

Program Evaluation: a Plain English Guide

grosvenor
management consulting



Foreword



A foreword from Dr George Argyrous ANZSOG Senior Lecturer in Evidence-Based Decision-Making

Governments and private organisations are insisting on rigorous evaluations to demonstrate whether the programs they fund are working. But the available literature on program evaluation is often overly theoretical, very technical, or loaded with bewildering jargon.

This guide to plain English program evaluation cuts through this confusion to help those who do not regard themselves as evaluation experts, but who need to have a general understanding of what an evaluation might involve.

By focusing on the key aspects of evaluation planning and design, using a consistent and easy-to-follow example, Dana provides an invaluable resource. Even 'experts' in evaluation will find this a refreshing overview of the evaluation process; those who are not 'experts' even more so!

Contents

- 1 What is program evaluation?...p3**
- 2 Understanding which programs to evaluate...p8**
- 3 When is the best time for program evaluation?...p12**
- 4 Program theory and program logic: articulating how your program works...p17**
- 5 Types of program evaluation...p21**
- 6 Tools for planning program evaluation
A: Evaluation framework...p24**
- 7 Tools for planning program evaluation
B: Evaluation plan...p26**
- 8 How is your program going... really?
Performance monitoring....p29**
- 9 Communicating your program evaluation
findings effectively...p33**
- 10 Breaking bad news...p35**
- 11 Putting improvements into practice...p37**

1. What is program evaluation?



As program managers, we all know the importance of program evaluation to the successful governance and performance of our programs, not just so we can understand whether our program has achieved its objectives, but so we also know what's working, and what isn't.

But for many of us, the art of program evaluation can seem a bit of a mystery. What is it? More importantly, how do I do it well?

Welcome to Grosvenor Management Consulting's 11-step guide to program evaluation.

When we first started learning about program evaluation, we found the guidance material overly complicated and highly academic. While we understand that there is a place for this more detailed guidance, we felt an easy to read and understand guide written in plain English was missing and that we were well placed to develop one!

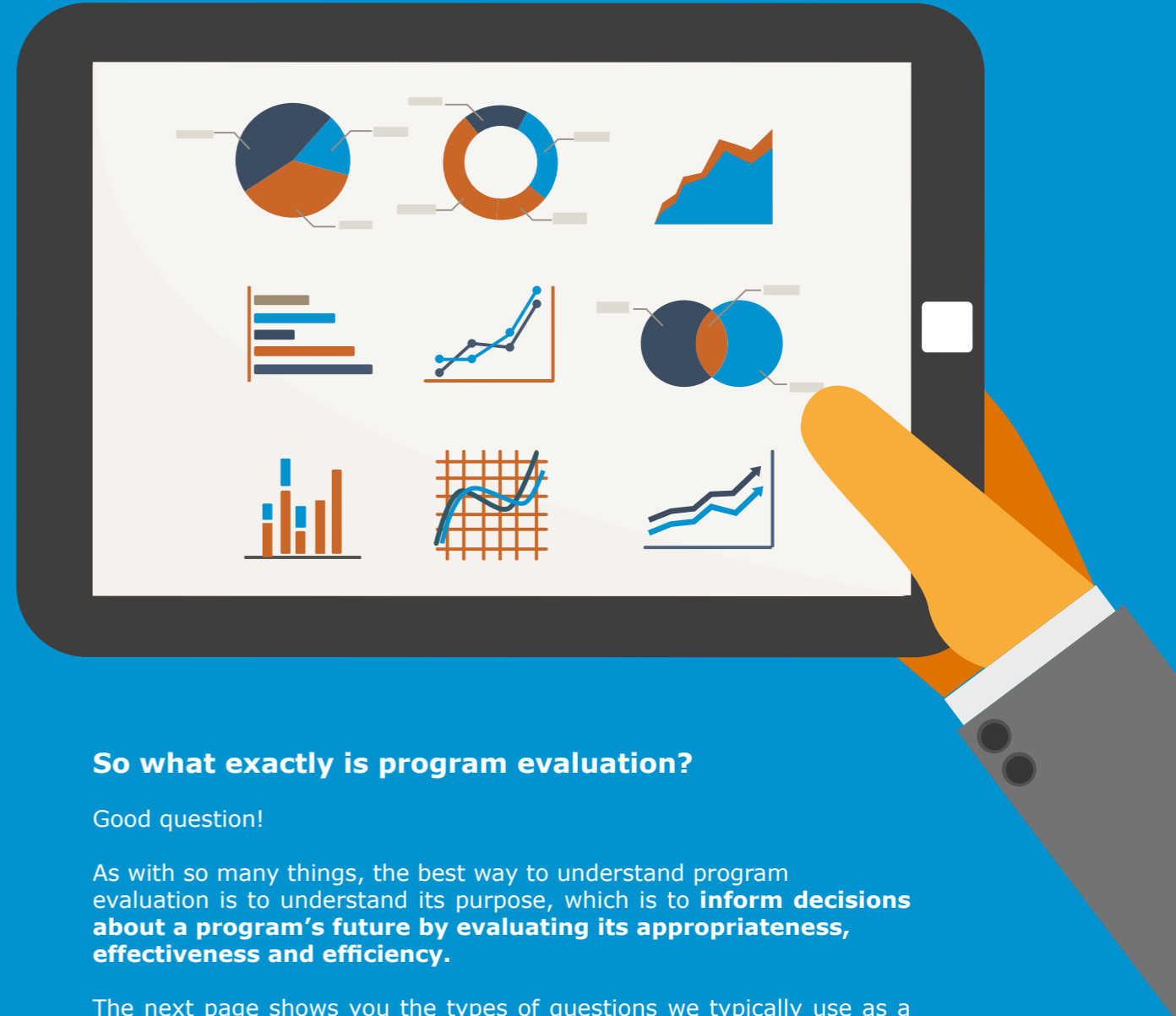
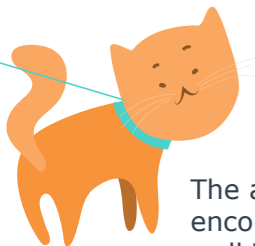
This eBook will help you understand and apply some of the most credible, tried-and-tested program evaluation practices available.

