

Evaluating IAG: A guide for nextstep delivery networks

May 2006

Of interest to people engaged in the development and delivery of adult IAG services across England.

This Guide is intended to help IAG contractors to do evaluations well, whether directly or indirectly. We want it to be a practical and comprehensive guide, in that it seeks to address the key evaluative questions: why, what, how, when and who. As such, it addresses the following issues:

- What evaluation is, what it isn't, and how we can define relevant concepts in a meaningful way.
- What the strategic context for the evaluation of adult IAG is, and what information we need to collect.
- What types of evaluation there are, when and who should undertake them and what guidelines there are to best practice.
- How we can make the most effective use of evaluative research methods and techniques.
- What kinds of approaches to IAG evaluation have been tried by nextstep contractors of late, and the key messages that have emerged.
- Other sources of help that we can access to learn from others.

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Nextstep contractors particularly should use the content of this guide to inform the development of continuous quality improvement strategies for their networks from August 2006 onwards.

This guide is also of interest to national, regional and local Learning and Skills Council colleagues, members of local strategic boards and nextstep contractors.

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Section 1: About this Guide – What's it About and Who is it for?

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Purpose and Overview of the Guide

1 Welcome to this guide-come-toolkit to the evaluation of adult information, advice and guidance (IAG) provision in England. This Guide is intended to help IAG contractors to do evaluations well, whether directly or indirectly. We want it to be a practical and comprehensive guide, in that it seeks to address the key evaluative questions: why, what, how, when and who. As such, it addresses the following issues.

- What evaluation is, what it isn't, and how we can define relevant concepts in a meaningful way.
- What the strategic context for the evaluation of adult IAG is, and what information we need to collect.
- What types of evaluation there are, when and who should undertake them and what guidelines there are to best practice.
- How we can make the most effective use of evaluative research methods and techniques.
- What kinds of approaches to IAG evaluation have been tried by nextstep contractors of late, and the key messages that have emerged.
- Other sources of help that we can access to learn from others.

Target audience

2

The main audience for this Guide is people engaged in the development and delivery of adult IAG services across England. These include:

- practitioners involved in the day-to-day delivery of services (such as advisers and information specialists) and those people with managerial responsibilities within provider organisations
- people involved in the management of provision at an area-wide level, that is, nextstep contractors
- people responsible for funding IAG and its strategic development, such as members of IAG strategic boards and local Learning and Skills Councils (local LSCs).

Acknowledgements

3

We are particularly grateful to all the nextstep IAG contractors who submitted information about their approaches and experience of evaluation, which we profile in Section 6 of this Guide, and who also offered valuable advice and comments on the draft version.

Section 2: Definitions and Concepts – What do we Really Mean by "Evaluation"?

4

The evaluation of IAG for adults is not an island unto itself; rather, it sits within a broader strategic policy framework set by the Government which informs, guides and influences the development and delivery of these services across England. This is therefore our starting point in this opening section of the Guide. Then we define relevant terms and concepts before setting out the rationale for evaluating IAG – why we need to do it well and what we are trying to achieve by doing so.

5

Information and advice (IA) services potentially have a number of outcomes, which can be assessed through research over time. These outcomes fall into three main categories:

- immediate outcomes, which can include enhanced knowledge and skills, attitudinal change and motivation
- intermediate outcomes, which include enhanced job- and learning search, options appraisal and contingency planning
- longer-term outcomes, such as the increased take-up of appropriate opportunities or entry and retention within employment or learning.

Defining "Evaluation"

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Definitions abound, but here are three useful definitions of what an evaluation is essentially about:

- determining the worth or value of a policy, programme or initiative. Assessing the impact or effectiveness of a policy, programme or initiative using a defined process and methodology (LSC, 2005a)
- forming a judgement on the value of a policy, programme or initiative by undertaking an in-depth enquiry at a discrete point in time
- judging a policy, programme or initiative according to its results, impacts and the needs it aims to satisfy (European Commission, 2004).

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Perhaps the most important notions are that an evaluation is a process and that this culminates in a judgement or an assessment of whether something is working as it was intended to or not. These judgements are commonly expressed in terms of whether a policy, programme, provider or intervention provides value for money, a concept to which we return later in this section.

8

Evaluation is a learning process as well as a management tool to assess performance. People at all levels within an IAG delivery network stand to gain from good evaluation, including:

- the strategic board for IAG
- the LSC
- IAG provider networks or forums
- lead bodies or managing agents, for example nextstep
- individual providers, and their management, delivery staff and other stakeholders.

What evaluation is not

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To better understand what we mean by evaluation, it is helpful to compare and contrast it with some other concepts and approaches. The "dividing lines" between these can be thin at times and are often hard to draw in practice, but it is still worthwhile trying to distinguish between what we term "evaluation" and the following concepts.

Evaluation is not scrutiny

- Evaluation is not an appraisal, which can be seen as the comparison of a potentially wide range of options to reach a judgement about which (if any) is likely to achieve the best value for money. In contrast, an evaluation takes place after the fact (ex-post), while appraisal precedes delivery and implementation (ex-ante).
- Evaluation is not an audit, which is concerned with the verification of the legality and regularity of systems, procedures and processes.

10

The relationship between evaluation on the one hand, and monitoring or tracking on the other, is more complex but also of key importance to adult IAG. Monitoring is concerned with measuring progress against agreed milestones and targets set out in an action plan. When monitoring includes a judgement, this judgement refers to the achievement of operational objectives (for example, the number of advice sessions delivered) rather than the impact and effectiveness of these interventions.

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The key features of monitoring and evaluation are set out in Table 1.

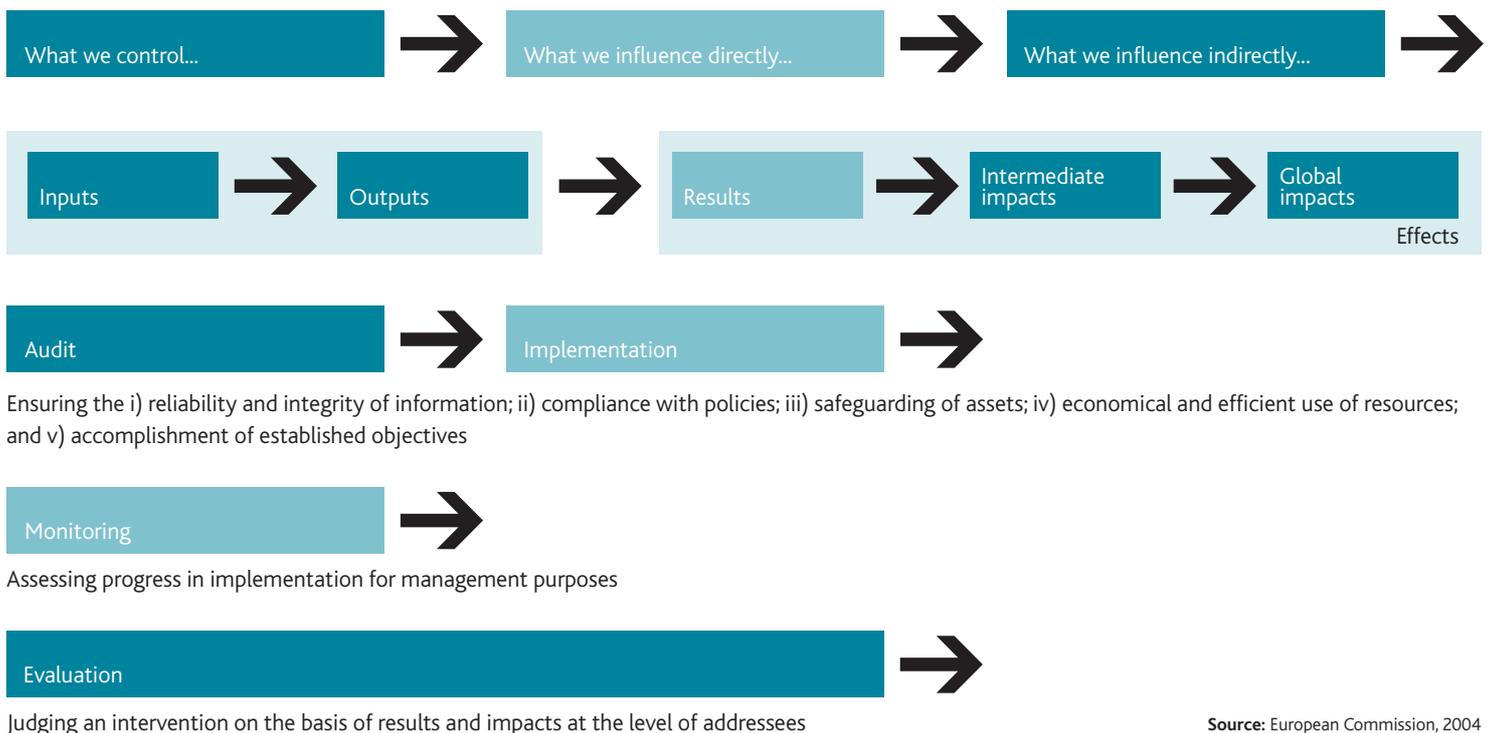
Table 1: Key features of monitoring and evaluation.

Monitoring:	Evaluation:
Regular and periodic	Undertaken from time to time
Keeping track and watching progress	Longer-term assessment
Improving efficiency	Improving effectiveness
Adjusting the work plan	Assisting future programmes
Managing the current programme	Future programming
Tracking inputs and outputs	Assessing outcomes and effectiveness
Using routine data or systems	Using routine data as well as other sources (for example, surveys, case studies)

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Figure 1 makes some of these distinctions between three key concepts – evaluation, monitoring and audit.

Figure 1: Evaluation, monitoring and audit compared.



13

The relationship between evaluation and research is also worth a mention. Research is about creating new knowledge, whereas evaluation might be said to help provide more insight, but the differences are small and both often use the same types of methodologies (for example, for data collection) to reach findings and conclusions.

