

Agenda item 5

For discussion & decision – Improving our evaluation of the Council’s work

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Summary

Our Revised Strategy commits us to improving our evaluation work. This report introduces the topic of evaluation, why it’s important and sets out some questions to be discussed at the meeting. The purpose of the discussion will be to help with the development of some costed proposals for evaluation to be presented at the next meeting of the Committee.

What is evaluation and why is it important?

Evaluation is a process that helps us to critically examine a project or programme and understand how effective it may be in helping us to meet our goals which in the case of FTC are set out in our Revised Strategy.

It is important to do because it can help us to:

- Demonstrate the impact of our activities in economic, social, and environmental terms and in terms of value for money to a variety of audiences including the community, partners, and funders
- Identify who is benefitting from our work – important from the point of view that part of our vision is to help build ‘an inclusive town where no one gets left behind’
- Secure support and funding for our work
- Identify where we need to improve our performance against the things we want to achieve

Some of these points are reflected in our Revised Strategy which says the following about evaluation:

‘Keeping track of how we’re doing

5.1 We want to understand the impact and value of the work of the Town Council and understand how far we are progressing towards achieving our vision. We will engage the community with the process of reviewing this strategy to find out how and where we are making progress, who we are helping and who we may need to support further with new projects or activities.’

Some of the concepts explained

Here is an attempt to explain some of the basic concepts and the differences between them:

Outputs – these are the *activities delivered* and are relatively easy to measure

Outcomes – the *observed effects of the outputs on beneficiaries* which are more difficult to measure

Impact – *the degree to which the outcomes observed are attributable to the activities*, something which tends to be difficult to measure but nonetheless useful

Where do we start?

We are not starting with a blank sheet. Our Revised Strategy identifies a vision and the things that we want to achieve and in our Work Programme, we have identified the activities that we consider are important to get us there.

We have undertaken some evaluation already. At a basic level, our annual report collates data and information about the impact of our work with some facts and figures and a narrative to explain impact where that is known. Other examples include research on the Community Fridge that has evidenced the amount of food saved from landfill and a Community Development Action Research Study that has enabled us to better understand the general issues faced by neighbourhoods and how we (FTC) can best support through community development work.

We are starting to evaluate the National Lottery funded Green & Healthy Future programme and measure the impact of the projects that are part of this programme on our carbon footprint and the health of the community. These exercises may provide some useful pointers in terms of how we evaluate other activities that the Council is either delivering or enabling.

Some important considerations

To help us move forward, there are some important questions to consider:

- Are the outcomes of interest including the intended beneficiaries of our work clearly identified?
- Are those outcomes broadly consistent across the activities we are delivering or enabling?
- Do we have sufficient data that tells us what the current situation is and against which we could evaluate progress? Or do we need to undertake some baseline research?
- Would it be useful to select 2 or 3 activities and designate these for an ‘evaluation trial’ or should we develop an evaluation strategy to embed an evaluation component in all appropriate activities?
- How do we decide what to evaluate and how?

An evaluation trial – what to choose and how?

Some of the things that may help us to decide what activities to choose and how to go about it include:

- Is there a priority for evaluation i.e., some things that would be of particular interest?
- What is practical to focus on e.g., do we have staff with existing experience in evaluation already embedded in a project?
- Size – smaller is easier
- Timing/funding – are there crucial deadlines that we need to meet around securing continuation funding for a project?
- Beneficiaries e.g., a project may have an impact on a certain community in need making evaluation particularly worthwhile

An evaluation strategy – some things to consider

- Who would put this together?
- How would stakeholders be involved?
- What is best practice? What case studies can we draw upon?
- How could an evaluation strategy be designed to be consistent across differing activities?

Some resource considerations

All of the above need to be considered in the context of what is feasible for FTC in terms of time and resource. It needs to be clear that what is being evaluated is both worthwhile and possible. This also helps avoid survey fatigue by residents/service beneficiaries. We may wish to partner with others in taking forward evaluation e.g., universities.

Discussion

1. What are the outcomes of interest for FTC?
2. Should we pursue an ‘evaluation trial’ around 2 or 3 selected activities or develop an evaluation strategy to embed an evaluation component in all appropriate activities?
3. What are the activities that are a priority to evaluate?

Recommendation

Delegate authority to the Deputy Town Clerk in consultation with a small group of councillors with expertise in evaluation to prepare some costed evaluation proposals based on the outcome of discussion at this meeting and to be considered at the next meeting of the Committee.