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Title: Keeping Evaluation Safe? Reflections on the use of advisory groups in the public sector.

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1 Introduction

Why this topic?

The idea for this paper arose from a number of discussions some of us had about our experiences of evaluation advisory groups. These discussions or conversations were stimulated by questions raised in the context of the amalgamation of the research, evaluation and data analysis teams of the former Ministry of Social Policy and Department of Work and Income, within the new Ministry of Social Development. The official launch of the new research unit – the Centre for Social Research and Evaluation (CSRE) on 22 November 2002 provided an opportunity to review existing policy, processes and practices and to question established ways of doing things. A review was initiated which sought to develop a common understanding of evaluation management processes within CSRE and to ensure that these processes reflected good practice in the conduct of evaluations.

The review gave us the opportunity to reflect on the ways in which we manage the development and implementation of evaluations and the changes we might seek to make to future governance processes. Two of the authors of this paper were members of the former Department of Work and Income, Centre for Operational Research and Evaluation (CORE) and three were members of the former Ministry of Social Policy (MSP) Evaluation Unit. We all agree that reviewing our experiences of evaluation governance processes has been a useful and interesting exercise. When working effectively, an advisory group can be crucial in helping an evaluation generate useful and relevant information. Yet in our experience, the processes for establishing and managing such groups are not well documented or commonly discussed, so no agreed processes or guidelines are widely available to guide beginning or seasoned evaluators in this area. However, this is not to suggest that the knowledge itself does not exist. In reflecting on ‘advisory groups we have known’, we are seeking to give value to and make explicit, the tacit or taken-for-granted knowledge and understandings about how evaluation projects are managed and supported.

Our early discussions quickly highlighted key questions which needed answers. For example, why might an advisory group be needed? How might one be set up? Who should take responsibility for setting up such a group? What it might achieve and how should it be managed? Why do some advisory groups seem to work better than others? While it was generally agreed that advisory groups can facilitate the management of an evaluation, we all had experiences where such groups had been less useful than anticipated or were even a complicating factor. The Conference seemed an appropriate forum to discuss this topic with a wide range of people interested in the commissioning and practice of evaluation.

This paper draws on the personal experiences of the authors and explores key questions in relation to the structure, function and dynamics of advisory groups. In discussing these features, we are aware that the challenges we have experienced are not restricted to evaluation Advisory Groups, and may be relevant to evaluation governance structures generally. For this reason, although we take advisory groups as our departure point, we also identify factors that in our experience, appear to contribute to improving the effectiveness and efficiency of evaluation governance processes in the broader sense.

Our collective experience draws upon:

- a. Evaluations with an external evaluation contractor from the perspective of both the funder and the evaluation contractor.
- b. Large scale evaluations (whether conducted in-house, externally contracted or a mix of both)
- c. Inter-agency evaluations, where two or three agencies are working in partnership

What we hope to gain from today?

Our approach raises more questions than provides answers and we are seeking to establish a shared understanding of how to make Evaluation Advisory Groups (EAGs) as used in the public sector, work more effectively and efficiently. We seek your perspectives and comments whether as a public sector manager of an evaluation, a member of an advisory group, an external evaluation contractor, an end-user of evaluation material or an interested community participant.

Overview

The topics covered in the paper include:

Expectations of an Advisory Group

- What it should do?
- Eight EAG examples
- What are its formal functions?
- What happens in practice?

Setting up an Advisory Group

- Whose job is it?
- What input is needed?
- Who should provide that input?

- Issues we have encountered

Advisory Groups at Work

- How do you keep an EAG working effectively?
- When is closure for an EAG appropriate and how should it be managed?

Conclusions

- Our experience of the characteristics that make successful advisory groups

Where to from here?

2 Expectations of Evaluation Advisory Groups

The term ‘advisory groups’ covers a multitude of meanings. There does not appear to be any agreed definition as to what an advisory group should or should not do, nor how an advisory group might differ from other groups, for example, working, steering or reference groups. We have encountered all of these terms in our evaluation work. In addition there appears to be very little literature available on evaluation advisory groups or governance processes and no clarity around issues of terminology (Appendix One provides our list of the search terms and consulted literature).

2.1 What should an Advisory Group do?

In the absence of any significant guidance from the evaluation research literature, it seemed logical to start with our own perceptions. We assumed that the name of a group should be an indication to others as to what a group might or might not be expected to do and we reflected on our understanding and experiences of different evaluation governance groups. Discussions amongst ourselves and with other evaluators indicated there were some shared understandings amongst evaluators as to the expected role and functions of working, advisory, reference and steering groups. This can be seen in the comments below.