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From a less technical perspective, we can also say that evaluation is, or should be:

- more than testing and measuring
- more than retrospective justification
- not an end itself but a process that supports accountability, transparency and learning
- not an "add-on" or afterthought but an integral part of the management and delivery process.

What is "Value for Money"?

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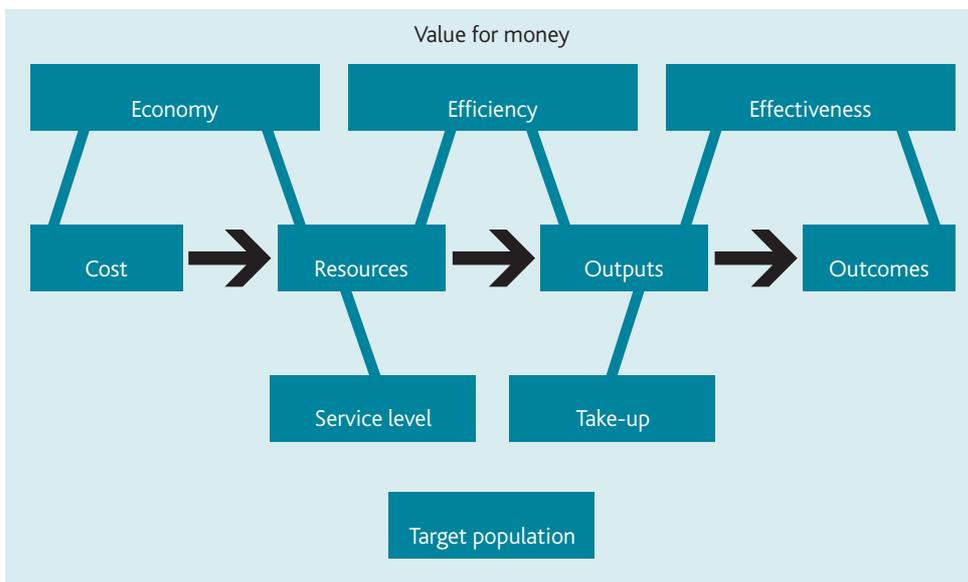
Whether IAG provides value for money, and if so, to what degree, is an issue that needs to be approached from three main directions. The generic term "value for money" (VFM) is used to describe three ways of measuring performance, these being:

- **economy** – minimising the cost of resources acquired or used, bearing in mind the quality, that is, spending less. It is about the cost of purchasing resources
- **efficiency** – the relationship between the output of goods or services and the resources used to produce them, that is, spending well. It is about the outputs achieved from the available resources
- **effectiveness** – the relationship between the intended and actual results of projects and programmes, that is, spending wisely. It is about the final outcomes or impact the service levels (outputs) have on the people who receive them (the clients).

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Figure 2 provides a visual illustration of what constitutes value for money.

Figure 2: Value for money and measuring performance.



17

Figure 2 also helps us understand how we measure the performance of an intervention. We can see that performance can be measured along four dimensions or levels:

- **cost** – how much funding is used to purchase resources (or inputs)
- **resources provided** – for example, staff, buildings, ICT, outreach facilities. In some circumstances, it may be possible to measure "units of service", for example the number of advice sessions potentially available to the client group. This would depend of course on the funding allocations made to each IAG provider and the unit costs per intervention (for example, session, interview and so on)
- **outputs** – the use made of the resources, that is, the service actually delivered to the client group. This would include the number of advice sessions actually delivered, the number of clients receiving advice and the number receiving specialist support such as psychometric or aptitude tests
- **outcomes** (or impact) – the ultimate value and benefit of the service received by the user. This would include the number of clients accessing learning, the number achieving qualifications and the number entering employment or self-employment.

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It is important to try to define the target population for a service. For example, we know that not all people in the pre-level 2 target client group for IAG services in a particular area actually access these services. But we may know the total number of people living in the area with qualifications below Level 2. If a scenario such as this can be identified, two other performance indicators come into play:

- **level of service** – what service is available for the target population (in principle), for example, the number of advice sessions available in relation to the total pre-level 2 population aged 20 plus with no upper age limit living in an area
- **take-up of the service** – how many people in the target population (or priority groups) actually use the service available; for example, the proportion of the pre-level 2 population aged 20 plus with no upper age limit living in an area who actually had an advice session.

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Securing and improving VFM is an important objective of a governing body and responsibility for its achievement lies primarily with management. The controls that management should have in place cannot be rigidly defined but some of those most directly concerned with VFM are:

- planning, including a clear definition of objectives and targets and availability of accurate and reliable management information on a timely basis
- performance measures and indicators and the use of benchmarking to evaluate performance
- policy and programme evaluation, including post-implementation review, and identification of resource consumption and accountability.

Section 3: Why Evaluate? – Why Should we Evaluate Information, Advice and Guidance?

Introduction

20

IAG for adults sits within a broader strategic policy framework set by the Government which informs, guides and influences the development and delivery of these services across England. This is therefore our starting point in this section of the Guide.

21

Evaluation is a learning process as well as a management tool to assess performance. So we consider what kinds of information about clients who receive IAG services we need in order to do it well, and ask what we are trying to achieve by doing so.

Strategic Context

22

The LSC's mission is to raise participation and attainment through high-quality education and training which puts learners first so that by 2010, young people and adults will have knowledge and productive skills matching the best in the world. More specifically, the LSC has been asked to:

- raise participation and achievement by young people
- increase demand for learning by adults and equalise opportunities through better access to learning
- raise skills levels for national competitiveness
- improve the quality of education and training delivery
- improve effectiveness and efficiency.

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Key strategic targets for the LSC are to:

- extend participation in education, learning and training
- increase the engagement of employers in workforce development
- raise the achievement of young people
- raise the achievement of adults
- raise the quality of education and training customer satisfaction.

Information, advice and guidance strategic vision and objectives

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The LSC's IAG Strategy for Adults aims to "improve the participation and achievement of adults in learning and at work by ensuring that excellent information, advice and guidance (IAG) on skills, training and qualifications is at the heart of everything we do" (LSC, 2005b, paragraph 5).

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The IAG strategy identifies seven key objectives for IAG, with the seventh being to "measure the impact of IAG services for adults on meeting LSC and Skills Strategy objectives" (LSC, 2005b, paragraph 31).

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The strategy indicates that this objective will be achieved by:

- establishing meaningful baseline data and improving data capture techniques and service user record systems for IAG
- establishing effective impact measures for IAG against LSC objectives
- using information on learner demand to help shape the pattern of future learning opportunities at a local level
- implementing effective impact measures for IAG against LSC objectives
- continuing to evaluate the impact of IAG on delivering LSC objectives.

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One of the key actions set out in the IAG strategy is the creation of a local strategic board for IAG that will produce a three-year vision and strategy for the delivery of IAG in its local area. Part of the core remit of these area boards is in delivering the seven key objectives of the IAG Strategy for Adults.

Purpose of Evaluation

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With the above context and definitions in mind, we now turn to the issue of why we need to evaluate IAG for adults from the perspective of IAG contractors and their delivery networks. The next section of the Guide looks into the different types of evaluation, so here we focus on the fundamental aims of any evaluation.

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An evaluation can serve a number of purposes depending on several factors such as the particular project, programme, strategy or delivery network under consideration, and the motivations and specific objectives (for example, its focus and scope) set by those commissioning or undertaking an evaluation.

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It seems almost self-evident that evaluation is a "good thing", but as we comment in Section 4 of this Guide, clarifying the real purpose behind any evaluation is a key success factor in its own right.

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The main purpose of an evaluation clearly depends in part on what is to be evaluated. For example, it could be concerned with the:

- overall impact of the three-year vision and strategy for IAG produced by a local strategic board for IAG
- value-added of an IAG delivery network and/or an informal regional network of delivery partners

- performance and impact of a particular provider of adult IAG
- specific effect of an information, advice or guidance intervention (such as an interview) on a client and, perhaps indirectly, on an employer.

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If, however, we consider a "generic evaluation" that might encompass all the above, the main purposes should be to:

- establish and validate externally the rationale for intervention
- measure impact and performance against agreed targets
- assess whether an intervention or approach adds value and provides value for money
- assist in achieving a more efficient allocation of resources
- accumulate and provide evidence for changes in policy, strategy and resource planning
- determine and encourage good practice leading to continuous quality improvement
- empower practitioners and encourage self-directed learning for the people responsible for managing and delivering services.

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The relative priority and weight given to the above evaluation aims is a key issue when planning and designing an evaluation.

Information, Advice and Guidance for Adults – What Information do we Need to Collect?

34

Information and advice services potentially have a number of outcomes that can be assessed through research over time. The economic impacts or outcomes of IAG fall into three main categories:

- immediate outcomes, which can include enhanced knowledge and skills, attitudinal change and motivation
- intermediate outcomes, which can include enhanced job- and learning search, options appraisal and contingency planning
- longer-term outcomes, such as enhanced take-up of appropriate opportunities, improved entry into (and retention within) labour and learning markets.

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In order to measure the above outcomes we need to select appropriate impact indicators and these can either be:

- "hard", quantifiable impact indicators such as when a client actually moves into (higher levels of) work, education or training
- "soft" impact indicators that refer to the "distance travelled" by a client; they indicate progress towards achieving "hard" outcomes such as increased search activity and acquiring new skills (Dewson et al, 2000).

36

All nextstep IAG contractors are required to ensure providers undertake customer follow-up. Customer follow-up is defined as a subsequent assessment of a customer for the purpose of monitoring actions undertaken as a result of previous advice.

37

The LSC's annual evaluation of information and advice services (LSC, 2003) identifies and collects information from IA users about a range of impact indicators. Hard outcomes that may arise from access to adult information and advice include the following:

- started or completed a work-related training or education course
- started a new or additional job (full- or part time)
- became self-employed
- achieved a national vocational qualification (NVQ) or equivalent qualification
- became a volunteer.

38

Softer outcomes can take various forms but it is useful to consider them as achievements relating to:

- **personal or attitudinal skills** – increased awareness or insight, motivation and confidence. Started to look actively for employment or work towards a qualification
- **practical and analytical skills** – the ability to solve problems, weigh up options and make informed choices. The ability to access and use information, complete application forms and prepare CVs
- **organisational skills** – the ability to order and prioritise and to manage change.

