

Strategic Evaluation

This section contains:

- guidance about conducting strategic evaluations examining the relationship between project outputs and desired outcomes and the expected impact of the project on community cohesion;
- advice on identifying and constructing good quantitative indicators and;
- suggested indicators for measuring impact on community cohesion.

Strategic Evaluation: Relating Project Outputs and Outcomes

The main purpose of undertaking a strategic evaluation is develop a view about the extent to which the project's planned activities and outputs are likely to contribute to its stated longer term outcomes. As such, a strategic evaluation is not concerned with issues of implementation and delivery, but seeks to answer two main questions:

- are the project's activities and outputs causally linked to the desired outcomes?
- what are the likely impacts of the project's activities, outputs and desired outcomes on community cohesion?

An initial strategic evaluation should be conducted as early as possible. If the need for evaluation was recognised from the outset, then a strategic evaluation will ideally take place before the project begins delivering activities. This enables planned activities to be changed or supplemented if necessary, in order to address:

- potential 'missing links' in the causal chain between planned activities, outputs and outcomes and;
- potentially adverse impacts on community cohesion.

If evaluation has been built into the project's activities at a later stage, however, it is still worth undertaking a strategic evaluation, as this may influence future practice. Periodically revisiting the strategic evaluation will also be useful if the project's activities or focus has shifted over time in response to changing needs.

Some terms for strategic evaluation

There is no shortage of terms used to describe different elements of project work and it is easy to get lost in a sea of jargon. When conducting a strategic evaluation, however, there are a few terms and concepts worth knowing.

Most projects will have the following distinguishable elements:

- **Project Inputs** which are the resources and revenues invested in running the project. Depending on the particular project, **project inputs** may include volunteer time, skills, funds received, in-kind contributions, matching funds, income generated revenue and capital assets.
- **Project Activities** which are the things the project *does* with its resources and revenues. Projects engage in a vast range of activities, of which a few of the possibilities are listed below:
 - providing services to people;
 - running educational and training courses;
 - providing opportunities for people from different backgrounds to interact;
 - organising festivals, sporting and cultural events;
 - enabling civic engagement and participation;
 - providing services to specific types of organisation;
 - providing leisure opportunities and;
 - producing publications.
- **Project Outputs** are the immediate results achieved by the project. As with project activities, projects can deliver a huge variety of outputs. A few possibilities are listed below:
 - people gaining qualifications;
 - new participants in cultural and other sporting activities;
 - improved access to information and resources;
 - people and organisations receiving services;
 - number of new jobs created;
 - number of people engaged in challenging discrimination and prejudice;
 - increase in the proportion of people who say that they regularly meet and talk with people from different ethnic backgrounds.
- **Project Outcomes** are the project's long-term goals and desired improvements. Within Oldham Borough, the project's long-term goals and desired improvements may link with priorities in the Local Area Agreement, the Community Cohesion Strategy, the Community Strategy and Oldham Beyond. These might include things such as:

- developing a highly-skilled and well-educated local population;
 - eliminating health inequalities;
 - eliminating discrimination and harassment;
 - good community relations throughout the Borough;
 - eliminating poverty;
 - avoidance of a low wage economy.
- **Project Impacts on community cohesion** include the project's effects on:
 - inequalities;
 - community relations across various domains of difference including age, sexuality, disability, social background and ethnic group;
 - opportunities for meaningful social interaction between people from similar and from different backgrounds;
 - engagement in local democracy;
 - involvement in social, political and cultural life;
 - the fairness and transparency (and perceived fairness and transparency) of service provision, access to services and resource allocation.

Evaluating Causal Connections between Activities, Outputs and Outcomes

The purpose of evaluating causal connections between activities, outputs and outcomes, is to explore whether or not the project's assumptions about the likely outcomes and effects of its activities and outputs are well-founded. By identifying places where the causal chain between activity, output and outcome may potentially break down, the evaluator may play a role in identifying supplementary activities which may improve the likelihood of the project contributing to its desired outcomes. To do this, the evaluator should consider:

- May the project's activities have unplanned but predictable adverse effects that impact on its ability to reach the desired outcome?
- Are there other factors that are likely to intervene between achievement of outputs and the desired outcome?

Asking such questions will sometimes lead the project to broaden its remit or examine possibilities for liaison and joint working with other organisations and institutions.

Evaluating Strategic Impact on Community Cohesion

The purpose of evaluating strategic impact on community cohesion is to examine the impact of the project's outputs and desired outcomes (as distinct

from its planned activities and actual practice) on community cohesion. If the Oldham M.B.C definition of community cohesion is used, relevant questions may include:

- Who are the intended project participants or beneficiaries? Are some groups within the project's remit under-represented or likely to be under-represented within the project?
- Does the project provide opportunities for people from different backgrounds (socio-economic, ethnic group, age) to meet, talk and interact?
- Does the project provide opportunities for people with similar experiences or backgrounds to come together to build confidence and challenge discrimination, harassment and prejudice?
- Does the project provide opportunities for people to learn about each other?
- Is the project likely to increase or decrease existing tensions between different groups of people (for example, intergenerational tensions, interethnic tensions, social tensions)? Why? Remember that sometimes an increase in community tensions is related to the efforts of people who have experienced discrimination or prejudice to achieve social justice and may not be a bad thing!
- Do the outputs and outcomes tend to reduce or increase existing inequalities?
- Do the outputs and outcomes tend to accept or challenge existing inequalities?
- Will the project's outputs or outcomes address racism or other forms of prejudice and discrimination?
- Will the project's outputs or outcomes broaden access to decision-making and engagement in local democracy?
- Will the project's outputs or outcomes enable more people to participate fully in cultural, social or economic life?
- How does the project connect with other projects and agencies in the same area or the same field?

It is not necessary (or even necessarily desirable) for a project to seek to be all things to all aspects of community cohesion. It is important, however, that the project should have a clear understanding of potentially adverse impacts on community cohesion, so that it is well-prepared to address these effectively. Conversely, a clear description of potential benefits of the project to community cohesion may enhance its value to potential funders.