Working Group

“To me a working group or working party sounds like the members would have a significant role in undertaking some of the key decision making within an evaluation and would do so right from the outset. So they may choose the scope for the research associated with an evaluation. In community development research this might mean a government agency brings community people in and has them working alongside evaluation and operational or policy staff”

“A working group has an in-house feel about it- small and focused. It’s the project group but could also be the inner core of an advisory group”.

Advisory Group

“An advisory group would have more contact with the evaluation project team, would monitor the evaluation and would have people able to commit time to assisting with resolution of issues. An advisory group would have more of a quality assurance role”.

“An advisory group is set up by the project team to cater for gaps in knowledge about the topic, skill sets etc or access to and input from key stakeholders and to facilitate participation of stakeholders in the evaluation and the acceptability of results”.

Reference Group

“A reference group has a one step removed feeling- set up to provide a range of views on a particular topic. It might be set up for the project team to refer specific issues/questions for consideration.”

“A reference group does not sound like a group that makes major decisions in an evaluation or who would have major sign off. I wouldn’t expect a reference group to have skilled evaluators on it. They may be senior operational or policy staff”

Steering Group

“A steering group has a senior management feeling about it that implies someone else is doing the work. They are reported to rather than consulted”.

The key characteristics of each group that we identified from these quotations and the reflections of other authors are:

1) Working Group

- Small and focused on specific tasks within the evaluation
- Working group members may do some of the evaluation work
- Meet regularly

2) Advisory Group

- Knowledge of evaluation area and/or technical skills
- Members advise on key issues over the life of an evaluation-have a broad perspective
- Members perform a quality assurance function
- Members likely to be representative of many different agencies/groups
- Meets to review evaluation milestones

3) Reference Group

- Provides advice on a specific aspect of the evaluation
- Meets less frequently or on an as-requested basis

4) Steering Group

- A Senior Officials group who are given evaluation updates
- May require high level changes to be made to evaluation

We are interested in hearing if your perspectives on these terms are similar or different to ours.

2.2 Eight Evaluation Advisory Group Examples

From our own experiences of a number of evaluation projects we have selected eight evaluations for which we had been either, the government agency project manager, a team member or a contractor. All eight projects were conducted over a ten year span by different public sector agencies. These evaluations covered a range of fields, including social services, education, community development, employment and income support. The evaluations varied in their foci, and included demonstration projects as well as evaluations of social policy reforms and strategies, which involved multiple evaluation components.

In line with the confusion over terminology for such groups, it should be noted that two of the ‘advisory groups’ selected were titled respectively a ‘Working Party’ and a ‘Steering Group’. As both groups were seen by those concerned to have been set up to provide advice and guidance to the evaluation, they were therefore included in this review. A brief summary of the terms of reference are set out in Table 1. Those groups without formal terms of reference are marked by an *.

<i>Evaluation Advisory Group 1</i>	<i>Terms of Reference</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide specialist advice as required in the development of the RFP • Provide agency specific information needed for the design and conduct of the evaluation • Assist as appropriate with the selection of the external evaluator • Provide guidance to an external evaluator on any issues arising during the evaluation • Provide feedback on progress reports received • Review and comment on the draft final report
<i>Evaluation Advisory Group 2</i>	<i>* Function</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Signing off on key documents and key changes in direction. • Taking responsibility for employing an evaluation project manager • Provision of guidance and support on issues as they occurred

<i>Evaluation Working Group 3</i>	<i>Terms of Reference</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helping to plan the evaluation • Establish the process and appropriate sources for gathering information • Assist the researchers to gain access to the information • Review and comment on the draft reports prepared by the researchers • Help to formulate conclusions and recommendations from the analysis • Consulting with communities on the conclusions and feedback to researchers
<i>Evaluation Advisory Group 4</i>	<i>* Function</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The advisory group did not have a role in commenting on draft reports and primarily provided an information access role.
<i>Evaluation Steering Group 5</i>	<i>Terms of Reference</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Determine the strategic functions, application of resources and utilisation of evaluative information on advice from the Project Manager. This includes final sign off and accountability for the evaluation. • Make decisions about dilemmas when the Project Manager is undecided about a course of action • Be available to discuss non-technical evaluation issues associated with relationship management and utilisation of evaluation information.
<i>Evaluation Advisory Group 6</i>	<i>Terms of Reference</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agree the tender brief • Take all possible care to ensure that the evaluator had the necessary skills and competencies to carry out the tasks • Ensure that the evaluator is well informed as to what is required from the evaluation • Approve the final evaluation design • Monitor the progress of the evaluation • Ensure that the final report is of an acceptable quality and standard