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Softer outcomes may also be psychological in that information and advice may lead a person to feel more optimistic about their future job or career prospects.

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In addition to collecting information about the outcomes and impact of IAG, an evaluation must also collect information relating to the:

- personal details, characteristics and circumstances of the individual, both when they received advice and at the time of the survey
- person's needs and the type of service and support they received.

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How these requirements can be formulated within a questionnaire is covered in Section 5 of this Guide.

Section 4: Approaches to Evaluation – Learning the Trade

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There is not one type or approach to evaluation and nor are all the possible approaches of particular relevance to adult IAG. In this section we try to sort the “wheat from the chaff” by focusing on what types of evaluation really matter to adult IAG practitioners and also to IAG contractors and IAG strategic boards.

Essential First Step – an Evaluation Plan

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Before embarking on an evaluation, it is important to draw up an evaluation plan. This is a planning, communications and performance monitoring tool since it helps all those involved in the evaluation directly or indirectly to understand what is going on.

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Your evaluation plan need not be a huge tome, indeed the more succinct and understandable it is the better, but an eye for detail is necessary. The plan should provide a pause for thought since it must address the following key questions.

- Why are we undertaking an evaluation of a particular programme or project, and why now?
- Who is the evaluation for?
- What is going to be evaluated exactly?
- What is the scope of the evaluation?
- When will we undertake the evaluation?
- What are the start and completion dates?
- What key issues or questions do we want to address and answer?
- What methods and tools will we use to collect evidence and information?
- Who will undertake the evaluation and will it be external and/or internal?
- How will we manage and review the evaluation process?
- How will we communicate and use the evaluation findings?

45

In many respects, the purpose of this Guide is to help you decide how to address these questions when you embark on the evaluation of IAG services for adults. Our focus is primarily on those services and the people who receive them and deliver them. The wider evaluation of IAG contractors or networks, usually undertaken by external consultants, is not addressed in this Guide.

Types of Evaluation

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There are several different types of evaluation – managerial, pluralistic, thematic, mid-term, in-depth, even “meta-evaluation”, which is evaluation of another evaluation or a series of evaluations.

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Although some of the terminology can be a little off-putting, the meaning behind the concepts is still really helpful. First of all, let’s consider formative and summative evaluation.

- **Formative evaluation** focuses mainly on process evaluation, that is how, why and under what conditions interventions work. Formative evaluations typically involve gathering information during the early (or mid-term) stages of a project or programme, with a focus on finding out whether your efforts are unfolding as planned, uncovering any obstacles, barriers or unexpected opportunities or risks that may have emerged, and identifying “mid-course” adjustments and corrections that can improve future performance. This kind of evaluation is usually of most interest and relevance to IAG practitioners such as advisers and information specialists.
- **Summative evaluation** focuses on the strategic impacts of interventions and is typically a method of judging the worth of a programme or contract strategy at the end of its life (ex-post) or at a natural break in its development such as a mid-year review. Using a broad perspective, emphasis is given to the performance and outcomes achieved and at what cost. It is often reflective, asking what has been achieved, how effectively and what has been learnt in the course of implementing the programme or strategy in its entirety, or at least over a fairly long period. Summative evaluation will probably be of most interest to IAG managers, contractors and strategic boards, but not exclusively so.

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The distinction between formative and summative evaluation has wittily been summarised in the following way: "When the cook tastes the soup, it's formative; when the guests taste the soup, it's summative".

49

There are two other types of evaluation worthy of mention.

- **Overall evaluation** examines an intervention or delivery arrangement in its totality. It intends to be comprehensive and to take account of all relevant issues and actions.
- **In-depth evaluation** consists of focusing the evaluation precisely on a particular issue or outcome (for example, post-IAG participation in work-based learning) or a particular client group. The aim is to "dig-down" by means of detailed analysis.

When to evaluate

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Clarifying when evaluation will be undertaken is a useful and important exercise. Clearly any evaluation will take up time and resources, and therefore a balance needs to be struck between undertaking meaningful evaluation which is useful to the organisation's future development, and over-evaluation which provides a lot of information, not all of which is particularly useful at a given point in time.

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When evaluation is to be undertaken often depends on the nature of the project or programme to be evaluated and why the evaluation is being performed. For instance, projects that have a finite timescale often have an interim evaluation to monitor progress and achievements to date and to inform the remainder of the project. This is often followed by a final evaluation at the end of the project to evaluate its overall contribution and achievements.

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In the case of adult IAG, the timing of an evaluation may be influenced by:

- the development and priorities of an IAG strategic board
- the timing and requirements of the LSC's funding guidance, business planning cycle and its own evaluation needs
- a need to supply evidence about service delivery, take-up and impact on clients to funding bodies
- when decisions need to be made about whether to re-contract with IAG providers in a network.

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In many respects, therefore, this highlights the importance of having clear objectives for undertaking an evaluation as this will inform when and how often evaluation needs to occur.

Who should undertake an evaluation?

54

Evaluations may be conducted either by persons from within an IAG delivery network or by consultants, academics or others from outside. The first instance is referred to as an internal evaluation (or self-evaluation) and the second as an external evaluation.

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There are several considerations here, not least the requirements of funders and strategic partners engaged in an IAG delivery network. There are clearly pros and cons to both approaches. In Table 2 we consider their relative merits.

Table 2: Pros and cons of internal and external evaluation.

Internal evaluation	
Pros	Cons
<p>Knows the project, scheme and delivery network</p> <p>Understands and can interpret personal behaviour and attitudes</p> <p>Is known to staff, so poses no threat of anxiety or disruption</p> <p>Has a greater chance of adopting or following up recommendations</p> <p>Is often less expensive, at least in terms of financial payments if not in terms of time</p> <p>Does not require time-consuming procurement negotiations. May provide more opportunity to build evaluation capability (unless external evaluator is contracted locally)</p> <p>Useful activity as part of the self-assessment process driven by inspectorate requirements.</p>	<p>Finds it hard to be objective</p> <p>May avoid looking for facts or forming conclusions that are negative or reflect badly on the organisation or individuals</p> <p>Is usually too busy to participate fully</p> <p>Is part of the authority structure and may be constrained by organisational role conflict</p> <p>May not be trained in evaluation methods</p> <p>May not have special technical expertise</p> <p>Staff may be reluctant to be open and honest.</p>
External evaluation	
Pros	Cons
<p>Not personally involved so finds it easier to be objective</p> <p>May be free from organisational bias</p> <p>Can bring fresh perspective, insight</p> <p>May have broader experience, more experience in evaluation and wide current programme knowledge</p> <p>Better suited for intensive work</p> <p>Can serve as an arbitrator or facilitator between parties</p> <p>Can bring contractors into contact with additional resources.</p>	<p>May not know the organisation, its policies, procedures and personalities</p> <p>May be ignorant of constraints affecting feasibility of recommendations</p> <p>May be perceived as an adversary arousing unnecessary anxiety</p> <p>May be expensive</p> <p>Requires more time for contract negotiations, orientation and monitoring</p> <p>Cannot follow up recommendations related to programme management</p> <p>May be unfamiliar with local political, cultural and economic environment.</p>

56

If an external evaluation is the order of the day, then how to commission the right one becomes a major consideration.

Guidelines to Good Practice

57

The UK Evaluation Society (UKES) has developed some guidelines for good practice in evaluation (UKES, 2003) to support the work of evaluators across a range of fields. These are summarised and adapted below.

Guidelines for self-evaluation

58

Participants involved in self-evaluation need to:

- make the aims, objectives and purposes of the evaluation clear to all members of the institution
- ensure that the process is built into the structure and function of the institution
- review and evidence the competence of the evaluator(s)
- have a clear set of procedures for sharing data within and beyond the institution
- take steps to ensure that all members of the institution believe the evaluation is worth doing
- acknowledge that the sharing of knowledge and experience within the institution may be more threatening than to those outside and take steps to reduce this threat
- treat all colleagues equally in the process of the evaluation and dissemination of findings
- ensure that all involved in the evaluation (whether as data givers, collectors or users) are engaged at some level from the start so they know what is happening and why
- adopt methodologies that are economical and feasible to use in the timescales and operations of the institution

- have the backing and support of the head of the institution, including financial support where appropriate, for meetings, networking, dissemination and publication
- assure members of the institution that the findings from the evaluation are fed back into development as well as providing a measure of accountability
- indicate that the process is methodologically sound and one from which valid implications can be drawn for the precise purpose agreed
- ensure the agreement and understanding of all members of the institution before starting the evaluation
- demonstrate consistency and predictability of behaviour in the conduct and negotiation of the evaluation
- recognise and agree when it is important to make data public and when, for the development of the institution, it is prudent to retain some data in confidence
- communicate openly and honestly with colleagues, consistent with maintaining fair and equitable ethical procedures
- seek advice and/or consider adopting a critical friend to conduct a process audit of the methodological rigour and fairness with which the evaluation is conducted
- communicate to colleagues in accessible language and engage them in discussion on the utility of the evidence and findings
- observe Data Protection Act and Freedom of Information Act requirements.

Guidelines for external evaluation

59

Commissioning an evaluation from outside means you have to be clear about:

- developing an evaluation plan or strategy, and being clear about the purposes of evaluation, the methods to be used and who has the capacity to do it
- designing the evaluation, and, if you decide it should be commissioned externally, writing the specification for a contract

- choosing the evaluator through transparent and effective advertising, interview and selection processes
- managing the evaluation and making sure the evaluator does what the delivery network wants, when it wants it
- using the results, and getting feedback and reports that help the delivery network know whether it is achieving the outcomes it hopes for
- observing Data Protection Act and Freedom of Information Act requirements.

