

# Alcohol Impact

Monitoring and evaluation research handbook

# Project aims and activities

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In developing your interventions you will have set out some key identifiers of success, or aims, for your activities. This will also have helped you understand what it is you are trying to monitor and evaluate.

**Aims** can be described as the overarching and specific changes you want to achieve—the rationale for your intervention (for example, decreasing the amount of alcohol consumed by students at pre-drinking events or meet ups). The method you described to deliver your intervention will help you achieve your aims.

The activities described in your method will form the basis of your monitoring and evaluation (M&E) plan. The plan should cover the following questions:

- What and who are we going to monitor and evaluate?
- How will we do it?
- When will we do it?
- Who will do what?
- What resources will we need, including support from outside the project team?

In this guide we'll be working through each of the elements of your monitoring and evaluation outlined above in more detail, with top tips and ideas for carrying out your research.

What and who are we going to evaluate?

# What and who are we going to evaluate?

Two commonly used terms in monitoring and evaluation are **outputs** and **outcomes**, and your M&E plan should cover both of these for each of your project activities where appropriate.

**Outputs** can be described as the specific activities, services or products developed or provided by your project. The 'reach' of your project, e.g. the number of apps downloaded, should be measured as part of your outputs.

## **EXAMPLE | Outputs**

Aim: To reduce the number of students drinking excessively according to NHS guidelines

Intervention: To develop a drink diary app for students

Output: Production of an app for smartphones and tablets

- How many apps were downloaded?
- How often were the apps completed?
- What kind of people downloaded the app?  
E.g. Staff or student? Full-time or part-time student?

When recording your outputs you need to think comprehensively about what data to record. For example, the yellow box above shows the kind of data that could be captured taking the example of a drink diary app, outlined in the pink box.

In this instance, keeping a register and asking participants to fill in a registration or feedback form would provide the types of information outlined above. If you have lots of different activities running as part of your project, you might want to create a central spreadsheet to log all of your outputs. Remember to keep this updated on a regular basis to make it easier to keep track of how your intervention activities are working.

# What and who are we going to evaluate?

**Outcomes** are the 'what happens' as a result of your intervention's activities, services or products. Outcomes can be good, or bad, and expected or unexpected. Outcomes can also affect a range of different audiences for example individuals to communities to the environment. Outcomes can be 'hard' (usually involving numbers, so in our example the number alcoholic drinks consumed) or 'soft' (for example a change in attitude, in our example having an ability to limit consumption). Soft outcomes can be hard to measure but are still an important part of your intervention's achievements.

## ***EXAMPLE / Outcomes***

Aim: To reduce the number of students drinking excessively according to NHS guidelines

Activity: To develop a drink diary app for students

Outcomes: People who completed the diary app were more aware of their levels of consumption and made steps to reduce consumption

- How often do participants consume alcohol?
- How often do they consume beyond the recommended limit?
- Do participants perceive any changes in their health as a result of reduced consumption?
- Do participants perceive any changes in academic achievement as a result of reduced consumption?

Recording your project outcomes (see pink box above) is likely to involve some primary research (outlined in more detail in the following sections of this guide). The yellow box above outlines some examples of things to consider.

**Impacts** are the broader, more long-term effects of your project activities, outputs and outcomes e.g. the social norms around excessive alcohol consumption amongst the student population are shifted towards more moderate consumption. Again this is likely to involve ongoing primary research.

How will we do it?

# What are the different research methods?

Generally speaking, data collection methods can be either **quantitative** or **qualitative**.

On the whole, **quantitative** research is concerned with 'hard' data, for example 'what?' and 'how much or how many?', and is therefore often numerical. Specific methods that are used to collect quantitative data include face-to-face questionnaires and online surveys.

**Qualitative** research is more concerned with the 'how' and 'why' and common methods include in-depth interviews or focus groups. These methods can be particularly useful when investigating why people behave in certain ways.



Choose your method according to...