"Cats on Leads": a program evaluation case study.

In this eBook we'll be looking at a fictional program evaluation case study: "Cats on Leads". The Cats on Leads program gives Australia's cat owners access to a training regime which teach their cats to walk on leads. (OK, we did say this was fictional!)

The aim of the program is to reduce the impact of cats on our native wildlife: it encourages owners to house their cats indoors, and give them outdoor exercise by walking them on a lead.

Sounds crazy? Or are you thinking that you've seen crazier programs come out of Canberra before? Of course, Cats on Leads is a fictional example, but we hope that it will provide a practical, easy to understand insight into how program evaluation works.



So what exactly is program evaluation?

Good question!

As with so many things, the best way to understand program evaluation is to understand its purpose, which is to **inform decisions about a program's future by evaluating its appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency.**

The next page shows you the types of questions we typically use as a starting point.

Example: Cats on Leads: creating key questions

Figure 1 can be best understood using our Cats on Leads case study. Here's how:

Is the program a good fit for the problem in hand?

The Cats on Leads program is based on a few key assumptions, namely:

- ➔ Cats who spend time outside kill native wildlife
- ➔ Killing native wildlife is bad
- ➔ Indoor cats require at least some time outside.

If you wanted to verify these assumptions, you could ask some or all of the following questions:

- ➔ Do cats actually kill native wildlife?
- ➔ What is the impact of outdoor domestic cats on Australia's ecology?
- ➔ What proportion of cat owners allow their cats outside?
- ➔ Do all domestic cats require time outside?

Is the program working?

To understand whether or not the program is working, you could ask some or all of the following questions:

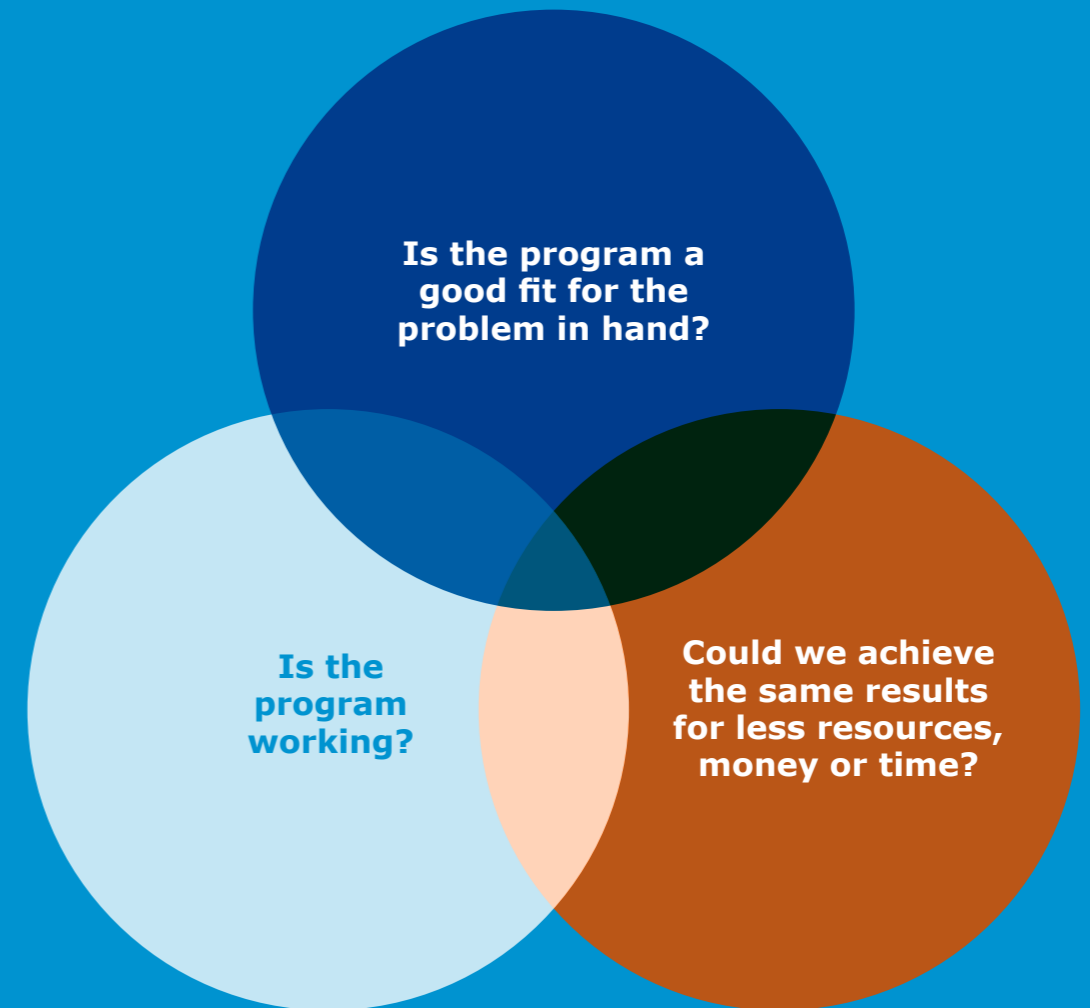
- ➔ What proportion of cats can be trained to walk on leads?
- ➔ What proportion of enrolments are from owners of "outdoor" cats?
- ➔ Have outdoor cat owners reduced their cat's unsupervised outdoor time as a result of the program? If so, by how much?
- ➔ Does restricting unsupervised outdoor time of cats reduce the amount of native wildlife killed?

