How to conduct an implementation and process evaluation

Implementation and process evaluations (IPE) cover a wide range of activities that consider whether the key components of an intervention's logic model — including its resources, activities, and population reach — are practical and achievable. For this reason, they are sometimes referred to as feasibility studies.

Implementation and process evaluations are essential for understanding whether your intervention or service can be delivered, and therefore whether it is worth future development and investment. Your implementation and process evaluation will help you understand how the intervention or service is being delivered, what elements are difficult to deliver, who it is reaching, how much it will cost, and its perceived value from those who are receiving it. The findings from your implementation and process evaluation can help you to refine elements of your intervention or service, ultimately improving its quality and increasing the likelihood of a positive change in outcomes for children when it is ready to undergo a more rigorous evaluation.

When planning your IPE, you will need to consider the following areas, which are summarised in the following sections:

- what research questions you need to answer
- the data collection methods you need to employ to answer these research questions
- the practical considerations of collecting data from individuals
- how you will analyse and write up your findings.

It is also important to remember that IPEs are not focused on outcomes; that is the role of the pilot impact study and impact evaluation. The pilot impact study uses established assessment tools to measure one or more of your short-term outcomes. It is often useful to combine your process evaluation with your pilot impact study as a way of saving resources and not duplicating data collection methods. If this is the case, you will need to read this guide in conjunction step 5: pilot impact study.
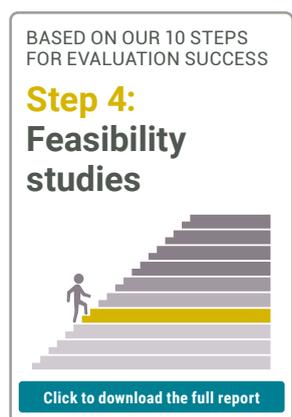
Determining what research questions to ask

To determine to what extent an intervention or service can be implemented successfully, you need to consider three separate areas:

1. delivery (including fidelity, which is whether it has been delivered as intended, and the quality of delivery)
2. participation (recruitment, retention and reach)
3. costs.

The exact areas you want to investigate will depend on your individual intervention or service needs, but by investigating these three areas you will get a good understanding of whether your intervention or service can work in its current format, or what changes are required to be made to make the implementation more effective.

Below we highlight some of the questions you may want to answer within these three areas, although there are likely to be additional questions you are interested in exploring.

1. Delivery

- How is the intervention or service being delivered? This includes the method of delivery. For example, group sessions/one-to-one sessions, number of activities, frequency of activities, the content of activities.

- Is it being delivered as intended? How does the actual delivery of the intervention or service differ from what was initially expected. For example, are sessions being run in a different order to what was expected; are sessions every two weeks instead of every week?

- What factors influence delivery and how? Factors could include access to funding, recruitment and training of practitioners, securing a suitable venue, or securing materials or resources needed for delivery.

- What are the difficulties faced in delivery?

- What are practitioners' experiences of delivering the intervention?

- What are the perceived supporting factors or barriers to effective delivery?

2. Participation

- How successful, or not, has it been at recruiting participants and why?

- Has the recruitment strategy been successful in reaching intended participants for the intervention?

- How successful or not has it been at retaining participants, and why?

- Did the participants find the intervention engaging and useful?

- To what extent has it reached its intended audience?

3. Cost

- What are the fixed and variable costs of delivery?

- What is the unit cost of delivery?

- How does this compare in terms of cost to other interventions for this population?

- To what extent are the costs justifiable given the expected outputs and proposed outcomes?

You may also want to ask participants and practitioners about their perceptions of any benefits or impacts for those involved. While this is in no way a measure of actual impact, gaining an understanding of whether participants and practitioners believe that there is an impact will help you gain an understanding of their responsiveness to the intervention/service, and help you further understand the reasons behind any changes in outcomes you identify in a pilot study (see step 5).

Deciding on your method of data collection

IPEs frequently make use of a variety of different research methods to investigate an intervention or service from a variety of perspectives. The nature of your research question will determine what sort of method you will need to employ to answer it. For example, if you want to know how many participants were recruited to your programme or service, this is easily answered through monitoring data. However, if you want to know the reasons behind those figures (such as why recruitment figures are low) you will need to directly ask individuals involved.

