

# Essentialising Evaluation:

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# Introduction

***Is Perfect the Enemy of  
the Good?***



*A mildly provocative look at  
aspirations for proportionality  
in evaluation method  
(& use) choices*

# Evaluation in the UK

## What's the State of Play?

It's a pretty good time to be an evaluator:

- Lots of proven methods & technical choices
- Raised profile for 'complexity in evaluation'
- Strengthened & widely recognised Magenta ('20)
- Greater technical exposure – methods (and fit) widely disseminated
- Rising demand for quality evaluation (cross-gov't push/ETF; What Works Centre's; NESTA; Lottery; push from uni's, VCOs, regulators etc.

**BUT ...**

**consequent  
challenges  
for evaluators**

‘Good times’ have drawbacks:

- Evaluation ITQs, ITTs, ToRs often vague or confusing
- Commissioners not always ‘informed consumers’
- Specifiers often ‘working in the dark’ on needs, etc
- Unrealistic or ambiguous asks of evaluators:
  - Unclear purposing
  - Mismatch between ‘needs’ and budget and/or timeframes
  - Lack of realism on observable impacts, appropriate counterfactual, data access, etc
- Procurement often a hindrance to quality choices.

So evaluations often kick off with unresolved gaps between what could be and what should be done.

# AND the elephant in the room ... is evaluation use and utility!

In 2011 (Inst. of Gov't) neither civil servants nor ministers felt Whitehall use of evaluation met its potential (Cabinet Office in 2001 said much the same) ... and now:

- National Audit Office (2021) said there was some gov't progress on evaluation and evidence use ... but a long way to go.
- The last CSR called for an evidence push including with better embedded evaluation needed to be more central to policy and decision making
- The Evaluation Task Force is tasked with taking this forward and ... and boosting an evaluation culture across departments (and WWC's, ALB's etc)

And outside government evaluation use and utility often appears to be no better (and often worse) ... and lacks an ETF to act as a focus for improvement.

# USE, UTILITY & ESSENTIALISING EVALUATION: I

Is current evaluation practice at risk of optimising methods while neglecting use and utility?

- Yes .... and it matters!
- The essential purpose of any evaluation is about providing reliable evidence to support (better) decision making
- Building evaluation cultures anticipates valuing of outputs ... method perfection (of itself will not bring that about

Evaluators alone can't bring about this transition ... but they can (and should) contribute; HOW?

# USE, UTILITY & ESSENTIALISING EVALUATION: II

## How can evaluators contribute?

- Robust expectation management ... essentialising intent & ambition to better balance robustness and utility
- Better informed proportionality (method–use compromises)
- Critical (early) exploration of use/user needs ... including proactively engaging (wider) stakeholders
- Producing more accessible & relevant communication of findings – with fit for purpose recommendations

Evaluation independence and impartiality should not mean isolation from use and utility





So ...

Is perfection the enemy of the good?

**As evaluators or commissioners we need to ask ourselves what are & how we make 'good' choices.**

# And where ‘good’ promotes use & utility!

Our comfort zone is with the ‘technical’ (‘best’ method choice) ... a sound principle BUT it needs tempering by ...

- A (better) balance in making design challenges between optimising technical possibilities ... and political (use/user) context
- Procurement, commissioning and steering processes harnessing evaluators as collaborators (protagonists?) ... not just delivery agents
- Confidence among evaluators to understand and rise to the balancing challenges.

So better utility is the other side of the ‘good’ evaluation ‘design’ coin ...

This is more than an abstract (or provocative) thought because method decisions which support evidence ‘valuing’ (by users) are set to be a keystone to building evaluation cultures.

And (selfishly) without this will the ‘good times’ last?