Could we achieve the same results for less resources, money or time?

- ➔ To understand the efficiency of the project you could ask some or all of the following questions:
What are the success factors for:
 - ➔ Cats walking on leads?
 - ➔ Cat owners reducing or eliminating unsupervised outdoor time for their cats?
- ➔ Can the results be replicated more quickly or with less expenditure?
- ➔ What improvement opportunities are there?



Figure 1. Key questions to determine a program's appropriateness, efficiency and effectiveness



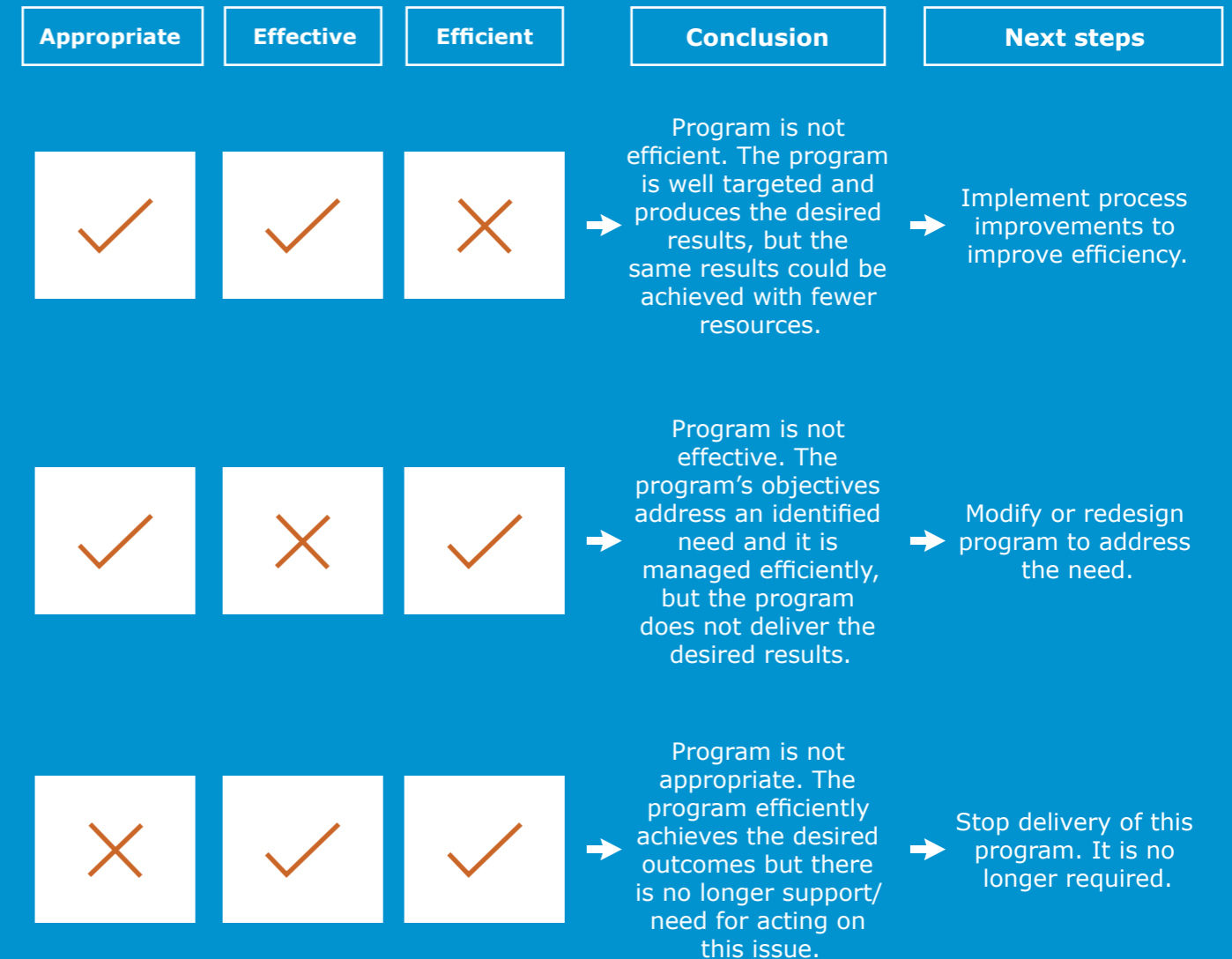
What is program evaluation used for?

Program evaluation – and the questions in Figure 1 – can help you make some of program management’s most important decisions, such as:

- ➔ Should the program continue?
- ➔ Are there any changes that can be made to improve the program?

Figure 2 shows how program evaluation is used by decision-makers when making tough decisions about the future of a program:

Figure 2. Using appropriateness, effectiveness and efficiency in program decision-making