60

In circumstances in which an external evaluator is involved, evaluators need to:

- be explicit about the purpose, methods, intended outputs and outcomes of the evaluation and be mindful of unanticipated effects and responsive to shifts in purpose
- alert commissioners to possible adjustments in the evaluation approach and practice, and be open to dialogue throughout the process informing them of progress and developments
- consider whether it is helpful to build into the contract forms of external support or arbitration (should the need arise)
- have preliminary discussions with commissioners prior to agreeing a contract
- adhere to the terms agreed in the contract and consult with commissioners if there are significant changes required to the design or delivery of the evaluation
- demonstrate the quality of the evaluation to other parties through progress reports, for example on development and financial accountability, and adhere to quality assurance procedures as agreed in the contract
- be aware of and make every attempt to minimise any potential harmful effects of the evaluation that might prejudice the status, position or careers of participants.

61

Evaluators also need to:

- demonstrate that the design and conduct of the evaluation are transparent and fit for purpose
- demonstrate comprehensive and appropriate use of all the evidence and show that evaluation conclusions can be traced to this evidence
- work within the Data Protection Act and have procedures that ensure the secure storage of data
- acknowledge intellectual property and the work of others
- have contractual agreement over copyright of evaluation methodology, findings, documents and publication
- write and communicate evaluation findings in accessible language
- agree with commissioners from the outset the nature of dissemination in order to maximise the utility of the evaluation.

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In practice, evaluators need to:

- demonstrate a commitment to the integrity of the process of evaluation and its purpose to increase learning in the public domain
- be realistic about what is feasible for them to achieve and their capacity to deliver within the agreed timescale and budget
- know when to refuse or terminate an evaluation contract because it is undoable, self-serving, or threatens to undermine the integrity of the process
- be prepared to argue the case for the public right to know in the evaluation in specified contexts
- treat all parties equally in the process of the evaluation and the dissemination of findings.

Which consultant?

63

Choosing which consultants to invite to tender is no easy matter. The best advice is to ask around, especially other nextstep delivery networks across your region or even beyond. You may also want to take soundings from other organisations such as the local LSC, learning partnerships, economic development agencies or a local authority or two, all of which will almost certainly use consultants to undertake evaluative work from time to time. This latter point is an important one; you should be looking for consultants with relevant experience, that is, of evaluation generally and, preferably, evaluation of IAG specifically.

64

The publishers of Regeneration and Renewal magazine have compiled a useful nationwide directory of regeneration consultants and their services (see www.planningresource.co.uk/pp/consultants).

Commissioning and using consultants

65

Selecting and using the right consultant(s) is clearly a crucial issue when an external evaluation is called for.

66

The Institute of Management Consultants set out "10 golden rules" which you may find helpful (www.imc.co.uk/consultants/choosing_usin_g.php), and which we have summarised and adapted below.

- Clearly define the objectives that you hope to achieve.
- Consult with others in your organisation (delivery network) to agree and confirm those objectives and set them out in an invitation to tender.
- Shortlist no more than three consultants, and ask them to provide written proposals.

- Brief the consultants properly.
- See the individual consultant who will do the job (if selected) and make sure that the "chemistry" is right.
- Ask for and take up references from the chosen consultants before confirming the appointment.
- Review and agree a written contract before the assignment starts.
- Be involved and in touch during the evaluation.
- Carefully review and discuss the findings, conclusions and recommendations made by the consultants in their draft report, before it is finalised and submitted.
- Where appropriate, consult or more closely involve the consultants in an advisory role in taking forward and implementing recommendations.

67

It is a good idea to compile a checklist for shortlisting consultants which can be used by the panel with responsibility for making the appointment. The criteria for the selection of consultants will vary with the aims and objectives of your brief, but criteria for decision-making typically include:

- **depth and clarity of understanding of the brief** – do they understand what we are looking for and what the service is all about?
- **fit of the proposed approach and methodology suggested to the brief** – is the approach they are suggesting fit for purpose?
- **capacity and capability** – do they have the experience and expertise to deliver what they say they will?
- **timing** – can they deliver what we want within the available timescale?
- **value for money** – are the proposed costs reasonable, within budget and commensurate with the consultants' expertise and the days' input they propose to undertake?
- **fit or chemistry** – can we work with them, do we think they can work for us?

Section 5: Evaluation Techniques – Tools in the Toolkit

68

This section looks at the tools we have in our evaluation toolkit – what methods and techniques we have to choose from when undertaking an evaluation and which might be most suitable for adult IAG.

69

We look at a range of different research methods and include some tips on good practice as we go along.

Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

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Broadly speaking, there are two main types of research process or method, qualitative and quantitative.

71

Qualitative research address issues that are not easily quantified, many of which are the “soft” outcomes referred to in Section 4 of this Guide. Here the emphasis is on client attitudes about advice services received and those who provided them, their experience and the opinions they may have about the value of the service and how it might be improved. Qualitative approaches tend to have the following key features:

- a concern and interest in subjectivity
- an emphasis on process, interaction and engagement
- an interest in understanding, meaning and insight
- account taken of the wider context in which an intervention occurs.

72

Quantitative research is concerned with the precise measurement of outcomes arising from an intervention, many of which relate to the “hard” outcomes referred to in Section 4. The main features are:

- an interest in objectivity
- a search for causal relationships and what exactly has happened and been achieved
- production of data capable of statistical analysis that enables comparisons to be made between users.

73

The ways in which questionnaires can be used in both quantitative and qualitative research are discussed below.

Research Methods

74

What evaluation tools, techniques and methods do we have at our disposal? There are several, so here we consider those of most relevance to the evaluation of adult IAG services.

75

Research tools that lend themselves to the collection of qualitative information include:

- semi-structured interviews
- focus groups
- mystery shopping
- simple observation.

76

Research tools that help capture quantifiable information include structured interviews and data supplied directly by clients, for example forms, such as the client record information collected by providers and inputted on the IAG Manager management information system.

77

Where an evaluation results in the generation of new information and data (from a client survey for example) this is referred to as primary research. When we draw on data that has been collected earlier (prior to the evaluation), perhaps as part of a monitoring process, we refer to this as secondary data.

Sampling

78

Today, the word “survey” is used most often to describe an activity designed to gather information from a sample of individuals. The sample is usually just a fraction of the population being studied.

79

Samples can be selected in three main ways:

- simple random sampling, where a percentage of individuals is selected entirely at random by “picking names out of a hat”
- systematic random sampling, where a random start-point is selected and then every “nth” person from that point onwards is selected. This is the approach used in the national IAG evaluation survey
- stratified random sampling, where individuals are grouped according to certain criteria or “strata” such as gender, ethnicity or age. The sample is then selected to reflect the actual profile of the population in terms of specified criteria.

80

In all three cases, random sampling ensures that every individual has an equal chance of being selected for interview and therefore the sample as a whole should be representative of the total population (that is, the number of advice users each year). Small-scale studies of a particular group of people (for example, IA users aged over 50 who are in employment) may not call for sophisticated sampling techniques, whereas larger surveys usually do.

81

Sample selection may be influenced by a variety of factors such as the availability and reliability of data, timescales, the evaluation purpose and cost. These factors will also be relevant to the choice of sample size and survey method.

82

There is no general rule for sample size that can be used for all surveys, but these need not be inordinately large provided good sampling techniques are applied to reliable client data sets. For the 2004 national evaluation of IA, a sample of 2,000 clients was interviewed. This sample was drawn from 15,765 client contact records and so amounted to 12.7 per cent. It was probably around 5 per cent of all people who accessed advice sessions over the period in question.

Survey methods

83

There are three main ways in which a survey can be undertaken: in person, by telephone, or by post or email. In each case, information must be collected using standardised and agreed procedures so that the findings are reasonably accurate and consistent. The approach is summarised in the list below.

- Face-to-face interviews are probably the preferred survey method when fairly complex or in-depth information is needed, and certainly where information of a sensitive or confidential nature is concerned. Such interviews may enable an interviewer to explain more clearly the purpose of an evaluation and to gain the trust of the interviewee. They can usually be arranged at a mutually convenient time. Overall, personal interviews provide more scope to capture qualitative information compared to other techniques. They can be expensive and sometimes time-consuming however, and the presence and demeanour of the interviewer may bias some responses.
- Telephone interviews are a reasonably efficient method of collecting some types of (quantitative and, to a lesser extent, qualitative) data and lend themselves particularly well to situations where the length of the evaluation period is limited. They limit opportunities for discussion and for capturing qualitative data and can sometimes be regarded as intrusive if, for example, they take place in the home or at inconvenient times.
- Postal surveys can be low in cost, targeted and fast. But response rates can be low and skewed towards particular groups and there is a risk of respondents feeling detached from the survey and its aims, especially when these are to evaluate a service in a meaningful way. The outlook for postal surveys looks dim as more and more people come to rely on email and the Internet. The limitations of this approach in terms of accuracy and reliability are also very significant in all but a small number of cases.
- Not surprisingly, most IAG providers have turned away from postal surveys of clients as part of their tracking responsibilities, given much higher and more informative response rates through telephone and even email and texting follow-up methods.
- Observation can be useful if evaluators are interested in reaching informed judgements about client adviser interaction and processes. Observations should be guided by the use of a checklist or observation sheet. Recording or video-taping a guidance interview, for example, may be useful but on the other hand a client might find this intrusive. Although having obvious limitations (for example in the scope for misinterpretation and interviewer bias), systematic observation can be useful as the basis for designing and planning more structured techniques and for enabling the evaluator to gain a better appreciation of the context in which IA services are delivered.
- Case studies are in-depth studies of information collected on specific cases and examples. They may concern individuals, programmes, organisations, projects or techniques. The approach draws on both qualitative and quantitative data techniques and is most suitable for evaluations where complex processes are involved as, for example, can often be the case with guidance interviews undertaken over an extended period. A case study can help add a degree of realism to an evaluation but it must be chosen carefully in order to be representative of one or more beneficiaries or interventions. The results are always presented in narrative form, giving the reader an “inside view” of what the experience was really like.