<i>Evaluation Advisory Group 7</i>	<i>Terms of Reference</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To assist in monitoring the progress of the evaluation and to make recommendations on proposed modifications where necessary • To comment or make recommendations regarding the evaluation design and plan • To review the quality of all the evaluation work including the cultural dimension • To seek resolution of major difficulties encountered during the course of the evaluation • To review drafts of evaluation reports • To provide any other support necessary to assist the evaluation
<i>Evaluation Advisory Group 8</i>	<i>Terms of Reference</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To provide pertinent information which relates to this evaluation from the agency each member is representing • To assist where possible, with the access to information which is held by the representing agencies • To keep each members agency informed on the progress of the evaluation • To make recommendations regarding the evaluation design and plan • To monitor the progress of the evaluation and make recommendation on proposed modifications where necessary • To review the quality of the evaluation work, including appropriateness for how evaluation with Maori and Pacific peoples is managed • To seek resolution of major difficulties encountered during the course of the evaluation • To review drafts of evaluation reports

2.3 Formal Functions of Evaluation Advisory Groups

Reflecting upon the formal terms of reference for these groups suggested that the selected advisory groups performed a number of similar functions (see Table 2 below). The most commonly stated functions of evaluation advisory groups were:

1. Evaluation planning and development support, for example, developing a Request for Proposals (RFP), or comment on evaluation design
2. Quality assurance and review processes, mostly draft reports
3. General guidance and support where difficulties arise - more commonly those of a non-technical nature, e.g. decisions about human resources (employing a project manager or bringing on another person with specific skills).
4. Organisational information sharing and access, which is generally required for technical planning and design purposes, but also to aid communication and utilisation of evaluation findings.

We are interested in knowing whether these functions reflect your own experiences.

Table 2. Main Functions of Evaluation Advisory and other Groups

<i>Functions</i>	<i>Advisory Groups</i>	<i>Working Group</i>	<i>Steering Group</i>
<i>Planning/development</i>	1 6 7 8	3	
<i>Selection of contractor</i>	1 6		
<i>Information input/access</i>	1 4 8	3	
<i>Quality assurance-review processes¹</i>	1 6 7 8	3	
<i>Guidance/support/troubleshooting</i>	1 2 7 8		5
<i>Resource d/making</i>	2		5
<i>Sign off on evaluation</i>	2		5

Discussion

Despite differences in name, there were considerable overlaps between some of the functions of the advisory, working and steering groups. For example, Working Group (3) was similar in function to four of the Advisory Groups. However one of the Advisory Groups (2) had more in common with the functions of the Steering Group (5) than with

¹ This was the main function of the Quality Assurance Group set up in Evaluation Steering Group 5.

other Advisory Groups. This similarity reflected the management-based composition of both groups, which was designed to facilitate joint decision-making and accountability, particularly in the case of Advisory Group 2, as the evaluation project was a collaborative, joint agency evaluation. What is obvious in considering the examples above is that the title for any governance group is not as important as establishing clarity around the tasks and functions of such groups. As the examples show, Advisory Groups are commonly set up to fulfil a range of different functions so formal written terms of reference may facilitate this process.

Some groups (see examples 1 and 8) concentrated many functions in one group. In our experience, the advantages of this approach were that the group acquired a critical mass of knowledge about the evaluation which facilitated the development of new, innovative solutions to problems arising and helped establish an overall commitment to the evaluation. However, the disadvantages of concentrating evaluation management functions in one group were that particular viewpoints were sometimes given less consideration. Other generic risks associated with large multi-purpose advisory groups are that skills associated with evaluation planning and quality control may be under represented and in seeking to gather sufficient expertise, such groups can become overly large and difficult to manage.

In other cases, some of these functions were separated out by the establishment of other groups, which collectively supported the evaluation. For example, Steering Group 5 jointly supported the evaluation alongside a separate consultation group (to facilitate information sharing during the planning stages of the evaluation) and a quality assurance group (providing methodological review). While this kind of approach had some advantages, for example greater concentration of skills and specialisation of focus, it also had the potential to create confusion over boundaries of responsibilities between groups. A further downside of having functions split between groups is the additional work required to set up, administrate and keep all groups functioning. This additional responsibility often falls on the evaluation project manager.

Advisory Group Functions in Context - An Overview of Governance Structures

These experiences raise questions about the desirability and effectiveness of concentrating different evaluation support functions in one group or more. However, more importantly they serve to highlight the need to consider a range of governance structures and how each might serve an evaluation, given the organisational context and goals of an individual evaluation project.

