

# Big Lottery Fund Evaluation, Research and Learning Strategy

## Summary version

### 1. BACKGROUND

1.1 This document provides a summary of the Big Lottery Fund's evaluation, research and learning strategy for the period 2005-09. The Big Lottery Fund was formed in June 2004 from a merger of the New Opportunities Fund and the Community Fund, with a mission of 'bringing real improvements to communities, and to the lives of people most in need'. The strategy builds on the existing work of the two legacy organisations. It sets out a new and distinctive approach for the Big Lottery Fund, expanding the range and scope of evaluation and research activity with the aim of increasing learning within the Fund and outside it. The strategy will be supported by annual action plans, which will specify the evaluation, research and learning activities planned for each year.

1.2 It is based on a definition of the purpose of evaluation and research at the Big Lottery Fund as follows:

*The Big Lottery Fund undertakes evaluation and research to enable it to improve funding impacts and processes; to promote wider sharing of such learning in order to improve practice and influence policy; and to support public accountability*

1.3 The strategy sets out a vision for E&R work which positions the Big Lottery Fund at the forefront of its grantmaking peer group. Through wide and high-profile dissemination of E&R findings, we expect to enhance our position as a leading grantmaker, demonstrating to opinion-formers, the public and the media as well as more specialist audiences the value and impact of Lottery funding. We will work closely with other lottery distributors and grantmakers to ensure lessons emerging from E&R are shared. While we aim to take a lead in this area, we do it in a spirit of shared learning and discovery. We will ensure our E&R work is rigorous and impartial, acknowledging challenges and difficulties in order to learn from them rather than simply celebrating success.

1.4 Recognising the considerable caseload of continuing evaluation activity from the legacy organisations (24 current evaluations plus 3 research projects), the strategy is designed to deliver incremental change to the way we go about E&R. New elements that will be introduced are:

- i) Wider use of evaluation against top-level outcomes, across programmes and by cross-cutting themes;
- ii) The establishing of systematic data-gathering through monitoring of

- all projects to feed into evaluation and reporting;
  - iii) More flexible and frequent use of research to inform programme and policy development and to pick up emerging themes of interest from evaluation;
  - iv) A greater emphasis on learning from E&R, internally and externally, through more comprehensive dissemination and knowledge exchange.
- 1.5 The Big Lottery Fund has completed a process of consultation with its stakeholders in all four countries of the UK and negotiation with government about the shape of its future funding activity over the period to 2009. The greater powers now accorded to the devolved administrations mean that Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales will be developing a different set of outcomes under the three UK-wide themes proposed by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, and will design their own programmes beneath these. This increasing divergence between the countries in outcomes and programmes will be reflected in E&R activity, although the E&R team will maintain a UK-wide remit.
- 1.6 As the largest Lottery distributor, the Big Lottery Fund can play an important role in sharing its experience and the fruits of its E&R activity. It also has a reputation to maintain, gained over the years by both legacy organisations in contributing to evidence and wider knowledge about social change and grantmaking processes. The strategy must build on this reputation for high-quality evaluation and research both within the funder peer group and wider circles of policy-makers, decision-makers and practitioners. This means not only identifying 'what works' and contributing to the evidence base, but also providing ongoing feedback to practitioners and current grantholders by identifying good practice and shared learning.
- 1.7 There is an obligation on us to involve stakeholders in the way we go about evaluation and research, and a need to demonstrate public accountability. Our work must reflect best practice in evaluation and research; it must keep up with emerging developments in evaluation theory and the Government research agenda, and where possible lead new thinking. We have a rich resource of data and experience and we must make good use of it.
- 1.8 The strategy is based on the following principles:
- i) We consider evaluation and research to be valuable tools in helping to understand impact and process in order to improve practice, policy and performance.
  - ii) We will only conduct research and collect information that has a clear purpose and use and we will only measure results that can reasonably be attributed to the activities of a programme.
  - iii) The methodological approach we take to E&R must be driven by

purpose and audience, ensuring maximum utilisation of our findings.

- iv) We will encourage self-evaluation and learning across all our programmes.
- v) Monitoring and evaluation are inter-related; there must be organisational commitment to both levels.

1.9 We have made the following assumptions:

- i) We will evaluate all our work at some level, whether through establishing programme or thematic evaluations, promoting self-evaluations and local evaluations or working in partnership with other organisations conducting evaluations.
- ii) Where there are many potential purposes and audiences, we will prioritise, to ensure our activity is focussed and likely to be most useful.
- iii) The strategy takes into account the principles of 'intelligent funding' but recognises that the Fund has yet fully to discuss the implications of this approach for its future work.
- iv) We assume a continuation of UK-wide responsibility for E&R in the short term, with resourcing for a central team rather than E&R officers in each country.
- v) The strategy recognises a substantial continuing commitment in the management of E&R for legacy programmes, in some cases up to 2009.
- vi) We will continue as a general rule with our practice of contracting out evaluations and research to external experts.

## 2. EVALUATION

2.1 There will be six units of evaluation activity.

- i) Big Lottery Fund outcomes - by aggregating up from projects and programmes we will provide evidence of the organisation's overall effect and performance against the themes and outcomes which govern our funding framework.
- ii) Strategic programmes - we will evaluate programmes that are piloting a new approach, have political importance or operate in a field that is relatively unresearched or short on evidence. We will not evaluate all programmes. It may be that parts of a programme, or the programme in one country will be the unit of evaluation.
- iii) Demand-led programmes - we will evaluate against common aims, themes or patterns by sampling across a range of projects.
- iv) Across programmes - we will evaluate cross-cutting issues across strategic and demand-led programmes. These could be aspects of key importance to the Big Lottery Fund, perhaps derived from the organisation's values, such as partnership or sustainability.