Interview techniques

84

Some questionnaires are intended to be completed by clients on their own for example via a website (these are termed "self-administered"). The majority are not however, and the completion of the survey is based on an interview between a researcher or evaluator and a respondent. There are broadly two interview techniques used to collect quantitative and qualitative information through face-to-face or telephone methods.

a Structured interviews have a set of standardised questions that are asked of every selected individual. Structured interviewing tends to be used in job interview and appraisal situations since there is a need to collect information in an accurate and consistent way. In essence, a structured interview is largely a one-way question and answer session which is recorded in some way. Whether structured interviews are best undertaken in a more or less formalised setting is an issue on which researchers tend to express different views.

b Semi-structured interviews are conducted in a fairly open and relaxed way and allow for focused, conversational communication but they are not completely unstructured. This technique has been referred to as "conversation with a purpose". The interview takes place within a previously designed framework of themes and issues and not all the questions are designed or phrased ahead of time. Those being interviewed can ask questions of the interviewer. The interviewer will use a topic guide or form rather than a detailed questionnaire as in the case of structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews tend to be used most when there is a need to:

- collect detailed individual accounts or histories
- collect in-depth information about personal motivation or behaviour
- understand complex circumstances
- discuss issues of a sensitive nature.

85

Variations on the above include investigative, in-depth and organic (unstructured) interviews.

86

As far as adult IAG surveys are concerned, both structured and semi-structured approaches are of value and, in some circumstances, in-depth interviews may be beneficial where specific issues of a complex nature need to be investigated. Although there will be exceptions, and the various techniques should not be seen in isolation, telephone surveys tend to be undertaken using more structured approaches, while face-to-face interviews can be more useful when semi-structured.

87

The length of interviews when evaluating advice services can vary significantly, especially face-to-face interviews. Factors influencing the time available for interviews include:

- client preferences
- conditions under which conducted
- interviewer experience
- cost and the purpose of the survey.

88

The national IA evaluation (telephone) survey takes 17 minutes to complete on average.

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Guidelines for interviewing

89

Interviewers of IAG users may be external consultants in some instances, but in self-evaluation exercises they may be providers of IAG or those responsible for the management of nextstep IAG delivery networks. All may play a role in the evaluation process, at one time or another, in interviewing adults who have received IAG.

90

Poor questionnaires can result in poor survey findings and so we turn to good practice in this field in the next sub-section. But first there is the interviewing process itself.

91

There are four main parts to an interviewer's job:

- a** contacting respondents (for example, IAG users, provider staff) and enlisting co-operation in a survey or consultation
- b** establishing a relationship with the respondent based on mutual understanding about the survey
- c** handling the question-and-answer process
- d** recording answers.

92

Here are some guidelines for effective survey interviewing.

- a** Prepare well in advance. Review the background information about the survey, ensure you have relevant materials to hand and, if it is a face-to-face interview, think carefully about where best to undertake the interview.
- b** Explain who you are, what the survey is for and who has commissioned it. Usually a questionnaire will begin with a preamble covering these matters (see below).
- c** Questions should be read exactly as worded.
- d** If the respondent's answer to the initial question is not a complete and adequate answer, probe for clarification and elaboration in a non-directive way, that is, in a way that does not influence the content of the answers that result.
- e** Answers recorded should reflect what the respondent says:
 - open-ended, factual questions – write down all relevant information
 - open-ended, opinion questions – write down the answer verbatim, use no paraphrasing or summaries
 - close-ended, factual questions – check off the answer chosen by the respondent and bear in mind their answer may sometimes need to be recorded as "other" with some explanation as to why
 - close-ended, opinion questions – check off the answer chosen by the respondent and probe accordingly.
- f** An interviewer should try to communicate in a neutral, non-judgemental way with respect to the answers a respondent gives, and should not provide any personal information that might imply how he or she feels about certain questions or responses. Nor should the interviewer provide any feedback to respondents, positive or negative, with regard to their answers.

Questionnaire design

93

Questionnaires are undoubtedly the single most frequently used type of evaluation instrument. They are quite versatile and can be used for both qualitative and quantitative research and in structured or semi-structured interviews. The apparent simplicity of using questionnaires belies the fact that their design can (and to some extent has to be) quite arduous and time-consuming.

94

Most questionnaires are trying to address both quantitative and qualitative research issues, especially within an IAG evaluation context. We therefore find a blend of open and closed questions.

- Closed or restricted questions seek quantifiable information (that is, data). Here the respondent marks "yes", "no" or "don't know", gives short answers or picks an item from a prepared list of responses. Attitude scales (for example, 5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = undecided, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree) may be used. Responses to this type of question are considerably better if the respondent is given the opportunity to elaborate on the reasons for their answer through a follow-up such as "Why did you choose (or say) that?".
- Open questions encourage the respondent to provide detailed information and explanation in their own words. This enables the evaluator to establish the context and the probable reasons behind certain responses. Open questions require greater effort on the part of the respondent and the responses themselves may sometimes be difficult to interpret and summarise.

95

The 10 key steps in the questionnaire design process can be summarised as follows.

- a** The place to start in designing a questionnaire is with your data collection and evaluation goals. What information do you really need and from whom?
- b** Once these issues have been clearly identified, the next step is to decide what specific types of information are needed to satisfy these objectives. This may seem rather arduous or presumptive, but it can help to draft an outline of the final evaluation report detailing how the survey will address the key evaluation (survey) objectives.
- c** The third step is to determine the best available mode of collection, for example in person, telephone, by email or post.
- d** Next we need to ensure we all understand what we mean by various names, concepts and terms. To design a good question, it is crucial that all concepts are clear and simply expressed. This can prove problematic, especially where we are seeking information in a format that may not be recognisable to the respondent, for example questions relating to qualifications achieved or being worked towards.
- e** When questions are being drafted, it is important for researchers to agree in advance on the level of detail required from the responses. The designer must think about how the answer to the question will be analysed later. One particular point to think about is whether a question is included mainly to make comparisons over time (for example, before and after a guidance interview) or comparison across groups (for example, satisfaction with provider follow-up among men and women).

f Some questions will be difficult to answer, but this cannot always be detected or foreseen at the design stage. Questions that are too detailed or tax a person's memory are generally to be avoided for example, but at the design stage researchers often feel they should seek as much specific information as possible. Pre-testing or piloting such questions (and the questionnaire as a whole) will quickly reveal problems and quite often solutions too.

g The format and structure of the draft questionnaire now needs some attention, especially layout and routing (links) between questions and responses (for example "If stated 'yes' to Question 3, please go to Question 4; if stated 'no', please go to Question 6"). Include an introduction that explains what the survey is about, who the interviewer is, whether it is confidential or not and what will happen to all the data collected.

h Once a draft is in place, step back and look at it as a total package. Read it over and see how it flows, ask your colleagues to read it and discuss their impressions of how easy it is to understand and respond to. Importantly, ask those who will conduct the interviews (in person or by telephone) for their views. Do they and the prospective interviewees get a clear sense of what the survey is about and seeking to understand and find out?

i On the basis of informal feedback, pre-testing, piloting and reflection, the questionnaire can now be revised, and then revised again, and perhaps again. But the design of questionnaires is both an art and a science, and the constant amendment of a questionnaire can easily run into the problem of diminishing returns whereby its quality actually diminishes as a result of too much revision or added complexity.

j Finally, the questionnaire and associated materials (for example, show-cards) need to be published in reasonable good quality and distributed with interviewer instructions. It is also a good idea for the researcher or evaluator to meet with the interviewer team before the survey commences to go through the questionnaire and allow for a discussion about possible problems and key success factors. An interviewee complaints procedure also needs to be agreed should the need arise.

96

To summarise, the key characteristics of a "good" questionnaire tend to be as follows.

- It is as simple and as succinct as possible.
- It seeks out information that is not currently or easily available.
- It deals with a topic that is relevant, important and memorable to the respondent.
- The purpose of the survey is clearly explained, as is the way in which the information will be used and how the client came to be selected as part of a sample for interview.
- It is well organised and easy to follow, for both interviewer and interviewee.
- It is designed to extract the right information, in the right order and in a way that is intelligible.
- The questions and response options are as clear, neutral and as unambiguous as possible. The "plain English" principle should always be applied.
- Consideration has been given as to how the responses to open questions will be collated and analysed.

97

The benefits of adequate pre-testing and piloting of a questionnaire cannot be underestimated, and yet this activity is often overlooked or too little time is devoted to it. Piloting a questionnaire with even a relatively small group of respondents can enable you to gain valuable insights into whether:

- respondents are inclined to respond enthusiastically, honestly or even at all
- the questionnaire is too long or difficult to complete
- the balance between closed and open questions is about right in terms of capturing information in sufficient depth and breadth
- the answers given to questions throw up unexpected responses, ambiguities or sensitivities.

Focus groups

98

Focus groups have become an increasingly popular way to learn about opinions, attitudes, beliefs and experiences. They are exclusively a qualitative research method which can be very useful in obtaining information about the usefulness of various learning and guidance techniques and providers. Focus groups are often used at the initial stages of an evaluation project since they can be helpful in framing questions for later use, perhaps as part of a survey exercise.

99

Focus groups generate information through the give and take of group discussion. Although focus groups are a form of group interviewing, their key characteristic is the insight and data produced by the interaction between participants.

100

Compared with other survey methods, the main potential benefits of focus groups are as follows.

- They can serve to highlight shared or common experience while also identifying different or polarised views.
- Interaction enables participants to ask questions of each other, as well as to reflect on and reconsider their own views and interpretations.
- A wide range of topics can be covered in a relatively short space of time.
- If a group works well, trust develops and the group may explore solutions to a particular problem or perceived weakness in provision and so they can become a forum for change.
- The group can provide a forum for discussion which some people feel more at ease with than, say, being interviewed face to face or completing a questionnaire.

101

Although focus group research has many advantages, as with all research methods there are limitations. Some can be overcome by careful planning and moderating, but others are more challenging.

- The researcher or moderator has less control over the data produced than in one-to-one interviewing. By its nature, focus group research is open-ended and cannot be entirely pre-determined.
- It can be difficult for a researcher to identify a clear message or to distinguish between what is or is not a person's own point of view.