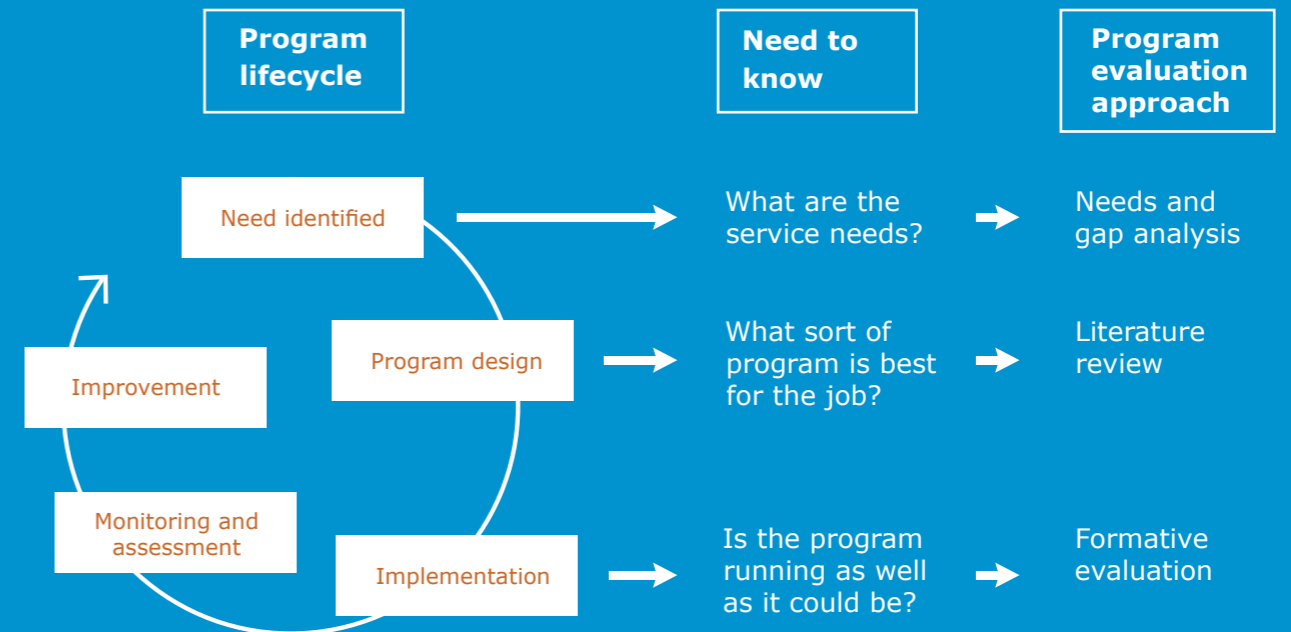
When should I be using program evaluation?

You can use program evaluation at many different stages of the program lifecycle, whenever you need to make significant decisions. To the right are some examples of the different program evaluation approaches and when they can be used.

In a nutshell

Put simply, program evaluation helps you assess the effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness of a program, to inform evidence-based decision-making about its future. Program evaluation uses a range of different approaches and can be undertaken at any stage of a program's lifecycle.

Figure 3. Program evaluation approaches at different stages of the program lifecycle



2. Understanding which programs to evaluate

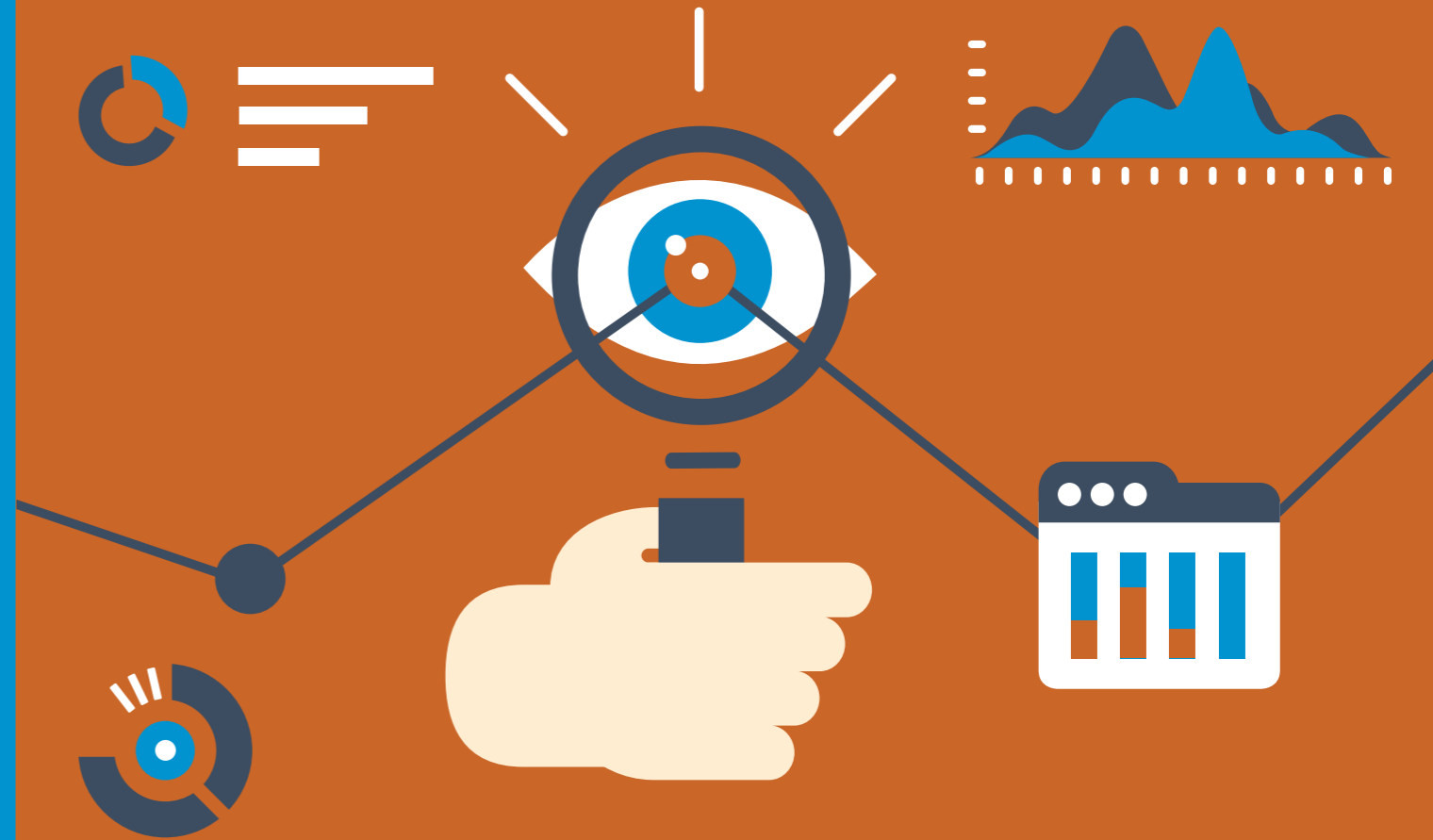


Figure 4. Sample needs assessment framework

While all programs should have some form of evaluation in place, sometimes it can be hard to identify which programs would benefit the most from program evaluation.