In comparing our collective experiences of advisory groups, it was apparent that issues associated with defining functions and roles of advisory groups within the broader organisational context were resolved through a mixture of implicit and explicit techniques and processes. These ranged from assumption (i.e. that all members of an advisory group had a similar understandings of organisational decision-making processes and how these shaped the functions of the advisory group), informal discussion (within or sometimes outside of advisory group meetings) through to explicit discussion and

documentation of the roles and functions of the advisory group and other governance structures in supporting the evaluations. The example presented below was developed by one of the authors in order to clarify ambiguities and assumptions about a group's function within the wider context of the organisations involved. To date, it has proved highly successful.

Table 3. Example of documenting governance and support functions for an evaluation project

Action	By Whom	For What
Sign off	CEO	Evaluation contract
	General Manager	Approval of recommendation from selection panel to contract preferred tenderer Approval of recommendation from project manager/working group to accept final evaluation report Approval of recommendation from project manager/working group to publish evaluation findings
Approval	Evaluation Manager	The Project Manager will seek approval from the Evaluation Unit managers at defined points throughout the evaluation and at such other times as deemed necessary. Defined points include: - Approval of final RFP for distribution - Approval of selection panel membership - Approval to make recommendation to general managers on preferred tenderer - Approval of recommendation from Working Group to accept substantive evaluation reports - Approval to make recommendation to General Managers to accept final report
Quality Assurance	Inter-departmental Working Group	Development of the RFP Participation in selection of appropriate contractor/evaluation team
	Reference Group	Review of quality of evaluation and reports Review of cultural dimensions Provide a channel of communication with Service Providers
	Research Advisor	Advice on (specific, e.g. cultural) dimensions
Information Sharing	Working Group	Inform managers of the evaluation's progress and relevant issues

The delicate and complex nature of evaluation work and the contextual settings in which they occur make tools and techniques described in Table 3 particularly valuable. However in our experience, these types of matrices are not commonly used, but are assumed within the terms of reference. It may be that the infrequent use of these kinds of tools within governance processes is due to a lack of knowledge or familiarity with them. Indeed, this matrix was new to a number of the authors and we became aware of it as a result of writing this paper, drawing attention again to the fact that knowledge about successful evaluation governance processes is often tacit, and shared in predominantly informal rather than formal ways.

However, whether a documented matrix or some other tool is used, the goal is to maintain a clear understanding about the roles and responsibilities of groups and individuals involved in the governance of an evaluation project. This is particularly crucial given that, in our experience, advisory groups commonly consider themselves accountable for the evaluation in some way. For example, such groups often assume a degree of sign-off responsibility for various stages of the evaluation, but may often also believe that formal sign-off accountability belongs with another group or more senior official. For example approval of evaluation design may be considered the responsibility of the advisory group, but sign-off on evaluation findings may be seen as the responsibility of senior management. These kinds of assumptions may easily develop in situations of organisational change. However they can result in significant difficulties for the evaluation (e.g. time delays and the re-litigation of issues).

Such experiences again highlight the need to carefully consider the roles and responsibilities of an advisory group during the establishment phase. An evaluation project manager and the advisory group both need to know who is responsible for final decisions at each stage of the evaluation and these stages need to be transparent. Where more than one agency has a direct interest in the evaluation outcome, a negotiated sign off process may need to have been established at the outset. However, in our experience these kinds of agreements are best accompanied by ongoing explicit reflection on the effectiveness of the group and its functions throughout the life of the group. These issues are discussed further below.

2.4 Evaluation Governance Roles and Responsibilities in Practice

The authors noted that in practice, while written terms of reference had been developed, Advisory Groups sometimes performed other functions, sometimes assuming additional responsibilities while relinquishing others. While changes in function can result from a lack of clarity over the role of the group for example, a lack of written terms of reference, more commonly in our experience they occurred as a result of organisational change. Political changes in government for instance, effectively alter the mandate of an Advisory Group: by initiating a change in organisational structure (e.g. government agency mergers, or executive appointments) or by creating a shift in policy emphasis. While written terms of reference may sometimes provide clarity in these instances, in others, the terms of reference may need to be revised to take account of changes in the direction,

focus, sensitivity, urgency or accountability of the evaluation, which have occurred as a result of broader changes.

These kinds of change highlight the fluid, dynamic nature of evaluation governance structures and the need to acknowledge and make explicit the role of reflective practice within evaluation governance and management processes. This may mean periodically questioning or re-examining the responsibilities and functions of evaluation governance structures. In a practical sense, it might involve placing a review of the advisory group on the agenda or ensuring that copies of the terms of reference are always taken to meetings. The key issue we wish to raise here is the need for reflective examination to be an accepted and common aspect of evaluation governance processes, either formally or informally. The ultimate goal of reflective practice is to ensure that the kind of governance structures used to support evaluations are consistent with the context of the decision making structure/s of the organisations concerned and are able to facilitate clear understanding amongst groups members as to their role and responsibilities in supporting the evaluation project.