- Discussions can be dominated by more confident and articulate members of the group while other members feel more inhibited because of this or the sensitive nature of some issues. People with communication problems or special needs may be at a particular disadvantage.
- On a practical note, focus groups can be difficult to assemble and it may not be easy to get a representative sample.

102

The role, skills and experience of the focus group moderator is a key success factor. Their basic job is to keep the group "focused" and to help facilitate a lively and productive discussion of the topic at hand, for example the availability of advice services in a given area or the barriers affecting access to guidance provision amongst ethnic minority groups.

103

The focus group should be facilitated by someone who is knowledgeable about adult IAG and a particular place or client group. They must be skilled at group facilitation and careful not to prompt or unduly lead the participants. A skilled moderator will ensure that everyone is given the opportunity to contribute their views and not allow one or two people to dominate the discussion. The moderator typically begins the discussion with an ice-breaker, giving participants the chance to introduce themselves to the group. The moderator should then use a topic guide to facilitate discussion, but most questions should be fairly open-ended so that there are many possible responses and scope for different points of view.

104

The most accurate way to document the outcomes from a focus group is to tape or video-record the discussion. If you decide to do this, it is essential to get the consent of the participants in advance and ensure that they are comfortable with this arrangement. Some people do not feel at ease being recorded and, in this instance, someone other than the moderator should be present to take detailed notes of the discussion. The transcripts can be analysed in a similar way to an unstructured interview, using thematic and/or content analysis. Particular note should be taken of points of consensus and disparity.

105

When convening a focus group, there are several factors that need to be considered at the planning stage beforehand.

- **Group size** – the optimum size for a focus group is usually 6 to 10, although there is no magic number. However, it is advisable to invite up to 15 people per group due to the likelihood that not all will attend. Contacting those invited just beforehand to confirm or encourage their attendance is also a good idea.
- **Frequency of meetings** – numbers of groups vary, some studies using only one meeting with several focus groups, others arranging meetings of the same group several times.
- **Location** – a suitable venue should be booked well in advance. It should provide for a relaxed atmosphere and be accessible to all people. The room should be self-contained and in a quiet location which is easy for people to get to.
- **Timing** – the meeting should be held on a day and at a time that is convenient to participants to ensure a good turnout.
- **Health and safety** – the health and safety and personal security of all involved is important. Colleagues and venue management should be informed of the date, time and venue and security arrangements verified.

- **Resources and equipment** – depending on circumstances, arrangements may need to be made for the use of recording equipment, PowerPoint presentations or overhead transparencies, flipcharts and so forth.
- **Incentives** – attendance can be boosted if incentives (for example book tokens) are offered and there should be refreshments available on the day.

106

At the focus group itself, the moderator should begin with an introduction that:

- introduces themselves and explains their role
- explains the purpose of the meeting and the evaluation study of which it is a part, that is, why the focus group has been convened and how these people were invited to participate
- lays down some basic ground rules to encourage everyone to participate in the discussion and get the most out of it themselves
- reassure the participants about the voluntary and confidential nature of their involvement.

Mystery shopping

107

Mystery shopping and covert observation studies have been growing in popularity over recent years both as a market research and evaluative tool.

108

Mystery shopping is essentially about the measurement of the quality of a service. It is a form of participant observation that uses researchers to act as a customer or potential customer to monitor the quality of processes and procedures used in the delivery of, for example, IAG services delivered by a nextstep sub-contractor. It is usually carried out by a visit or by telephone, although email is also being used more frequently.

109

The key advantage of mystery shopping is that it is able to measure quality according to preset criteria, rather than the knowledge and attitudes of service providers. There may, after all, be important differences between an adviser's knowledge and their behaviour and interaction with a client.

110

In principle, the design of a mystery shopping survey is fairly straightforward, but the practicalities of designing and monitoring a robust study are usually difficult. Key steps include the following:

- design of a suitable questionnaire to be completed after the researcher has left the premises
- recruitment and training of shoppers to match a particular customer profile
- conducting the survey and analysing the data generated in aggregate format. Quantitative data may be subject to statistical testing and qualitative data to thematic analysis.

111

The Market Research Society (MRS) has issued guidelines for practitioners engaged in mystery shopping that cover ethical and technical principles as well as logistical and legal issues (MRS, 2003).

Reporting and Dissemination

112

Once the survey work, background research and analysis are complete, the findings and conclusions need to be presented in a clear and coherent report. That report is also likely to contain recommendations for improvement to the future management, resourcing, development and delivery of adult IAG services in a particular local area or sub-region.

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113

The target audience of an evaluation report will affect how it is written, its structure and the means by which it is disseminated. With an IAG evaluation, it seems reasonable to assume that the audience will include:

- practitioners – the people who deliver IAG services to clients directly
- providers – the organisations and groups that contract for the delivery of services with LSCs
- strategic stakeholders – IAG strategic boards
- policy developers – LSC.

114

To be credible, an evaluation report should include not only findings and conclusions, but also clear explanations of how those results were used to reinforce, refine or modify IAG delivery and management arrangements. The research methodology is therefore a key component of an evaluation report.

115

We mentioned very early on in this Guide that there is merit in giving early attention (when planning an evaluation) to the probable structure of the final report. There is no blueprint for an IAG evaluation report, but a typical report structure may contain some or all of the following sections:

- title and contents page
- executive summary, which is a concise summary of the purpose, method, key findings and conclusions of the evaluation project
- introduction, with the aims and objectives and rationale for the evaluation, the methodology used (including sampling, survey methods and techniques and so on) and people who were involved in the management of the research project
- background, which sets out the context for the study, which may include reference to the relevant government policy agenda, local IAG management and funding arrangements, labour market trends and prospects and other evaluation studies or research
- findings, probably organised into themes and/or by the research methods used, the aim being to identify and describe key findings relevant to the research objectives. Examples of good practice and lessons learnt by practitioners, for example, can be included. An attempt should be made to assess the value for money derived from the services under evaluation (see paragraph 15 of this Guide). Tools such as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis can be a useful way to encapsulate findings and identify key issues

- conclusions and recommendations drawing the main findings together and putting forward overall conclusions in regard to the evaluation objectives that were set. These conclusions should inform a series of recommendations for policy, strategic planning, service delivery and/or further research
- appendices, which include more detailed accounts of research methods and materials (for example, the survey questionnaires, topic guides from focus groups), data sources and case studies.

116

The final and crucial task is that of dissemination, although the importance of this task is often overlooked. Effective dissemination of the contents of the evaluation report (especially its key messages and recommendations) is essential for a number of reasons. It:

- ensures that the evaluation process remains open and transparent
- increases the chance of key stakeholders taking ownership of the evaluation outcomes and addressing them enthusiastically
- enables good practice and lessons to be shared
- helps prevent replication of the evaluation while providing a base for other research to proceed.

117

Responsibility for organising the dissemination process may reside with a project steering group, the nextstep delivery network team and/or the IAG strategic board. As with research methodology, dissemination should be given early attention in the planning of any evaluation project.

118

The following tips regarding the dissemination of reports may be of interest.

- Produce accessible summaries using language and styles of presentation that engage the interest of a broad audience.
- Undertake at least one dissemination event either as a special event or part of, say, a relevant conference, meeting or training event.
- Try to find ways of combining dissemination methods to achieve added value.
- Be proactive.

119

Methods of dissemination may include:

- a nextstep IAG delivery network and local LSC website
- inclusion in a nextstep newsletter, summarising key messages and drawing attention to how and where to obtain copies of the full report or a summary
- presentation at a conference or seminar and/or inclusion as a topic for workshop discussion among practitioners
- communication at provider network meetings
- inclusion in staff training and development programmes.

Section 6: Evaluation in Action – the First-hand Experience of nextstep Contractors

Introduction

120

In this section, we draw directly on the experience of several nextstep adult IAG contractors who have been involved in evaluative work in recent times. We summarise the types of approaches adopted and their outcomes and provide contact details should you wish to follow up and talk with some of those directly involved.

121

The contractors and contacts in Table 3 supplied information for this Guide following a request from the LSC.

122

Further information about the above evaluative work and background information (for example, questionnaires, non-confidential reports and so on) can be requested from the above contacts.

Key Messages

123

Before we outline the specific evaluative work undertaken, we have identified six key messages arising from these examples as follows.

- Client evaluation surveys using methodologies in line with the LSC national IAG survey benefit from being able to make comparisons at both sub-regional and national levels and, given the highly quantitative approach adopted, they are also amenable to very detailed statistical analysis.

Table 3: Contractors supplying information for this Guide.

Contractor organisation	Contact name	Email address
Supplying information		
nextstep Lancashire	Geoff O'Donoghue	geoff@nextsteplancashire.co.uk
nextstep Kent and Medway	Hazel Allan	Hazel.Allan@vtplc.com
nextstep Essex	Sharon Scott	Sharon.scott@vtplc.com
nextstep Cornwall, Devon and Somerset	Rita Watkins	rita.watkins@nextstep-cds.org.uk
nextstep London West	Will Clark	WillClark@lclondon.co.uk
nextstep Suffolk	Dot Granville	dot.granville@iag.suffolkcc.gov.uk
nextstep London North	John Pawsey	John.Pawsey@Prospects.co.uk
nextstep Norfolk	Paul Allford	paul.allford@nextstepnorfolk.org.uk
nextstep West Yorkshire	Alison Kinder	alison.kinder@ckcareers.org.uk
Supplying examples of client tracking		
nextstep Leicestershire	Karen Heywood	kheywood@nextstep-leiics.org.uk
nextstep Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin	Marion Versluijs	m.versluijs@connexionsstw.org.uk
nextstep West of England	Lois Thorn	lthorn@ConnexionsWest.org.uk

- Survey research methods need to be chosen with great care, with particular consideration given to likely response rates and the accuracy of the data collected. Postal surveys seem to be effective in terms of tracking and gathering destination data, but face-to-face or telephone interviews allow for a more in-depth assessment of qualitative issues.
- Quantitative data derived from structured surveys enables comparisons to be made between different (priority) groups. By contrast, IAG provider and partner surveys tend to be more effective at unearthing key issues if undertaken using a more qualitative (or semi-structured) approach.
- Some comparisons can be made between the characteristics of the client (population) seen by IAG providers and the demographics of an area as a whole. Although there are limitations, some insights may therefore be gained into possible areas of under-representation among specific client groups (for example, people with disabilities, clients aged over 50, people of African Caribbean origin), geographical areas and gaps in service provision. Here we see the value of cross-referencing quantitative data from two sources – primary (arising from the survey) and secondary (arising from existing data sources, including IAG Manager or the UFI Learning Directory back office data tool).
- Specification of “soft” outcomes achieved by clients following IAG interventions needs to be treated with care. There is scope for ambiguity and misinterpretation if outcomes are not properly defined or explained to clients. The phrasing of questions relating to soft outcomes and indicators or distance travelled needs careful consideration.
- Surprisingly perhaps, there appear to be few examples of using focus groups to collect qualitative feedback from small groups of IAG users. Observation does not appear to be a research method employed at all.

nextstep Lancashire

124

nextstep Lancashire commissions consultants on a six-monthly basis to provide an independent evaluation of the advice and information (IA) services delivered through the nextstep IAG network. The evaluation includes both demand and supply components, in that it embraces both the users and providers of IAG services.