This chapter will help you to:

- ➔ Make the most of your program evaluation resources
- ➔ Plan your program evaluation priorities
- ➔ Identify program evaluations which could be under- or over-funded
- ➔ Get more value from program evaluation results.

Introducing the needs assessment framework

In program evaluation we often use a needs assessment framework to understand the extent of evaluation that a specific program needs.

This framework uses five key factors to help make decisions about prioritising and resourcing programs for evaluation -- see opposite for an example.

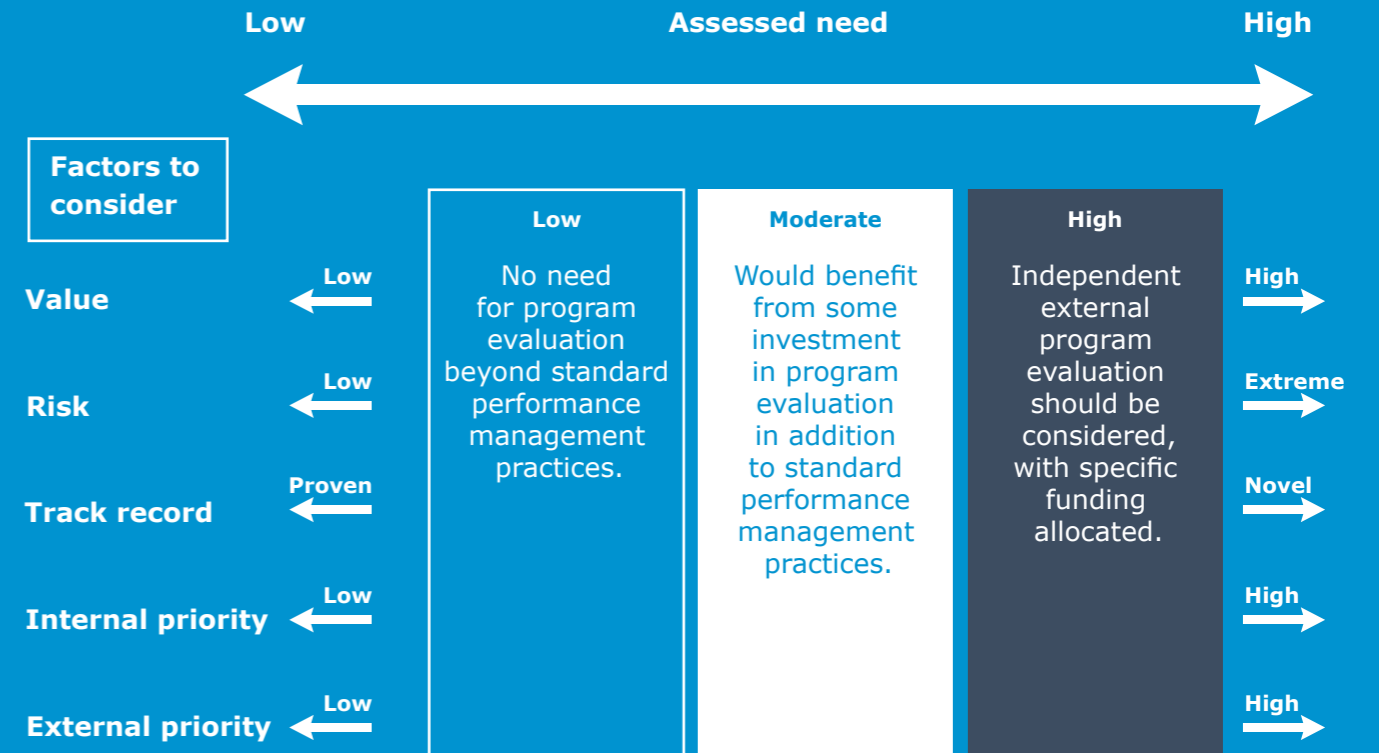


Figure 5. Definitions of needs assessment factors

Value	Risk	Track record	Internal priority level	External priority level
<p>The total value of the program relative to other, similar programs.</p>	<p>The overall risk rating of the program.</p>	<p>Considers the extent to which the program approach is proven to work (i.e. strength of the evidence base).</p>	<p>Considers the strategic importance of the program to organisational goals.</p>	<p>Considers the attitudes of key external stakeholders in relation to the program.</p>
<p>Provides a measure of the scale of the program relative to others in the organisation.</p>	<p>Increasing the scale of monitoring and evaluation is indicated for higher risk programs, as doing so can mitigate risk.</p>	<p>If the program is well tested and known to work there is less of a need to conduct evaluation beyond standard performance management, while novel programs require more evaluation to understand if the program is efficient, effective and appropriate.</p>	<p>Programs which are of high importance, internally or externally, have a higher level of scrutiny. Evaluation can contribute to enhanced monitoring and assessment of the program to fulfil these needs.</p>	

Using the framework

Simply assess and rank the programs you are evaluating using the five factors outlined above.