Below we summarise how different research methods can be used to help answer different research questions.

Administrative data sources

Administrative data refers to the data you collect on an ongoing basis as part of your usual start-up and monitoring procedures. These sources of information are useful in helping you answer questions related to how many participants took part, the numbers of staff involved, and associated costs.

Examples of how different administrative data sources can be used

Comprehensive monitoring systems can help you to capture demographic details of participants and record their attendance throughout the programme. Ideally these monitoring systems should allow you to track participants across different programmes, which is particularly important if you are undertaking a system-level evaluation. Monitoring data also helps you to understand the reach of your programme; essentially whether you are reaching the participants you specified within your theory of change, and whether you are reaching your recruitment targets.

Cost data should include both start-up costs (such as outlays for software or initial training for staff) and running costs (those costs that need to be outlaid each time the programme is run, such as staff time for recruitment and delivery, cost of venue hire and refreshments). Once you have identified all your costs you will be able to identify a unit cost per participant. This will help you to understand if your programme or service is expensive relative to other services/programmes.

Primary research

Primary research involves collecting information directly from individuals involved. That might be those delivering the service or intervention, or participants. Often surveys are used to gain quantifiable insight (for example, the proportion who would recommend the service) while qualitative in-depth interviews are used as a means of trying to understand the reasons behind these numbers (such as the reasons why participants would recommend the service). Often it is useful to utilise both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews or focus groups to ensure you get a breadth of information — for example through a survey or service participants — and depth of information, for example through a small number of qualitative interviews.

Examples of how different primary research methods can be used

Qualitative in-depth interviews with those delivering the programme or intervention can help you to understand delivery in more depth. You can ask questions relating to: any difficulties they have faced while delivering; elements they have changed or adapted; their views on content, delivery methods, selection criteria or referral processes; any perceived barriers or enablers to delivery; and also any perceived barriers or enablers to recruitment and retention of participants. Qualitative interviews are very useful for exploring issues in detail but they can be time-consuming and resource-intensive. For this reason usually only small numbers of interviews are included in an evaluation design.

Qualitative in-depth interviews with those participating in the programme or service will help you to explore the reasons behind why they chose to take part in the programme and what elements were seen to be most and least useful and enjoyable. You can also explore their views on practical aspects of the programme or service, such as timings, accessibility and length of courses/sessions, as well as perceived benefits and impact.

Surveys can be administered to both practitioners and participants. They can be used to get quantifiable information on areas such as satisfaction, receptiveness or perceived benefits. Surveys often use closed questions where you give the respondent a list of responses to choose from. This can include yes/no questions or questions with scales. Therefore, they are helpful for quantifying a response to a question (for example, the proportion of participants who were satisfied with the service) and it is generally less resource-intensive than face-to-face interviews or focus groups. However, surveys are much more limited in their ability to fully explore participants' or practitioners' views of the programme or service.

Qualitative in-depth interviews with those who either did not participate or dropped out will help you to explore the reasons behind this, and what, if anything, could have helped to encourage participation or continued involvement.

Observation of delivery can help you to understand to what extent there is consistency in delivery of the intervention or service, and whether it is being delivered as intended (also called fidelity). If undertaking observations, it is important to do this in a systematic way. One way of doing this is to develop a framework of elements that you would expect to see in a session and making observations against these elements.

Once you have decided on your key research questions and considered the different methods you may use to answer these, a useful approach is to map these out in an 'evaluation crosswalk'. This type of framework is useful for several reasons:

- It helps you to check that your planned data collection methods cover all your research questions.

- It helps to ensure that there is sufficient crossover between the different data sources, enabling you to cross-reference your findings and look for consistencies across the different data collection methods.

- It is useful as a starting point to develop your research instruments (surveys or interview schedules) as it identifies the main topics you should be covering.

See the **example of an evaluation crosswalk** in this document, and a template for a process evaluation crosswalk is available as a resource here: **https://www.eif.org.uk/files/resources/ehub-4-ipe-evaluation-crosswalk.docx**

Practical considerations for collecting data from individuals

The number of individuals you include in your process evaluation (your sample) will depend on a number of factors. Generally, the larger the sample the more representative it is of your target population and therefore the more confident you can be in your findings. However, you will also need to balance this with the resources you have available and your timescales for undertaking the research. Realistically, you may have different sample sizes for different elements of your evaluation. For example, you may send an online user satisfaction survey out to all participants but then carry out in-depth interviews with a much smaller sample.

