess whether or not our investments have made a positive difference, whether the difference made is the difference intended and whether the difference made is commensurate with the investment in the project.

    (ii)   all strategic projects and programmes supported by SFC should be subject to end of award review.

    (iii)   all significant investments by SFC, should be subject to impact evaluation several years after the end of support, either individually or as part of a programme evaluation.

    (iv)   end of award reviews should include confirmation of judgements made at funding stage of the desirability of an impact evaluation several years after the end of support.

    (v)   the outcomes of these reviews and evaluations should be disseminated to increase awareness of the achievements and share lessons in the management of strategic investments.

    (vi)   staff involved in presentation of projects and programmes for funding should take responsibility for assessment of monitoring reports but should not take the lead in evaluation of outcomes, to avoid conflicts of interest.

Stages in evaluation

9. The first stage in planning an evaluation is a clear statement of the aspirations and purpose of funding the activity (whether an individual project of whatever size, or a co-ordinated programme of projects) *before* funded works starts. Agreeing outcomes and quantifiable objectives at this stage will make evaluation of its outputs, outcomes and impacts, once the project is completed, much easier. Judgements should be made at this stage on the desirability of an impact evaluation several years after the end of support.

10. The following provides a framework of steps to be completed within SFC in preparing and taking forward an evaluation. These are not necessarily linear and a process of iteration is likely to be required within each broad area.

Planning - General	Detailed questions to consider	Indicative actions
Why are you evaluating?	Looking at accountability? Process improvement? Development? Identification of impact? Contemporary/continuing relevance, efficiency of delivery, effectiveness of impacts, utility of activity, sustainability of benefits?	Define your purpose in undertaking the evaluation.
What is to be evaluated?	A whole project or programme, part of a project or programme, stage of a project? The approach to funding?	Define the characteristics of the activity to be evaluated.
What did we set out to achieve?	Relate to policy objectives. What needs were being addressed? Why was activity in this area funded? Why was *this* activity funded? What are stakeholder's perceptions of the reasons for this activity?	Define your aims in supporting this activity.
What were the activity's stated outcomes, targets and indicators?	How did we intend to identify a difference being made?	Define stated objectives, outputs, outcomes and impacts.
How are you going to evaluate?	One or two stage. What resources are required/ available? By SFC or contractors? Consider management structures.	Judgements on scale of evaluation.

Planning – specific	Detailed questions to consider	Indicative actions
What questions will you be asking?	Should follow logic of decision to support original investment. Are there equalities issues to be considered?	Identify specific evaluation questions.
How will you know what the answers mean?	Benchmarks provide basis for judgements of good or	Identify benchmarks.

	bad	
Is evidence available to answer your questions?	Evidence could be quantitative or qualitative or both. Is any additional evidence needed?	Review availability of evidence and make judgements on how far it can be used – can questions be usefully answered within project constraints?
What will you have to do and arrange to answer your questions?	Include time and cost constraints, skills and other attributes required.	Draw up draft workplan including draft terms of reference.

Operationalisation	Detailed questions to consider	Indicative actions
Who is going to do the work?	May be internal or external	Select evaluator. Tendering procedures as necessary.
Does your choice of evaluator change what is possible?	Additional skills and experience may influence approaches.	Finalise terms of reference, including work plan and roles & responsibilities
How will you know what has happened?	Choose actual techniques/methods for data collection and analysis	Decide on data collection and analysis.
How will you assess whether the funded activity achieved/was responsible for the desired effects?	Include "counterfactuals"/alternative states, to test outcomes against. Assess success against immediate/ intermediate/ ultimate objectives. How will you challenge your own confirmation bias? Explore reasons for any failure	Decide on evaluation design.
Is the evaluation going according to your plan?	Implementation and analysis	Manage/undertake the project, keeping the workplan under review.

Reporting and dissemination	Detailed questions to consider	Indicative actions
What do you now know about the achievements and effectiveness of the activity/your investment?	Include differences from starting aspirations, effectiveness and reasons, cost-effectiveness, implications and recommendations – in line	Receive/ produce/ consider report.

	with terms of reference	
Will anyone else learn from what has been found out?	Include in Communications plan. Consider how best to share and archive learning.	Report to SFC Board. Actively disseminate achievements and lessons. Publish.

Prioritising evaluation

11. Impact evaluations require resources – funding and time – to undertake. Judgements will have to be taken within SFC on whether impact evaluation, in addition to end of award review, is appropriate in each case.

12. Initial recommendations on priority for evaluation will be made at the point at which an award is made to a project. Reports from all awards will be reviewed at the end of funding and a further recommendation made on priority for evaluation, taking account of their experience and outcomes.

13. The table below sets out factors for consideration in making a judgement on the prioritisation of projects for evaluation.

Priority criteria at Outset	Priority criteria at End of Award
1.Scale of investment (time and financial – annual, absolute and in relation to lead institution's core grant from SFC)	1. Relevant to SFC's *current* strategic priorities at time of completion (as well as those which were current at the time of award) offering learning for future work
2. Ambition and complexity of the proposed activity, its operation and outcomes	2. Will enhance SFC's understanding of maximising the return on its investment
3. Significance of investment to the HE and FE sectors (including eg potential insights for practice)	3.Offers key/new insights (positive or negative) for managing future SFC investments and maximising their impact
4. Risk assessment (at the time of investment) *Should include Equalities Impact Assessment*	4. Merits wider communication to stakeholders and others particularly regarding the creation of added value to the Scottish economy
5. Topicality of outcomes to SFC and other stakeholder priorities (at the time of investment)	5. Is of relevance to wider stakeholders' priorities (eg individual institution, regions, Scotland, international)

14. The scores allocated at each stage will be agreed by the Strategic Funding Group and combined to give a prioritised list of candidates for impact evaluation.

15. Evaluation work may be carried out by the SFC executive or be commissioned from a third party. In some cases, projects include independent evaluation in their plans and costs. Where these plans have been agreed, SFC should use any opportunities to make efficiencies in its own work. However, SFC will always need to reach its own judgement on the effect of its investments and may still

sometimes require separate elements of evaluation.

[i] The framework described here draws on guidance published by the European Commission, Her Majesty's Treasury, the Scottish Government (Scottish Public Finance Manual) and on work by the Tavistock Institute for the Economic and Social Research Council and the UK Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (now the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.)