Example: Cats on Leads

Figure 7 shows us how to use the framework to allocate your program evaluation resources. In this instance, assume Cats on Leads is one of many programs that you manage. You only have limited evaluation resources and need to assess which program would benefit the most from program evaluation.

In this example, Cats on Leads is Program C.

Figure 6 provides some more information about the program, which we have used to make the assessment.

What the framework tells us

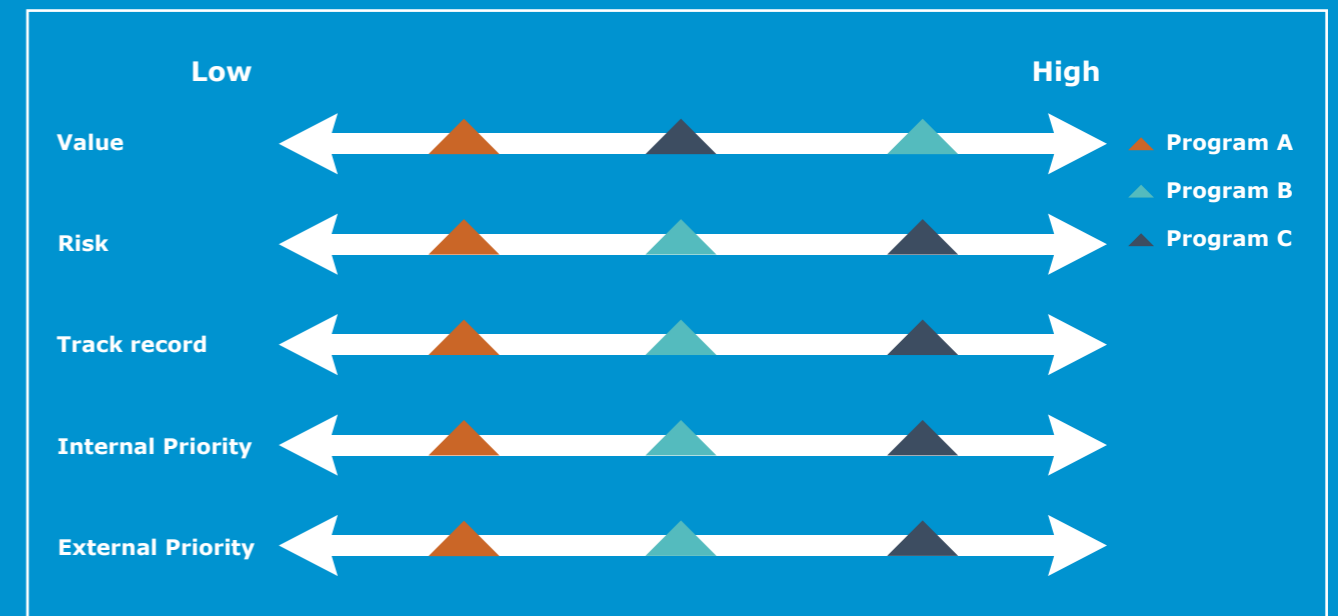
You can see how the framework tells us at a glance that Cats on Leads would benefit from a good chunk of your program evaluation resources. Relative to the other programs, it's the highest ranked across four of the five factors. Program B, on the other hand, only shows a moderate need (meaning it might need a small amount of program evaluation support) and Program A shows a considerably lower need.

This exercise shows how a simple needs assessment framework can enormously simplify the hard decision-making task to identify where your program evaluation efforts should be directed. What's more, this framework works just as well for individual program managers as it does for agency-based evaluation planning and resource allocation.

Figure 6. Cats on Leads evaluation factors

Factors to consider		Assessed need
Value	\$45 million	Medium
Risk	New program, lots of media attention	High
Track record	First of its kind, no examples of success on a national or formalised scale	High
Internal priority	Main program, directly supporting one of the key organisational goals	High
External priority	Election commitment, with backing of high-profile groups such as the RSPCA and a powerful environmental protection lobby	High

Figure 7. Sample evaluation framework for Cats on Leads.



3. When is the best time for program evaluation?



Once you have decided which program(s) you are going to evaluate, you'll need to consider the best time for your program evaluation.

This chapter explores some of the key factors you should consider when setting program evaluation timeframes, and identifies the lead times you will need, helping you set realistic and achievable timeframes for the evaluation of your program.

Key influences on timeframes

There are five key influences that you should consider when setting a timeframe for your program evaluation:

1. Decision-making timeframe
2. Existing governance arrangements
3. Project timeline
4. Availability of data
5. Evaluation lead times

1. Decision-making timeframe

As discussed in our first chapter, program evaluation is almost always driven by an upcoming decision about the future of a project. When does that decision need to be made?

When you're planning the timeframe for your program evaluation, this will almost always provide the first point of reference for your planning.

For instance, a decision will need to be made before the program's current end date for funding, meaning the evaluation report and recommendations regarding the program's effectiveness, efficiency and appropriateness would need to be available well in advance of this point to be of most use.

2. Existing governance arrangements

If your program has existing governance arrangements, these often provide key points (e.g. annual reports, scheduled reviews) at which the results of your program evaluation may be required.

3. Program timeline

As program manager, you will have probably already considered the timeline for your program at the planning stage. This would include factors such as:

- ➔ Length of implementation
- ➔ Anticipated uptake of the program by participants
- ➔ Length of the program
- ➔ Lead time for long-term objectives to be achieved.

You should consider all these factors when deciding the timeframes for your evaluations. For instance, a longer-term program may benefit from several evaluations over its lifespan, allowing you ample opportunity to implement the learnings from the evaluations.

4. Availability of data

What data will you need to perform your program evaluation? How will you collect it? How long will it take to collect? Depending on the data you need and the questions you are seeking to answer, there may be a significant time-lag before your data becomes available for analysis.