- What kind of information you need
- Whether you need to repeat the research
- What audiences you will be collecting data from
- How easy it will be for you to collect and analyse the data

You are also likely to be collecting data, for example on your **outputs**, which doesn't involve primary research. You should think about how you are going to log this data – as mentioned in the previous chapter, a spreadsheet is usually a good place to start.



# What are the different research methods?

If you'd like to discuss the monitoring and evaluation of your intervention, please get in touch with the Alcohol Impact team.

## KEY RESEARCH METHODS

The key primary research methods proposed include:

- Surveys
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Diaries

Each method has its own strengths and weaknesses. You might want to strengthen your research approach by collecting data in more than one way. For example qualitative research can be used to illustrate and provide narrative to the hard data provided by quantitative research. The next section provides more detail on each of the individual methods, but first it's worth touching on the research process as a whole.

### Baseline

To assess the outcomes and impacts of your project you will need to **find out what the situation is before your project starts**. Ideally your plan should involve carrying out research before your project activities commence (baseline research). The central research provided by NUS will help to assess this however you should think about whether any further research is needed – either through primary or secondary data.



Project activities

### Follow-up

This research then needs to be **repeated at the end of the pilot period to allow you to track how things have changed**.

Where possible you should also try to repeat the research halfway through to see how things have progressed so far. Find out more in the 'When will be do it?' section later on in the handbook.

# Which methods will be best for our intervention?

The tables on the next two pages outline the **main advantages and disadvantages of each research method to help you make sure you're using the most appropriate method for monitoring and evaluating your intervention activities.** You should also think about what steps you can take to reduce the effect of any disadvantages associated with each method.

RESEARCH METHOD	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<b>Surveys</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can secure responses from a large number of people</li><li>• Relatively quick and easy</li><li>• Using scale-based questions can help measure change when surveys conducted pre and post-project</li><li>• Provides information in a standardised way</li><li>• Can be easily repeated to identify changes and trends</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Survey fatigue</li><li>• Less suitable for complex issues</li><li>• Possibility for respondents to mis-interpret questions</li><li>• May require follow-up research to unpack findings</li></ul>
<b>Interviews</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Useful for exploring difficult issues</li><li>• Can unpack and illustrate quantitative research in finer detail</li><li>• Allows for detailed questioning</li><li>• Can include quantitative and qualitative questions</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Not usually able to be representative of all participants or population</li><li>• Can be time consuming and costly</li></ul>

# Which research methods will be best for our intervention?

RESEARCH METHOD	ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
<b>Focus groups</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Useful for exploring difficult issues</li><li>• Can unpack and illustrate quantitative research in finer detail</li><li>• Discover how different groups think and interact</li><li>• Save time and money compared to individual interviews</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can be time consuming and costly</li><li>• Some groups are difficult to moderate so you may not get the information you are looking for</li><li>• Some participants may not feel confident expressing their opinions in a group situation (though online groups can be a solution to this)</li></ul>
<b>Diaries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Gives insight into changes amongst individuals over time</li><li>• Allows information to be recorded 'in the moment' rather than relying on recall</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can be difficult to analyse</li><li>• Time consuming for participants so may require substantial incentives</li></ul>

# Who will we research?

An important part of planning your monitoring and evaluation is to **think about who you need to participate in your research**. The boxes below summarise two main approaches.

## Total population

- You may not be able to collect data on everyone who has come into contact with your intervention, though in terms of carrying out surveys online sending an 'all-student' email or through a student newsletter can be an important way of reaching a large audience.
- If you choose this option you should report on the characteristics of the respondents to your surveys and consider how this varies from the characteristics of the overall population.
- This option will also allow you to capture non-participants as well as project participants in your follow-up research so you can see directly what impact your work is having on those who are involved.

## Samples

- An alternative is to collect data from a sample. You should aim for this sample to be representative of the overall population you are aiming to investigate.
- If you choose to carry out surveys, samples are usually generated through random sampling.
- This means that everyone has an equal chance of taking part in the research, however it is important to remember that very small groups within the total population will have a lower chance of being selected.

If you're planning to carry out focus groups or interviews you might want to deliberately select who takes part to ensure you get a range of views and experiences.