This is particularly important in times of organisational change. In our experience, explicit reflective practices have been infrequently used to maintain clarity around the functions of different evaluation governance structures. As a result, key events or changes which may have a bearing on an evaluation project and on the group governing it are known or assumed, but often left unexamined. In these cases there has been a tendency for attendance at advisory groups to become more sporadic as individual members assume the group is no longer necessary or that their own expertise is less relevant.

3 Setting up an Evaluation Advisory Group

Some evaluations in the public sector, for example those involving largely one agency and/or programme, may not require a formally established advisory group. The tasks undertaken by an advisory group may be adequately undertaken by the project team and other tasks carried out in other ways. However, projects that are large, complex or of high significance to government may also require such an arrangement even though they are located within a single agency of government. Increasingly, new policy initiatives are framed within a whole of government perspective and involve an inter-agency approach to the resolution of social issues. Such initiatives and the corresponding evaluations are often complex involving multiple stakeholder interests. An advisory group for the evaluation can often be one way to formalise those interests.

3.1 Who should set up an advisory group?

From our experience most decisions to set up advisory groups were made by the funder/sponsor of the evaluation on the initiative of the evaluation project manager. However, this was not the case for all of the case studies. In some instances, evaluation contractors requested that a group be established. The variety of different experiences

indicated that there are no clear guidelines around to determine if or when an advisory group might be needed nor how to go about establishing one. This lack of clarity is interesting to consider in the light of the 2002 AES conference which raised considerable discussion about the role of the evaluator and the debate over what types of processes could be used to genuinely and respectfully engage the views of all stakeholders. Writing this paper almost 12 months later, it is interesting to consider whether uncertainty about when and how to establish Advisory Groups is in fact somehow symptomatic of a common uncertainty over how and when to include stakeholders generally.

We are interested in hearing what your experiences have been

3.2 What kind of input is needed?

As the previous discussion highlights, an advisory group may serve a number of functions. If the need for such a group and responsibility for establishing it has been agreed, one of the first steps is to decide what kind of input is needed from others for the duration of the project. This may include:

- evaluation technical advice
- policy advice
- operational advice (including perspectives of clients or former clients)
- specialist advice (cultural, professional)

Consideration of why this input is needed is also necessary:

- Is it to facilitate information access to agencies represented on the Advisory Group?
- Is it to provide technical evaluation advice and guidance?
- Is it to enable stakeholder voices to be heard in evaluation development and management?
- Is it to ensure the evaluation has a balanced perspective?
- Is it to reflect a participatory or collaborative approach to evaluation?
- Is it to achieve 'buy in' from key stakeholders to the evaluation and the acceptance and implementation of findings?

Discussion

Setting up a group can be a time consuming and potentially daunting task. As discussed previously, an Advisory Group may serve a number of functions. Gaining some clarity and agreement over the input needed and the appropriate people to approach for this input requires consultation with other interested and knowledgeable stakeholders, and is often dependent on a degree of tacit organisational knowledge. A new project manager or someone new to the organisation does not necessarily know the appropriate people to contact.

Establishing Advisory Groups that are effective in managing and supporting evaluation work is an important task. Yet in our experience, the time, effort and skills required to

establish an Advisory Group frequently go unrecognised or unquestioned. Given that evaluations are often carried out over a long period having a group that lasts the distance and works well together is an advantage. Inadequate consideration of the work required to establish an EAG has, in our experience created a number of membership issues which minimised the effectiveness of such groups.

Difficulties associated with setting up an EAG – membership skills and responsibilities

- Insufficient knowledge to identify people with the appropriate skills (internally and externally) to contribute to an Advisory Group may create a ‘lottery’ effect. Some members may assume their participation is based upon expertise they have, but which is actually unknown to other members in the group. Misunderstandings or assumptions about the expertise within the group may result in a lack of commitment to the EAG process and reduce attendance.
- Insufficient knowledge about who is available to participate in a group can mean individual members may prove to be less knowledgeable than was assumed, less industrious than might be desired, routinely unavailable to attend meetings, or uncommitted to the project agenda (and possibly even opposed to it); These issues may collectively result in a group which is unbalanced, lacks energy and drive, or is unable to work constructively together.
- Consideration of the degree of expertise needed is also important in establishing a group that has the necessary critical mass of knowledge, yet is not so large as to be unwieldy. Unusually small groups may have insufficient expertise to adequately support the evaluation, while groups that are too large may be difficult to convene and manage, resulting in irregular support.
- Ensuring adequate evaluation expertise relative to other skill sets is also important. While EAGs often deliberately seek a broader range of expertise, translating this into practical support often requires a good knowledge of evaluation concepts. This is particularly important in evaluations that are externally contracted. Yet, in our experiences, evaluation contractor attendance at advisory group meetings only occurred in a small number of instances.