5. Evaluation lead times

Depending on what you need to evaluate, and how you choose to do it, program evaluation can take varying lengths of time. Let's look at some lead time guidelines on the next page.

How long should you allow?

There are a lot of factors to consider when you're planning your program evaluation lead time – not all of them within your control. Failing to plan thoroughly can compromise the quality of the evaluation or even result in non-delivery, so it's important to get it right.

Did you remember...?

Below is a checklist of program evaluation processes that are often forgotten or underestimated:

- ➔ Approvals processes (often multiple)
- ➔ Selecting / procuring an evaluator (if you're outsourcing)
- ➔ Data collection (can vary according to method, volume, distribution and levels of internal engagement)
- ➔ Data analysis
- ➔ Report drafting and proofing.

Sample timeframe

On the following page is an example timeframe for a program evaluation. This one needs to be completed by the end of November.

Of course, the timeframes for your program evaluation may vary from this, depending on the nature of your program and evaluation approach. But this should give you a frame of reference to start with.

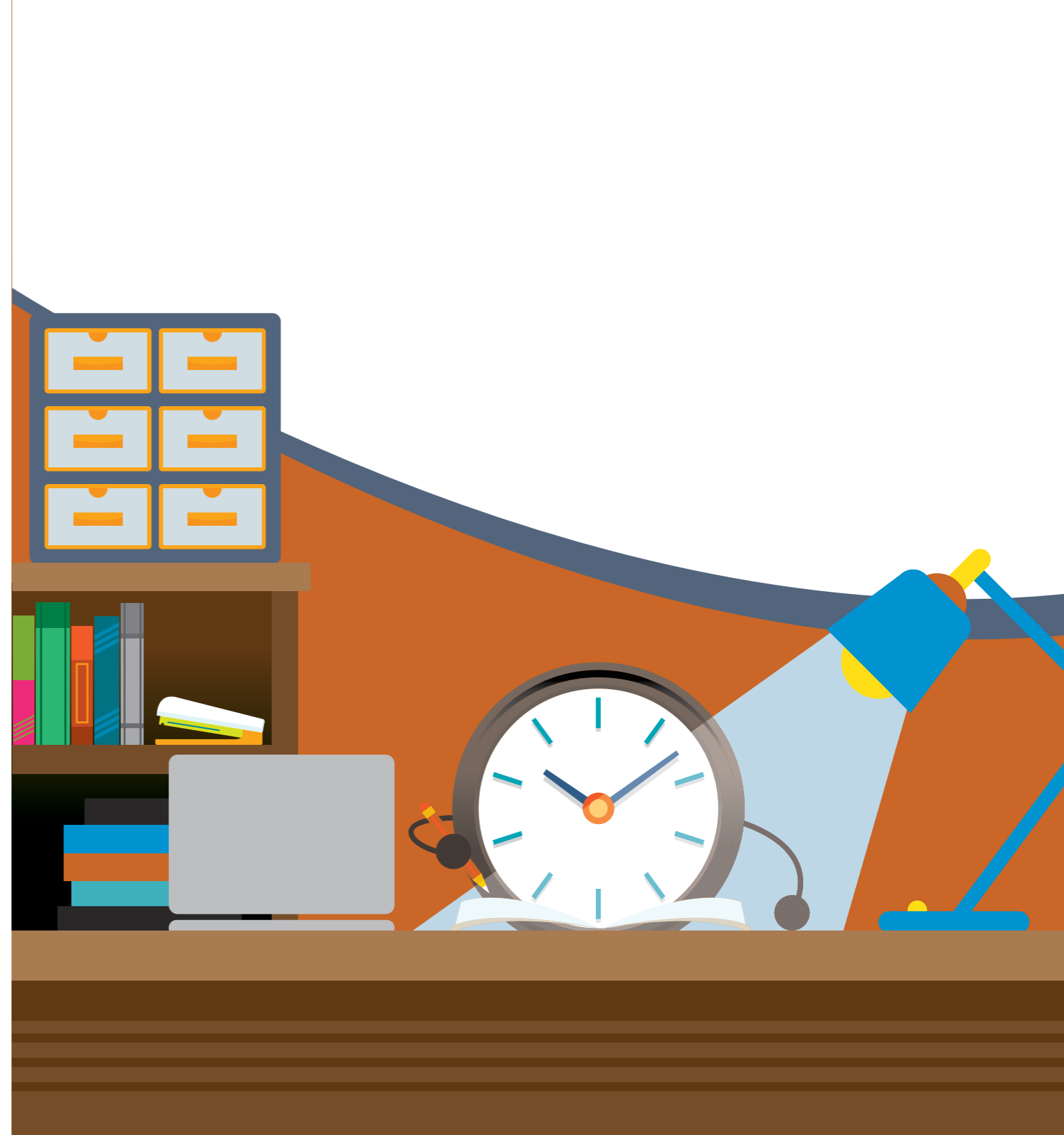
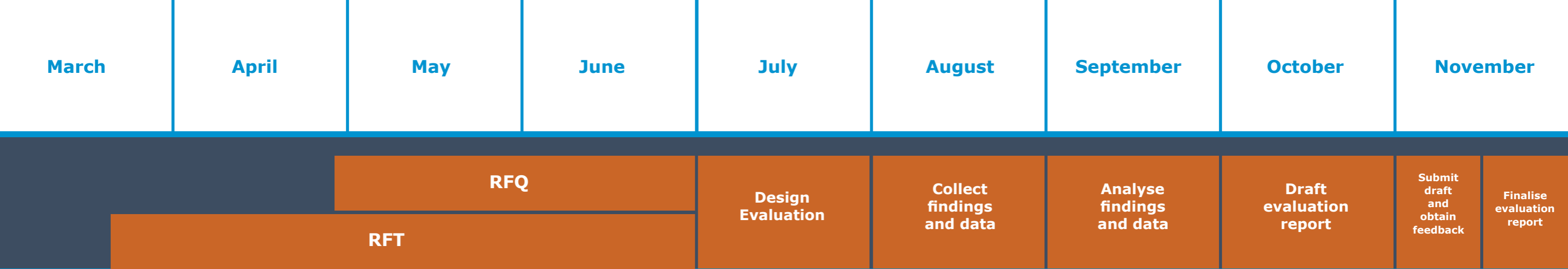
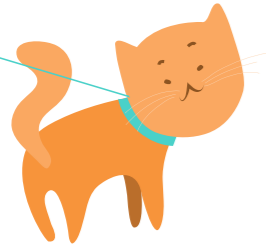


