

All museums can and should evaluate their work; effective evaluation helps you tell the story of your work and its impact. This resource takes you through the basics of evaluation explaining why evaluation is important for museums of all sizes and the common terms and information you need to be aware of.

Sometimes evaluation can be seen as something only funders want or find useful; that it is too difficult to achieve or something we don't have enough time or resource for, but evaluation has many benefits and can be scaled according to the type of project or activity depending on its scale and complexity.

Evaluation can be done in-house or by an external evaluator. There are free or low-cost options, as well as those where a dedicated budget is needed.

Why evaluate?

There are many benefits for a museum when it comes to effective evaluation, these include:

Learning

To find out what went well and what you could do differently in the future. Evaluation isn't about demonstrating success or failure; it's about learning from what you have done. Things that went well can be built on or repeated. Things that didn't go well can help you plan, by improving processes and making changes so that things work even better next time.

Planning

Evaluation helps you to plan better, providing you with information about how you are doing, who you are reaching and who you aren't, what activities have been successful and how your collections and displays are received and more.

It will help you to prioritise for your forward/ business planning and how you allocate your resources to be more effective.

Feedback

Museums rely on support from a wide range of sources including your local community, your workforce, funders and other stakeholders. Evaluation will help you to give meaningful feedback on projects and other museum activities to those who support you, describing what the impact of the project has been. This will strengthen your relationships with supporters and stakeholders, and appeal to new supporters. It will also help with volunteer and trustee retention. Everyone likes to hear how a project they are engaged with has gone and what you have learned from it.

Funding

Evaluation will provide the best evidence from which to make a case for support, investment, staff or resources. Evidence-based requests are more likely to be successful because they are based on demonstrable needs of your organisation, collection, or community.

Top tips:

Be realistic about what, and how much, you can evaluate when setting your success criteria. Consider the resources (people, money, time) you have to collect and analyse data and whether you can realistically gather the data to assess each criteria.

Evaluation basics

Evaluation is a planned process by which the value, effectiveness, and benefits of a project* are objectively assessed.

*The project could be an event, exhibition, festival, redisplay, school's resource etc.

Data

We usually associate data with computers and IT today, but this resource uses the Oxford English Dictionary definition: "facts and statistics which are collected for reference or analysis."

Conversations, comment cards, visitor books and focus groups can all provide data as well as visitor numbers, questionnaires and surveys. Data collected for evaluation is divided into two types - quantitative and qualitative.

Quantitative data is numbers based and can tell you for example;

- How many people visited an exhibition
- How many young people took part in an activity
- How many people considered the workshop was good value for money
- How many ticket holders thought the talk was excellent

Qualitative data is language based and can tell you for example;

- What someone learned from visiting the museum
- How someone felt when taking part in an activity
- What actions someone plans to take because of their visit
- What they would like to see changed

Baseline Data

This is data gathered before your project starts, so that you can measure the difference the project has made. For example, if you want to increase the number of visitors in an age group, knowing how many you have now will allow you to measure the change made by the project. Or if you want to increase knowledge or awareness about a subject, a short quiz or poll when visitors arrive or before the project starts will provide a baseline measure.

Outcomes and Outputs

This language is used by many funders, and it tells you what they want to achieve from their funding/ investment in your museum. The outcomes are the difference they want their funding to make, and the outputs are the things produced by the project.

For example:

Output – Handling box for schools

Outcome - Pupils learn about the subject focus of the handling collection

Output - A high-profile temporary exhibition

Outcome - Making the museum more resilient through increased admission income

Output - Installing LED lighting

Outcomes - Reducing your environmental impact, improved collections care

Aims and objectives

To evaluate the project, you need to have a clear aim that you are trying to achieve. The project aim should be a general statement giving an overall target or goal. This needs to focus on an outcome, the difference you want to make.

For example:

- To reach new audiences in our local area, with a focus on young people
- To make our museum more financially secure by diversifying income streams
- To improve our collections care by addressing collection needs
- To make our museum more accessible to people with dementia

To deliver your aim you will need to take several steps, which are your objectives. These can be outputs and will be more specific than the aim.

For example:

AIM - To make our museum more accessible to people with dementia

Objectives:

- All staff and volunteers to complete dementia friendly training
- Achieve dementia friendly status for the museum
- Deliver memory café visits for local care homes with residents with dementia
- Review our processes and signage to support visitors with dementia

Success Criteria

What will success look like? You can think of success criteria as targets or goals that you want to achieve. They should be SMART: **specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time limited**.

For example:

By the end of the project the museum will:

- Achieve dementia friendly status
- Record an increase in visits from or outreach activities to care homes from 0 per year to six per year
- Achieve positive feedback from visits and where possible respond to any suggestions or comments from visitors and their carers within four weeks
- All staff, trustees, and regular volunteers (30 people) will complete dementia awareness training

You are now ready to make an Evaluation Plan, see the Effective Evaluation Planning resource.

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