Reviewing our experiences of Advisory Group membership (see Table 4 below) generated further questions about who should be on an advisory group and why.

Table 4. Membership Composition of Advisory Groups

<i>Membership</i>	<i>Evaluation Practitioners</i>	<i>Management representation (policy or evaluation)</i>
Funding/sponsoring government agency	1 2 3 4 5 6 7	2 4 5 7
Maori representation	3 7	
Pacific representation	3	
Community representation	3 6 7	6
Other government agencies	1 2 3 5 6	2 4 6 7
Specialist advisors	7	
Evaluation contractor (attends meetings)	4 6 7	

The membership of our eight advisory group examples was consistently made up of government agency representatives, including the evaluation funding or sponsor agency. One group (3) also included Maori, Pacific and Community Group representation. The nature of evaluation project 3 necessitated broader community, Maori and Pacific representation in the governance structures. However, we found ourselves questioning whether advisory groups were a more suitable forum for representing the views of government stakeholders than other groups. Do evaluation governance groups have their own ‘culture’? How would we know? Was this OK and if not, how could this be addressed?

Moreover, if the views of some groups need representation, but an advisory group is an unsuitable forum, who should be responsible for ensuring these voices are heard? Does this responsibility sit with evaluation practitioners or should it be the responsibility of Advisory Group members to develop an alternative forum for representation? For us, these questions were similar to those generated by debate at the 2002 Conference around the values and views that are most valued within evaluation practice. In our view, questions over “whose values are valued?” are not only relevant to the specifics of evaluation practice, but also to broader mechanisms associated with evaluation governance and management processes.

4 Evaluation Advisory Groups at Work

In reflecting on evaluation group membership and management both positive and less positive experiences were recalled. These experiences helped us identify two key questions associated with how Advisory Groups contribute to evaluation projects, which are discussed below.

4.1 How do you keep an EAG working effectively?

Some of the key learnings from our experiences of advisory groups have been:

Resourcing: Time and Money

All advisory groups involve time costs for participants. Members need time to attend meetings and review documents and reports. Even the most well constructed advisory group may founder if the amount of time required and when, is not clear to members when they agree to participate. Members need to balance their input to the EAG with other demands on their time. This needs to be recognised by the project manager in the establishment and operation of the group, through actions such as providing dates of meetings or evaluation milestones at the outset. Members should be notified early of any changes to planned meeting dates. Advisory Groups also have time costs for the agency responsible for the management of the evaluation. This includes not only set-up costs identified previously, but time spent by the project manager in keeping EAG members informed of progress between meetings, seeking input to the evaluation design and feedback on evaluation milestones, as well as setting up and managing meetings of the group.

Advisory groups may also involve financial expenditure such as travel costs for members living in different regions and meeting fees for community members. Building evaluation advisory group costs into the budget at the planning stage is essential. This includes deciding on the most appropriate and least costly location to hold meetings. It may involve holding some or all meetings in different locations.

Not having an advisory group budget available may mean that funding for basic costs such as travel either have to sourced from elsewhere, or that, in absence of funding, groups are only able to meet infrequently. The following comments illustrate these issues.

Evaluation Advisory Group 1

“The evaluation contractors did not attend EAG meetings and communicated with the project manager largely through email as they were located outside of Wellington. Not having contractor meetings with the EAG built into the evaluation management was a weakness. The reason for this was there was no money set aside for EAG management”.

Evaluation Working Group 3

“I remember thinking that this advisory group was an expensive option.....All meetings were held in Wellington so a lot of money would have been paid out in airfares...The issue of cost for advisory groups is quite important”

Evaluation Advisory Group 7

“Since no provision had been made for EAG costs, the EAG has operated via telephone, mail and email. This has limited its effectiveness.”

Using Good Processes (reflective practice, minutes, agendas, focus on issues etc)

Good processes are central to ensuring the functionality of advisory groups and other governance groups. In our view good processes include:

- preparation for meetings, such as early notification and provision of agendas
- ensuring that meeting notes are taken and distributed soon after the meeting
- good facilitation of meetings to ensure that all viewpoints are heard
- communication about evaluation progress between meetings
- recognition of tensions and management of conflict

Good processes contribute to the following:

Gaining and maintaining commitment to the evaluation from the group

It should be acknowledged that members may have different levels of interest in the evaluation and thus different levels of commitment to the advisory group. The project manager or advisory group convenor should endeavour to identify at the outset the level of interest of members. Where lower levels of interest are identified for some members, strategies to increase their interest should be developed, such as highlighting the utility of the evaluation to their organisation or group.