125

The objectives of the evaluation study were to provide a comprehensive assessment of:

- overall programme performance against contracted targets, delivery outputs and outcomes
- the changing composition and needs of the target client groups
- the impact of services on clients’ economic status and welfare
- operational activities and factors influencing performance and added value
- issues relating to the management and organisation of service delivery
- the effectiveness of access and information points
- the extent and effectiveness of engagement with network members
- the effectiveness of support and capacity-building offered through the sub-contractor network to providers.

126

The key stages in the methodology used by the consultants were as follows:

- a inception and planning meeting between the consultants and nextstep delivery network management
- b interviews with IAG delivery network core team members and LSC Lancashire’s IAG manager

- c semi-structured telephone interviews with all 14 IAG providers in the network. Key lines of enquiry included:
 - client take-up and needs
 - factors affecting provider performance and impact
 - network management and resources
- d report on progress within two specialist IAG projects funded via the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF)
- e telephone interviews with two other comparable IAG contractors in order to compare experiences and identify lessons and features of good practice
- f a structured telephone survey of 100 adults who accessed IA services over the previous six months. The survey fieldwork was undertaken by a specialist survey research team. The survey questionnaire mirrored that used in the national survey, but was customised to address specific issues of importance to nextstep Lancashire
- g analysis of all findings and production of a report including recommendations for action, followed by a verbal presentation to key partners. The report includes comparisons with:
 - findings from previous client surveys undertaken for nextstep Lancashire in the form of a trends analysis
 - findings from the national IA survey undertaken for the LSC in the form of a comparative analysis.

127

An annex to the report sets out the client survey findings in the form of detailed survey analysis tables.

nextstep Kent and Medway and nextstep Essex**128**

The nextstep contractors in Kent and Medway and in Essex have commissioned consultants to undertake client evaluation surveys on their behalf.

129

As with nextstep Lancashire, these contractors have benefited from the comparative analysis of findings made possible by using a methodology similar to that employed in the annual IA client evaluation survey.

130

The findings and recommendations of the evaluation projects have been widely reported within the nextstep provider network, amongst the nextstep core team and to the IAG strategic boards. They are also fed into the annual business planning process and will also provide evidence of value to the inspection process.

nextstep Cornwall, Devon and Somerset**131**

nextstep Cornwall, Devon and Somerset recently completed a client impact study, the aim of which was "to measure the extent to which nextstep's IAG intervention resulted in beneficial changes in the lives of its clients in Cornwall, Devon and Somerset, and where clients feel there have been no benefits, the extent to which this is the result of external issues, or the quality of the IAG experience". The study was undertaken by independent consultants on behalf of nextstep Cornwall, Devon and Somerset.

132

The objectives of the evaluation were to address the following questions and issues:

- the personal circumstances of clients when they presented themselves to the IAG provider
- the impact IAG had on those personal circumstances, for example on employment and learning
- clients' perceptions of the positive impact of IAG on their lives
- the extent to which clients were able to act upon information and advice received and move on, and the effect of perceived barriers.

133

The consultants considered but ruled out the idea of a postal survey of the client group on the grounds that this approach would be unlikely to yield reliable and valid data for an impact study. A telephone survey was selected as the most reliable way of gaining valid data for analysis and stratified random sampling was used to generate a representative sample of the client group in terms of geographical distribution, nature of the service received and population characteristics such as age, gender and ethnicity. Client details were selected from the nextstep client contact database. With clients of every provider being included in the survey, the sample size was 10 per cent of the eligible sample population.

134

At the IAG interview stage, clients had been asked if they would be willing to participate in follow-up surveys. Those who did not consent were excluded from the sampling frame drawn from the database. Prisoners who had received IAG from service providers were also excluded because of the difficulty of contacting them. The final client population numbered 3,796 individuals and the sample was drawn from this group.

135

In total, 200 former and continuing clients participated in the survey, a further 7 did not remember the service they had received and were therefore ineligible and a further 14 refused to participate. More than 100 others could not be contacted because their contact details were no longer current.

136

Clients were interviewed during the first and second week of July 2005 using a semi-structured approach. Key qualitative and quantitative data was recorded systematically via questionnaire for later analysis. This data centred on:

- employment and learning outcomes (or transitions) experienced by clients following IAG support
- reported barriers to (re-)entering learning and/or work
- the positive impact of IAG on clients, including those with Skills for Life needs
- "soft outcomes" arising from IAG interventions such as raised awareness, confidence and motivation
- reasons for seeking IAG
- perceived quality of provision. Clients were asked to rate the quality of various aspects of IAG received using a five-point scale. The aspects included information and advice about learning, careers, jobsearch and benefits
- the means by which clients were referred or signposted to IAG services – mediated (for example, Jobcentre Plus, learning providers) or non-mediated (for example, literature, advertising).

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nextstep London West

137

nextstep London West commissioned consultants to undertake an annual evaluation of its adult advice services. The evaluation aims were to:

- assess the quality of service that clients had received from IAG providers
- find out what the outcomes and benefits of using IAG services were for those clients
- consult partners on the effectiveness of the delivery network, its future and any areas for improvement
- identify any common issues arising for sub-contractors delivering advice services in West London.

138

The evaluation method used in the 2005 study had five main stages:

- an inception meeting and review of background documentation
- an interview with the LSC's IAG contract manager
- a (primarily) quantitative telephone survey of 200 clients who had received advice and/or guidance
- a qualitative telephone survey with 10 IAG providers
- the analysis of survey results and production of a report for discussion by the IAG strategic board.

139

The client survey was conducted during May 2005. The sample comprised 200 randomly selected clients who had used IAG services within the previous 6 months, and focused on the following issues:

- IAG help sought and received
- how clients found out about services
- client satisfaction with services
- barriers to learning and employment
- benefits and impacts
- areas for improvement
- willingness to refer services
- further help required (unmet needs)
- additional comments.

140

The client questionnaire was structured in such a way to gather as much quantitative information as possible, thereby aiding statistical analysis of responses using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). A small number of open questions was included so that respondents could provide additional comments not covered by pre-coded questions. Various client details were also collected so that an analysis could be undertaken comparing responses from different client groups, with some of this information also being of practical value to the delivery network in terms of new market intelligence.

141

Information derived from the client survey included:

- barriers to learning and employment
- client perceptions about which "priority groups" they belonged to
- marketing and awareness of services
- types of advice sought and received
- referral by other organisations or groups
- satisfaction with advice services received, including: sufficiency, usefulness, adviser support and ability
- progression, including progression into learning and work, changing attitudes and perceptions
- "soft" outcomes derived from accessing IAG, including help with decision-making, improved awareness and confidence
- suggested areas for improvement.

142

In addition to quantitative data analysis, the survey report also includes selected quotes from clients about their experience and perceptions of the IAG services and their providers.

143

The telephone survey of IAG providers was largely qualitative in nature and aimed to explore:

- views on the effectiveness of the delivery network, including communication, structure and organisation, services and resources (for example the matrix quality standard (see DfES, 2002b), training, networking, funding)
- outreach, marketing and the clientele, including outreach work, marketing strategy and target groups
- referrals and networks
- client follow-up methods and approaches
- views about the Adult Learning Grant, a specialist learner support initiative.

144

A diverse group of partners was consulted in order to gather a broad and representative range of views. Partners included a mixture of community, private and statutory organisations and groups based within the delivery network's six boroughs. These groups varied in size.

nextstep Suffolk**145**

nextstep Suffolk commissioned consultants to undertake a telephone follow-up survey of nextstep clients during May and June 2005. The evaluation aim was to provide an objective analysis and interpretation of statistical data gathered from the survey in order to establish whether IAG providers have provided a level of service in keeping with the matrix quality standard.

146

In total, 106 telephone interviews were completed from client data provided by 19 providers via Suffolk IAG. The sample was stratified by provider based on the number of advice episodes conducted over the course of the year. Interviews were confidential and took around 15–20 minutes to complete on average. The questionnaire addressed the following key issues:

- how clients heard about the nextstep service
- how the interview was conducted
- how long it took to see an adviser
- how easy it was to access the service
- how helpful the adviser proved to be
- whether the adviser was sufficiently knowledgeable
- whether the client had sufficient time with the adviser
- whether the client would be happy seeing the same adviser again
- overall satisfaction with the service
- whether the client would recommend the service (provider) to others

- whether the client had started any formal learning since the last advice session
- whether jobseekers found the advice useful
- in what ways the advice had been helpful (the benefits)
- whether the adviser contacted the client later on to see how they were getting on
- any other general information or views offered by the client about the service.

147

The IAG delivery network also commissioned a complementary piece of qualitative research which sought to evaluate the impact of nextstep national branding on IAG service delivery in Suffolk. The objectives of this research were to:

- obtain provider feedback regarding their use of the national branding and the impact on clients
- find out how providers are coping and managing working with the target (below Level 2) client group, looking at success factors and difficulties
- identify the characteristics of successful providers in terms of service delivery
- highlight good practice in terms of innovative approaches to reaching clients.