# Who will we research?

## ***Using a control group***

It can be hard to prove that any changes recorded amongst your project participants happened as a direct result of your project and that the changes would not have happened anyway. Thinking about who you include in your research will help you to prove the impact of your intervention activities. For example, distributing a survey to the entire student population will capture those who have participated in the intervention activities as well as those who haven't. Another approach can be to compare participants with a 'control group' however it is often difficult to find an appropriate, comparable group. Ensuring you collect information 'before' and 'after' your intervention activities commence will be key to proving your impact. You should also think about finding out about and acknowledging other potential influences on your intervention participants beyond your intervention activities.

# What are my responsibilities when conducting research?

There are a number of **important ethical issues to consider when collecting data from people including ensuring the information they provide is confidential; storing the information appropriately and informing your participants that you are doing so.**

Issue	Tips and ideas
<b>Confidentiality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• When gathering information, it is best practice to make your participants aware that any information they provide will be confidential.</li><li>• Participants should be aware that information will be collated and used to represent the whole project or activity rather than focus specifically on their individual responses.</li><li>• Reassure them that anything they disclose will be kept anonymous as this encourages participants to be more open and honest in their responses and is particularly important when participants are disclosing information in a group setting such as a focus group.</li></ul>
<b>Informing your participants</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tell your participants what you are doing, and how the information will be used, so they can decide whether or not they want to take part. You should also let your participants know about the confidentiality of the research and that you are complying with data protection as outlined in the other boxes in this section.</li><li>• It is good practice to put this information in writing and also to get consent and contact details for your participants.</li></ul>
<b>Data protection</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• If you are recording information about people you will need to comply with the Data Protection Act and store the information in a secure way. The Guide to Data Protection gives practical advice and guidance on the Data Protection Act. <a href="http://www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/data_protection_guide.aspx">www.ico.gov.uk/for_organisations/data_protection_guide.aspx</a></li></ul>

# How will we encourage people to take part in the research?

Securing responses to your research is key to generating robust and credible data. This is particularly important if you are working with a small number of people. The following tips should encourage people to take part in your research.

**Explain why** you're carrying out the research, and what you will do with the results.

Make sure the research methods you are using, and the language used within the research materials, are **inclusive and easily understandable**.

**Consider providing an incentive** for participation, for example through offering payment for attending a focus group or offering a prize draw to all respondents to a survey.

**Use personalised reminders** to encourage people to take part in your research.

**Choose methods that are accessible** to your potential participants, allowing them to contribute appropriately to the research.

When will we do it?



# When will we do it?

Your M&E should ideally be built into your overall intervention plan and included in your day to day project tasks and activities.

- **Evaluation** involves using monitoring and other information to assess how your project is performing overall. To know how your project has performed and what impact you're having, you need to know what things were like before it started known as **baseline** research as described earlier in this guide.
- This research is then repeated at the end of the project (or end of the funding period) to demonstrate the changes that have been achieved. This is usually called **follow-up** research.
- Depending on your project activities, it might also be appropriate to conduct some **mid-point** research halfway through the SGF funding period which will allow you to review the progress made so far and adjust your project if necessary going into the second year of funding.
- On the whole, the **questions should be the same, and asked and delivered in the same way in all three points of research.**
- The mid-point and follow-up research is also a good opportunity to ask directly about people's involvement in and experiences of your project as well as questioning on attitudes, behaviours or any other indicators you are using to measure your projects outcomes and impacts.

- Generally speaking, **monitoring** activities involve the routine, systematic collection and recording of information about your project e.g. how many views your project website has received or recording energy meter readings.
- Collecting this data will help you check your progress, and also help us identify where you might need some support (if at all).

You might also like to consider contacting your participants after they have stopped participating in your project in order to understand the longer term impacts of your project. For example, whether any changes in behaviour that occurred during the intervention are continued into the long term. Some interventions may also be specifically designed to have long term impacts, for example those that focus on graduate employability. If you intend to carry out research with people who are no longer participants you should plan ahead to ensure you will still be able to contact them after participation has stopped.