Evaluation Working Group 3

“The working party had a significant role in the evaluation and was chaired by a community person...Every member added value. It met about five times a year. The agency policy member organised meetings, minutes, planned travel and venues”.

Evaluation Advisory Group 6

“The EAG met frequently in the early stages when the evaluation was being scoped and the RFP developed. There was a strong sense of ownership of the evaluation by all parties and attendance at meetings and provision of feedback was readily given.”

One factor that can contribute to lower levels of commitment by the Advisory Group is when the evaluation runs beyond its expected end-time. Where evaluations are unable to deliver findings in a timely manner, the relevance to other government stakeholders may diminish as other policies or projects have become more significant. Where there are significant delays in evaluation reporting this can limit the quality of input from advisory review processes.

Successfully replacing a member of an advisory group or adding to the group

Replacement may be necessary because of attrition. Evaluations are often lengthy affairs and people change roles within an organisation or move on. Ideally the departing member will ensure an appropriate replacement is found from their agency or group. Where this does not happen the project manager will need to use similar criteria to that used in the set-up stage to find a replacement.

Replacements may also be needed to deal with the regular non-participation of members. This can be a delicate affair and where the non-participation means that significant advisory gaps exist, a solution needs to be found. It may involve contacting the person concerned to establish what the problem is and find a solution. If this fails, then an approach to the organisation using appropriate channels to replace the person may be required. A key learning from our experience was the need to be pro-active at an early stage once a problem has been identified.

Sometimes it is necessary to add to advisory group membership after the evaluation has commenced. This may be because of changes that have occurred in the relationship of key stakeholders to the project, programme or strategy being evaluated or changes in the direction or focus of the evaluation necessitating additional knowledge and skill sets be made available. While introducing someone new later in the evaluation can alter the group dynamics, it can also bring a fresh perspective.

Managing relationships between advisory group and project team

The relationship between advisory group and project team can be complicated or even delicate where the advisory group is made up mainly of managers. Issues that can arise include, non-attendance or irregular attendance at meetings and failure to provide timely advice because of conflicting demands on the time of senior managers. While issues will vary according to the nature of the group and the details of the terms of reference, key areas of potential tensions include:

- Attendance of project team staff (including external evaluators) at group meetings;
- Interactions between governance group members and project team members outside the context of the group meeting;
- Involvement of the governance group in substantive work on the project (via working groups).

One of the most important considerations here is the big picture governance arrangements for the study (that is, how the group governance structure fits into a larger picture of accountability relationships and reporting lines (i.e. also including staff/management relationships and project team/client relationships).

Evaluation Advisory Group 2

“It was intended that the advisory group would provide guidance and support on issues as they occurred. However, at times (especially near the end of the project when their attendance was crucial!) it was extremely difficult to get all the managers to attend an advisory group meeting. This limited the group’s ability to make decisions.”

Evaluation Steering Group 5

“The ESG has been in existence now for almost 12 months, but during this time it has only managed to meet a total of five times and the energy (and contracted time) spent on trying to arrange them has been frustrating. However, when they have occurred, the meetings have been fruitful and have successfully functioned to secure commitment from senior management to the evaluation”.

4.2 When and how should closure be achieved?

While a lot of effort is often put into the establishment phase, too often advisory groups are left to fade away. Planning for evaluation governance needs to include processes for closure. Closure processes might include:

- building an end point into the terms of reference
- being clear to members when advisory group reviews are requested on final reports
- keeping members informed of what is happening with a final report
- ensuring that all members are aware of the post-evaluation requirements, for example approval processes for release of report
- formal acknowledgement of the contribution of members and stated closure, either from the agency responsible for the governance or from the sponsor/funding agency.

While many evaluation advisory groups will operate throughout an evaluation, ceasing to exist with the acceptance of the final report, this is not always the case.

In some evaluations, particularly those of lengthy duration, it may be necessary to review the membership and terms of reference of the advisory group part way through the evaluation, to ensure they meet the ongoing needs of the evaluation. If considerable change is needed to the membership and/or terms of reference, it may be worth considering formal closure and the re-establishment of a new or modified advisory group. The review process should be built into the terms of reference so that all members are aware of this at the outset. Some advisory groups reach their end point before the final report has been accepted. An example of this was one of the less successful advisory groups:

Evaluation Advisory Group 4

“The advisory group was set up by the agency on the request of the evaluation contractors. The latter did not have input into selection of the membership of the advisory group. All members were Wellington based, though the evaluation covered the lower North Island. “The Advisory group met about four times over nine months and each meeting was in response to our requests. I don’t recall a meeting where everyone turned up (apart from the student rep who had little to offer)...Once we had submitted our first draft no more meetings were held....no minutes were ever taken”.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, evaluation practice inevitably occurs within complex social systems and is recognised as needing governance processes that will ‘wrap around’ the project as it progresses from planning through to final reporting and utilisation. However, while governance processes are frequently put in place, in our experience, there has been very little open or formal discussion about the effectiveness of these processes. Our own experiences have highlighted a number of issues, but have also helped identify characteristics of successful Advisory Groups

5.1 Characteristics of successful advisory groups

As has been stated throughout, this paper is based on our experience of eight advisory group examples, and draws collectively on our knowledge of other groups and evaluation projects. While this information is by no means exhaustive, we have found that governance structures which have the following characteristics to be particularly effective in supporting an evaluation project.

Advisory Group Establishment

- Occurs as an integral part of the evaluation project planning phase
- Is not rushed, but carefully considered
- Is linked into the overall governance structures of the organisation
- The purpose and functions of the group are clearly defined to meet the specific needs of the evaluation
- There are comprehensive formal terms of reference developed and agreed to by members
- It is clear from the outset whether the group will have an executive decision-making function.

Advisory Group Membership

- Consists of knowledgeable members committed to the evaluation goals
- All members are aware of the expertise each brings to the group
- Includes sufficient expertise to be able to make informed comment/decisions
- Members are willing and able to commit time to advisory group tasks (review and meeting attendance)

Work in action when

- Groups are adequately resourced if necessary
- Meetings are well planned and documented (including agendas and minutes)
- The expertise and time of the members is used to resolve issues

- Review of the advisory group functions, membership and management processes are built into the evaluation timeline
- Consultation processes used by members within their own agency are transparent and there is agreement as to what information can be shared outside the advisory group
- Regular communication about progress to members occurs between meetings (to maintain interest and commitment to evaluation)
- There is commitment from the project team and evaluation sponsors to properly consider the advice given

Advisory Group Closure

- Is planned for in the terms of reference, including an intended end-point for the life of an advisory group within the evaluation planning
- Review processes allow for earlier closure and/or reconstruction to occur
- Is formally acknowledged in some way by the evaluation sponsor/funder
- Includes sending a copy of the published report to all members

5.2 Where to from here?

The discussions that we have had in collaborating on the writing of this paper were useful and interesting. As we said at the outset, our motivation is to give value to and make explicit, tacit or taken-for-granted knowledge and understandings about how evaluation projects are managed and supported. We all learnt a lot from sharing and reflecting on our individual experiences and practices. We hope that our reflections are useful to others interested in the commissioning and practice of evaluation.

We propose to continue this discourse with our evaluation, research, policy and other colleagues in the Ministry of Social Development, with the aim of contributing to a general set of evaluation governance guidelines. We would welcome input from others in the evaluation community interested in contributing to this evolving discourse.

Appendix One: Search Terms and Consulted Literature

The following indexes were searched for references to literature on ‘the use and purpose of advisory groups in research and evaluation’

- MSD Information Centre Catalogue
- Social Science Index,
- Sociological Abstracts,
- EbscoHost Sociological Collection
- Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection
- PsychoINFO

These resulted in the following titles.

1. Blake, H. 2000. *Designing social research: the logic of anticipation*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
2. Cone, J. 2001. *Evaluating outcomes: empirical tools for effective practice*. Washington D.C: American Psychological Association.
3. Greenberg, J., Foger, R. 1988. *Controversial issues in social research methods*. New York: Springer-Verlag
4. Hedrick, T. (1988). “The Interaction of Politics and Evaluation.” *Evaluation-Practice* 9:3 pp5-14.
5. Morris, M., Jacobs, L. 2000. “You got a problem with that? Exploring evaluators’ disagreements about ethics”. *Evaluation Review* 24:4 pp384-406
6. Tolich, M. 2001. *Research Ethics in Aotearoa New Zealand: concepts, practice, critique*. Auckland, N.Z: Longman.
7. Williamson, E., Kent, J., Goodenough, T., Ashcroft. R. 2002. “*Social Science gets the ethics treatment*”. Sociological –Research-Online <http://www.socresonline.org.uk>, Updated 7th November 2002.

With the exception of item 4, none of the abstracts made reference to the use advisory groups within evaluation, although many were concerned with ethical practices and the process of obtaining or providing research grants. Items 1, 3, and 6 from the list were requested and item 4 which was requested but was unavailable. Again, having received these requested items, we found that they predominantly centred on ethical issues associated with research and evaluation practice.

All authors acknowledge that our literature consultation was limited by the need to prepare the conference paper and that there may well be further literature available on this topic. We welcome any comments that are able to direct us to more specific and relevant sources