148

This research involved using the following approach:

- an aide-mémoire based on questions agreed in advance, to ensure a structured approach to obtaining and analysing feedback
- in-depth, face-to-face interviews with 7 providers and, where available, with advice workers
- telephone interviews with 11 providers.

nextstep London North**149**

nextstep London North commissioned consultants to evaluate its enhanced services provision. The specific objectives of the research were to:

- ascertain the impact of the nextstep brand and local nextstep website
- establish the views and perceptions of members of the IAG delivery network
- analyse the management information client data and provide a comparison against the demographics of the area, and from this suggest areas of possible under-representation and gaps in service penetration
- establish the overall impact enhanced services have had on its clients and the difference they have made to clients in achieving their career aspirations
- ascertain the effectiveness of the referral process between advice and enhanced services
- examine the provider's client tracking, follow-up and feedback processes.

150

In total, 45 telephone interviews were undertaken with users of enhanced services and 30 providers (excluding sub-contractors).

nextstep Norfolk**151**

In addition to detailed statistical reports using secondary data relating to IAG delivery, nextstep Norfolk undertook an evaluation of the impact of IAG for 2003-04. This evaluation had three main themes:

- provider networks and their effectiveness
- client satisfaction with services received
- client impact (destinations) data.

152

The methodology involved collecting various data (quantitative and qualitative) from three main sources.

153

There was a structured postal questionnaire survey of all IAG network members, of whom there are over 900 drawn from 400 organisations. Just over 300 responses were received. This survey collected data regarding the value of:

- network meetings
- professional development training
- network training events
- the Norfolk IAG network
- future training needs.

154

Norfolk IAG employs two methods of capturing evaluative data from clients.

155

The first is achieved through completed responses to a leaflet given to each client at initial interview. The client feedback form asks clients to score various aspects of the service on a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) as follows.

- How did the service match up to expectations?
- Were the directions to find the provider accurate?
- Was the client made to feel welcome and put at ease?
- How did the client feel about the way they were dealt with during the interview?
- How did the client rate the usefulness of the meeting overall?
- How did they rate the quality of the information and advice they received?

156

Clients were also asked for any other comments and if there was any way the service could be improved. Forms can either be completed and returned immediately after their advice interview or later using a pre-paid envelope.

157

The second method used (at one and six months) to assess client satisfaction and acquire destination data is a structured questionnaire which is completed and returned by post by the client, or used as part of a follow-up interview by an adviser. A relatively high response rate was achieved using the postal questionnaire (42 per cent). Data collected includes clients' views on:

- whether they got the level of support they wanted
- the impact on their learning, employment or volunteering status
- the impact on soft outcomes such as motivation and confidence
- the degree of helpfulness of the adviser overall
- whether there was anything missing and how the service could be improved in their opinion.

nextstep Leicestershire

158

nextstep Leicestershire was awarded a pilot project under quality development funding in 2003 to pilot client tracking. External consultants were commissioned with the following objectives specified, to:

- identify IAG contractors where tracking systems are effective
- determine how tracking systems work in practice and their strengths and weaknesses
- identify lessons learnt and good practice leading to recommendations for future tracking procedures and processes in Leicestershire
- set up and test a bespoke tracking procedure in Leicestershire.

159

The research involved:

- telephone interviews with 103 former IAG clients
- discussions with 9 other IAG networks
- interviews with all IAG providers in the Leicestershire network.

160

In addition to a report, another output of the study was the production of a tracking toolkit, which highlights best practice in relation to tracking methods, systems and implementation.

161

Following this research, nextstep Leicestershire has put in place a new tracking system with the following elements.

- Clients are telephoned at one and six months after receiving advice. A dedicated member of staff (in the nextstep central delivery team) is responsible for tracking and is not a trained adviser. In this way, they avoid becoming embroiled in a telephone advice session. Anyone who would like to talk to an adviser is called back the next day or when it is convenient to the client. There is a space for this on the telephone questionnaire form and these are kept to one side ready to be picked up the next morning. Tracking interviews usually take place in the evenings to optimise results with some supplementary tracking during the daytime.
- Those that are not contactable by telephone are sent a questionnaire with a pre-paid envelope.
- All the replies are logged onto a client tracking database which can then be used to produce statistical data and reports on any of the fields. It also logs how many people agreed to be tracked on the questionnaire, how many responded and how many declined to take part.
- Any completed forms with comments that require follow-up are passed to the nextstep quality manager for action.

162

In addition to the core tracking and management information (MI) data required by the LSC, the client feedback form captures information about:

- reasons for seeing an adviser in the first place
- barriers to learning, training or work
- overall satisfaction rating
- suggested areas for improvement.

nextstep West Yorkshire

163

Careers West Yorkshire (on behalf of nextstep West Yorkshire) commissioned an independent external consultant to analyse what impact the products and supporting processes put in place by the delivery network are having on provider and practitioner practice and on client service users.

164

Following desk-based research to enable the consultant to understand the context of the evaluation, it collected views as widely as possible, within the parameters of the time available (10 days), using the following research methods.

- **Contract manager meetings** – face-to-face meetings were held with eight of the IAG contract managers for the sub-regions. The aim of the meetings was to find out how the delivery network is doing by evaluating contract managers' perceptions of the usefulness of services to members and the effect on practitioner practice. Each meeting followed a set format.
- **Focus group views** – two focus groups gathered views from delivery network practitioners who were already to some extent using delivery network services, in that one group was undertaking an NVQ in Advice and Guidance (Level 3), and the other was made up of managers and practitioners involved in handling referrals from learndirect to the delivery network's central referral points. The latter group focused solely on the functioning of the central referral point.
- **Telephone interviewees** – telephone interviews were held with nine sub-contract holders and practitioners from across the sub-region. The aim of the telephone interviews was to find out how the delivery network is doing by evaluating contract holders' and practitioners' views of the usefulness of services to members and the effect on practitioner practice.

- **Conference questionnaire survey** – a short questionnaire was given out to the participants at the West Yorkshire IAG delivery network conference on 27 April 2005. Completed questionnaires were then analysed by the consultant.

nextstep Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin

165

nextstep Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin has developed and piloted two client tracking forms to gather information of value to the delivery network and meet contractual requirements set by the LSC. There are two forms: one for use by advisers over the telephone and the other for self-completion by (former) clients. Although providers are given an option, it is strongly recommended that follow-up contacts should be by phone wherever possible, that is, when contact can be established and clients agree to be interviewed. The tracking pro-forma requests feedback in the following areas:

- overall satisfaction rating and supporting comments
- change in circumstances since the client's last advice session (a choice of entered learning; found work; found alternative work; started voluntary work; other; no change)
- client's view as to whether the advice session has been of any benefit to them and supporting comments
- suggestions for improvement.

166

The tracking survey takes place one month and six months after the last client intervention and applies to all people who have received enhanced services and up to 20 per cent of those who have received advice or guidance support. In the latter instance, providers are required to draw the sample on a random basis from their own client records database. It is left to the provider's discretion as to whether clients are followed up by the same adviser who provided the original IAG session or by a different practitioner.

nextstep West of England

167

Tracking surveys are undertaken by IAG advisers at the required one- and six-month milestones with information being collected on both quantitative outcomes required by the LSC (for example, entry into employment or learning) but also four kinds of soft outcomes:

- increased confidence
- greater ability to plan for the future
- increased understanding of their "next steps"
- more able to take-up and/or continue in learning.

168

nextstep West of England also requests from providers two client case studies which should be "typical and illustrative" of the experiences of the provider's general client group. Case studies can be either positive or negative whereby:

- positive case studies demonstrate the human side of how IAG services affect clients in a beneficial way. These may be used for publicity purposes with the client's permission
- negative case studies allow a provider to communicate issues that prevented or hindered clients achieving their goals. These can then be used as qualitative feedback in reports to the LSC.

169

A case study pro-forma is intended to guide submissions and includes requests for information pertaining to:

- client name and contact details
- brief details of the client's original enquiry
- barriers faced by the client
- client's goals and adviser's support
- circumstances that hindered client achievement, and adviser intervention
- client's learning and work outcomes
- other soft outcomes and milestones
- specific issues (barriers, problems and so on) that were beyond the client's control.

Section 7: Further Sources and Resources – More Help is at Hand

170

The following books, articles and guides should be of help to those wanting to look at evaluation issues in more depth or to explore related areas of research.

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Useful Websites

UK Evaluation Society:
www.evaluation.org.uk

Policy Hub – HM Treasury:
www.policyhub.gov.uk/policy_tools

Renewal.net: www.renewal.net

Centre for Guidance Studies:
www.derby.ac.uk/cegs

Guidance Council: www.guidancecouncil.com

IDEA Knowledge:
www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk

Learning and Skills Network:
www.lsneducation.org.uk

Regeneration and Renewal:
www.regenerationmagazine.com/

Planning Resource:
www.planningresource.co.uk

Institute of Management Consultants:
www.imc.co.uk

Market Research Society: www.mrs.org.uk

Related Publications

Coherent Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) Services for Adults

Publication reference LSC-P-NAT-050025

Competence and Capacity:

Enhancing Information and Advice Delivery Potential

Publication reference LSC-P-NAT-050009

Working Together: Connexions and

Adult Information, Advice and Guidance Services

Publication reference LSC/AA000/1183/04

Review of Framework Agreements for IAG

Publication reference LSC/AA000/11028/04

Working Together: The Learning and Skills Council, Jobcentre Plus and nextstep Services

Publication reference LSC-P-NAT-050010

Working Together: nextstep and Trade Unions

Publication reference LSC-P-NAT-050008

Working Together: nextstep Services and Higher Education

Publication reference MISC/0686/03

Information, Advice and Guidance Strategic Board Papers

Paper One: Working in Partnership with Key Stakeholders

Publication reference LSC-P-NAT-050503

Paper Two: Supporting the Entitlement to Level 2 Provision

Publication reference LSC-P-NAT-050653

Related website

www.nextstepstakeholder.co.uk

Further Information

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