Key considerations when thinking about ethics and consent

There are ethical and consent-related considerations you will need to think about when planning your process evaluation. The key considerations are:

- How to gain ethical approval for your study. Studies with parents and children should gain ethical approval for the local council as well as with any research organisation affiliated with the study (such as a university) or professional body (for example, all studies that recruit

families through health services require NHS approval). See the links in the box at the end of this section on how to go about this.

- How you will gain explicit informed consent from participants to take part in the evaluation. A project information sheet will help you to provide the information needed to ensure those involved in your evaluation are providing informed consent. This should include details about the evaluation you are undertaking and why, what questions you are likely to ask and what you will do with the information.

- The UK GDPR requirements for the study if you are collecting personal information, including how you will use, store and process the data. You will need to develop a privacy notice for your evaluation to gain informed consent for data processing. For more information, please refer to GDPR guidelines, such as those in the box below.

Information on ethics

Association for the Directors of Children's Services research governance: **https://adcs.org.uk/general-subject/article/reason-research-governance-guide-and-checklist**

Economic and Social Research Council. *Research with children and young people*: **https://esrc.ukri.org/funding/guidance-for-applicants/research-ethics/frequently-raised-topics/research-with-children-and-young-people/**

NHS Health Research Authority. *Applying to a research ethics committee*: **https://www.hra.nhs.uk/approvals-amendments/what-approvals-do-i-need/research-ethics-committee-review/applying-research-ethics-committee/**

Information on UK GDPR in research

UK Data Service. *Applying GDPR in research*: **https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/manage-data/legal-ethical/gdpr-in-research.aspx**

Analysis and reporting the findings

Once you have completed your data collection you will need to pull together your findings from all the different elements of your process evaluation. It is important to decide how you want to analyse your data early on in your evaluation. For example, you may decide you want to analyse your survey responses and monitoring data in terms of frequencies and percentages and produce graphs to help to show any trends in your data. For qualitative data it is important to approach this in a rigorous and systematic way to ensure that bias does not creep into your analysis. To do this, you will need to organise your data into categories. This can be done by theme or by research question and will enable you to accurately see where common issues or themes are coming out.

By cross-referencing your quantitative and qualitative findings, you will be better able to understand how implementation is going and why, and where improvements are required. Suggestions or ideas for improvements can often be found in the content of in-depth interviews, and when the data sources are combined, can lead to recommendations to strengthen the implementation of your programme or service.

When writing up an evaluation report you will want to describe what your data says and interpret what that means for your intervention or service. You should look at the connections between the data, and across different participant groups, and aim to contextualise your findings. It is important to be transparent when reporting and be careful to minimise any bias you may have. Be open about any negative findings and your sample sizes. You should include information on your research

questions, methods used, participant numbers and characteristics, findings and recommendations. One rule of thumb is to think about whether you have provided enough information in your report to allow someone else to replicate your evaluation.

Overall, analysis and reporting is a complicated process and you will need to be disciplined in your approach to ensure you are representing the data fully and reporting accurately on both positive and negative findings. Where possible we would recommend that analysis and reporting be done by someone who is independent of the delivery and development of the intervention or service. However, regardless of who undertakes this, it is important that research questions, methodologies and findings are subject to some form or independent quality assurance to enable you to be confident in your findings.

This summary is based on two EIF guides:

- *10 steps for evaluation success*: **https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/10-steps-for-evaluation-success**
- *Evaluating early help: A guide to evaluation of complex local early help systems*: **https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/evaluating-early-help-a-guide-to-evaluation-of-complex-local-early-help-systems**

Example of an evaluation crosswalk

Research questions	Method and research participant group				
	Administrative data	*Qualitative interviews with practitioners*	*Qualitative interviews with parents*	*Quantitative survey with parents*	*Observation of session*
1. Is it being delivered as intended?		X			X
2. How successful has it been at recruiting participants and why?	X		X	X	
3. To what extent has it reached its intended audience?	X				
4. What are the perceived benefits?		X	X	X	