- v) Process – we will evaluate internal Fund processes, such as delivery mechanisms, where a new approach is being tested or there is particular learning to be gained for us in terms of our method of grantmaking.
  - vi) Projects - we will promote a culture of self-evaluation amongst projects and ensure valuable learning is shared across projects and fed into other levels of evaluation.
- 2.2 The specific approach we take to evaluation will be determined by its purpose and audience. Often the approach will be formative – emphasising interim and short-term findings which can strengthen or improve the programme or issue being evaluated. Sometimes a more summative approach will be preferred, which emphasises longer-term more conclusive findings about the effect or impact of a programme. Careful consideration of purpose and audience will enable us to judge how far we should look at impact, and how far at process.

### 3. RESEARCH

- 3.1 Research will serve a wider purpose than evaluation, being more exploratory and aimed at either developing understanding around a specific initiative/issue or informing wider thinking. We expect different types of research will be used widely within the Big Lottery Fund to address different purposes, with the E&R team leading on much of this but acting in an advisory capacity to other parts of the organisation commissioning or undertaking research.
- 3.2 We will use research for two primary purposes:
- i) To support the development of new policy and programme development - this will require front-end research to develop our understanding around the themes and outcomes, and, more specifically, around emerging priorities.
  - ii) To address emerging or unforeseen needs - these needs may be generated from a range of areas and may include further developing evaluation recommendations; responding to emerging political agendas; improving understanding around organisational values; and joint work to promote shared understanding and collaborative relationships with other organisations, such as other Lottery distributors.
- 3.3 The Board will be considering proposals for research grants at its meeting in July 05. Subject to these decisions, we may develop closer links between our programme of E&R and research grantmaking.

### 4. LEARNING

- 4.1 The strategy sets out ways in which we will facilitate learning from evaluation and research, both within and outside the organisation. What

we propose forms part of a wider organisational shift to valuing learning and adopting 'learning organisation' and 'intelligent funding' principles.

- 4.2 We will facilitate improved internal learning by:
- i) engaging in constructive dialogue with key internal stakeholders at the outset of evaluation or research work to determine purposes, priority audiences and expected outputs;
  - ii) ensuring systems are in place for sharing ongoing, interim findings;
  - iii) providing findings in diverse formats according to user need;
  - iv) taking responsibility for sharing 'lessons for the Big Lottery Fund' and facilitating discussion of these.
- 4.3 We will play a key role in helping the Big Lottery Fund develop its approach to 'intelligent funding', and will establish a knowledge bank, as an initial step in wider consideration of knowledge management within a learning organisation.
- 4.4 We will facilitate improved external learning by:
- i) generating lessons from evaluation and research to enable grantholders and other practitioners to share good practice, and disseminating such lessons in diverse and accessible ways;
  - ii) giving clear and consistent messages about the Big Lottery Fund's self-evaluation requirements, and the relationship between monitoring, self-evaluation and programme evaluation;
  - iii) working closely with Policy colleagues in all four countries to maximise political and policy opportunities for using evidence from our evaluation and research findings;
  - iv) involving key players and experts, such as members of grantmaking committees, in Evaluation Steering Groups;
  - v) ensuring that we are publicly accountable, by putting high-quality evaluation and research findings in the public domain, demonstrating the value and impact of Lottery funding, and ensuring that our evidence contributes to the Big Lottery Fund's business planning and reporting processes;
  - vi) improving links and search facilities on the E&R pages of the website;
  - vii) engaging with others in the fields of E&R and grantmaking to ensure that we maximise opportunities for sharing learning and improving our practice.
- 4.5 The strategy identifies particular actions we can take to maximise utilisation of findings through improved dissemination. We have undertaken to allocate at least 5% of the budget of each evaluation or piece of research to dissemination, but await further recommendations from some research that we have commissioned about effective and

proactive dissemination practice. The approach we take to evaluation and research is designed to achieve greater take-up of our findings in that it prioritises purposes and audiences. Through involvement of key stakeholders from the very beginning and throughout the duration of the work we will ensure there is a greater correlation between purpose, audience and E&R output. We believe this will result in better utilisation.

## 5. DELIVERING THE STRATEGY

- 5.1 Since the Community Fund and New Opportunities Fund merged, we have established new management and governance arrangements for the E&R team. These will continue for the time being, but will be reviewed periodically to ensure they are best suited to the implementation of the strategy. We will update our commissioning procedures, and ensure appropriate cross-divisional systems are in place for communication, stakeholder involvement and accountability. The strategy covers evaluation activity across the UK, recognising that in some cases it will be appropriate to do UK-wide evaluations and in other cases, country-specific evaluations. This does not preclude country offices from leading and funding evaluation activities that are not addressed through our centrally delivered work.
- 5.2 The strategy represents an ambitious plan to increase evaluation and research activity and improve learning derived from it. We plan to do evaluation more widely, at different levels and across programmes; to do it more flexibly, using different approaches for different purposes and audiences; to disseminate it more comprehensively to lead to greater utilisation; and to have a stronger focus on learning from evaluation and research. Potential risks to its achievement are set out in the full strategy.
- 5.3 This strategy is borne of extensive consultation and fundamental rethinking of how to make the most of the wealth of data and experience that the Big Lottery Fund has built up through its grantmaking. We will use the strategy and annual action plans to guide the work of the E&R team. We have identified critical success factors and intend to manage the implementation of the strategy adopting the principles of good practice, shared learning and clarity of purpose.

E&R Team 30/06/05