What resources will we need?

# How do we develop our research materials?

Carrying out primary research will involve developing research materials such as surveys and topic guides for focus groups. Here are some useful pointers for each of the methods outlined earlier in this guide. When putting together your research materials, it is worth using the following checklist as a guide:

- ***What are current patterns of behaviour?***
- ***What are the specific behaviour changes being targeted***
- ***What are the key influences on those specific behaviours (and what are the cross-cutting influences e.g. attitudes, costs)?***
- ***What are the key audiences being targeted (and is there any variation by behaviour)?***
- ***Are there any existing data sources (for example surveys and metrics - e.g.. energy bills/usage, journey patterns) that can be used?***

## **Surveys and interviews**

- Different kinds of questions will give you different information so think carefully about the kinds of questions you ask and **refer back to you project aims**
- Open-ended questions are useful for providing qualitative data and closed questions will provide more quantitative data, it's often best to use a combination of both.
- A type of closed question that is useful for comparing change is a scaled question (e.g. agreement with a statement, frequency of taking action) – you'll be able to see how your respondents have shifted, if at all, up or down the scale. If you are using interviews, these will typically include more open-ended than closed questions, with the reverse applying for surveys.

# How do we develop our research materials?

## Surveys and interviews continued...

- **Make sure the questions are clear and easy to understand**, try not to ask leading questions (e.g. Would you say you cycled more now than you used to?) opting for neutral ones instead (e.g. How often do you cycle?) and keep questions focused on one issue rather than combining two or more (e.g. Would you say cycling has improved your fitness and saved your money?)
- How you order questions can affect how people answer them, it's normally best to **start with some easy questions and then group questions on the same topic together**. Start with the more general questions and then move on to specifics. It's normally best to leave personal questions to the end of the survey.

## Diaries

- If you plan to use diaries, you also need to take into account **what format will be most useful for evaluation, but also convenient (and fun!) for your participants**.
- You can provide participants with a proforma to complete or leave the diary more open to individual interpretations but **make sure you provide clear instructions for your participants**.
- If you decide to use a proforma, think about **providing your participants with a completed example** so they know what's expected of them and check in with them to see how filling in the diary is going.

# How do we develop our research materials?

## Focus groups

- As a general rule, **focus groups are usually made up of around eight participants**, though it's usually a good idea to invite a couple more as often people don't turn up on the day.
- Groups can work better when they're **made up of people with similar characteristics** so think about the number of groups you might need to hold to account for this.
- **Groups usually last around 90 minutes**, but you can use activities and tasks to break this up.
- It's **normal practice for groups to be video or audio recorded** as taking notes can prove tricky (and is almost impossible for a facilitator to do as well as managing the group) but remember to ask for participants' permission to do this.

*1. Context setting* – facilitators introduce themselves and the research, how the focus group will work including any ground rules

*2. Introductions and meeting fellow participants*  
It's usually a good idea to include an 'icebreaker' exercise to get the group talking, for example pairing off and then introducing their partner to the group

*3. Initial questions* – Start off with some light, easy questions and gradually guide the group towards the key issues

*4. Key questions* – Cover off the main areas of questioning, remembering to include some probe/prompt questions in your topic guide in addition to the main ones

*5. Ending* – The facilitator summarises the main points of the discussion and asks for any final reflections from the group

# How do we develop our research materials?

## Visual data

- This involves the **use of photos or video** and other visual materials to record information about your project.
- Your communications plans will include a video element but this method can also be used to help you monitor and evaluate your project as well as involving participants.
- Visual methods **should in general be supported by other sources of data** however can be a useful way of recording how users are interacting with any infrastructure created through your project, or recording how changes are being made.
- Projects focused on energy use might also think about visual methods for recording energy meter data (though reporting requirements here need to be rigid if an element of competition is involved).

Before you use any of these materials **remember to pilot and review** them to make sure you have all the information you need, in an appropriate format, and that respondents can clearly understand how to use them too. When you come to use your research materials it is worthwhile still **checking on the data being collected to make sure they are being used correctly** even if you have piloted them first.