Figure 8. Sample program evaluation timeframe





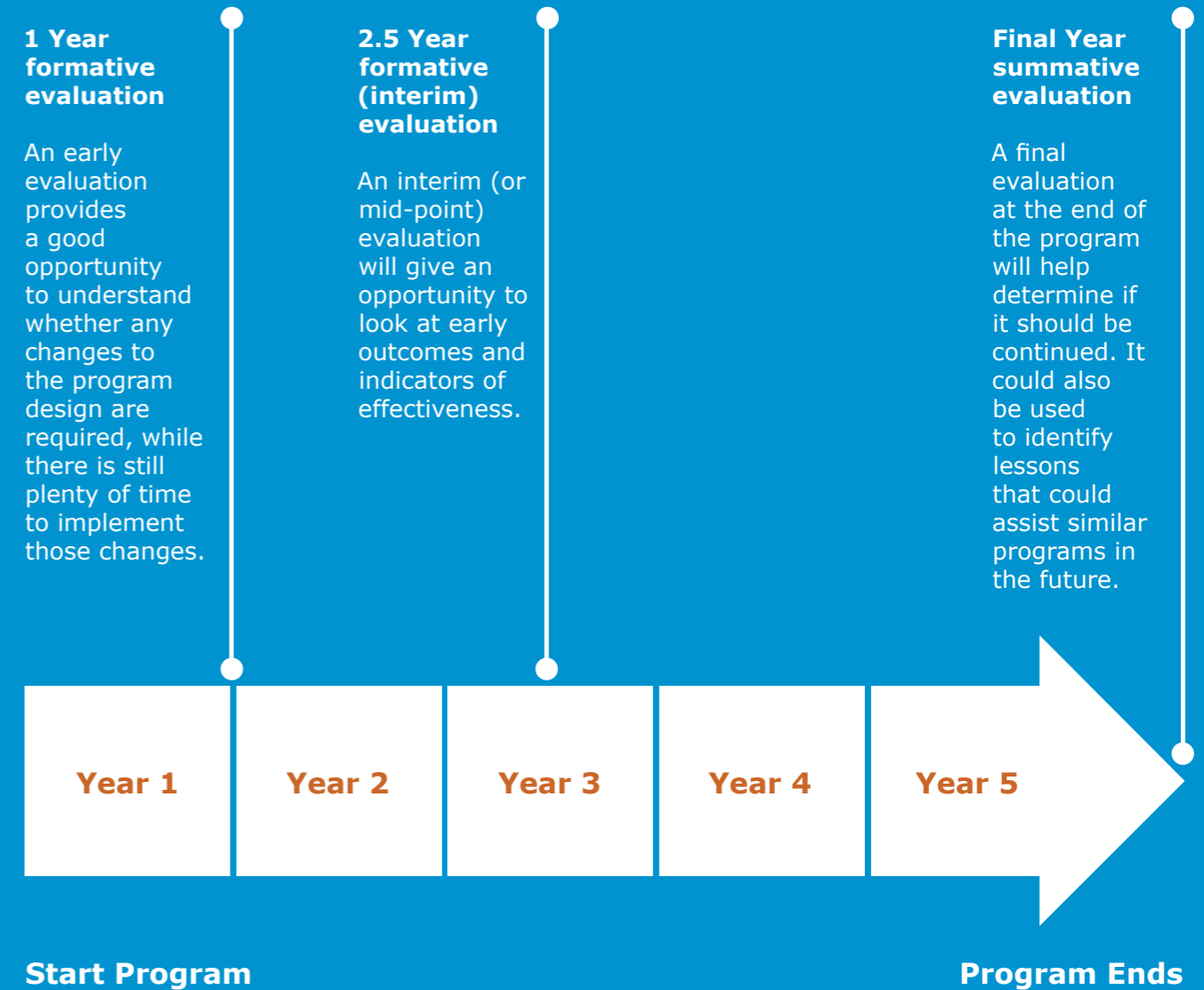
Example: Cats on Leads

In our Cats on Leads example, there are two main factors to consider for deciding when to evaluate:

- ➔ The program is the first of its kind, and
- ➔ The program will run over a relatively long time of five years.

Based on this, the evaluation schedule in Figure 9 is designed:

Figure 9. Cats on Leads evaluation schedule



4. Program theory and program logic: articulating how your program works



Have you ever noticed how hard it can be to articulate to others exactly what your program is for, and how it works? And how hard it can sometimes be to get internal buy-in and support as a result?

In this chapter, we show you how to develop a watertight program theory and program logic.

First things first: the benefits of having a program theory

Put simply, program theory is the way that you articulate the “why” and the “what” of your program: the reason for its existence, and the steps it will go through to accomplish its goal. It is a description of how the desired changes will occur, based on previous research and experience.

Here are seven reasons why a solid program theory is worth its weight in gold:

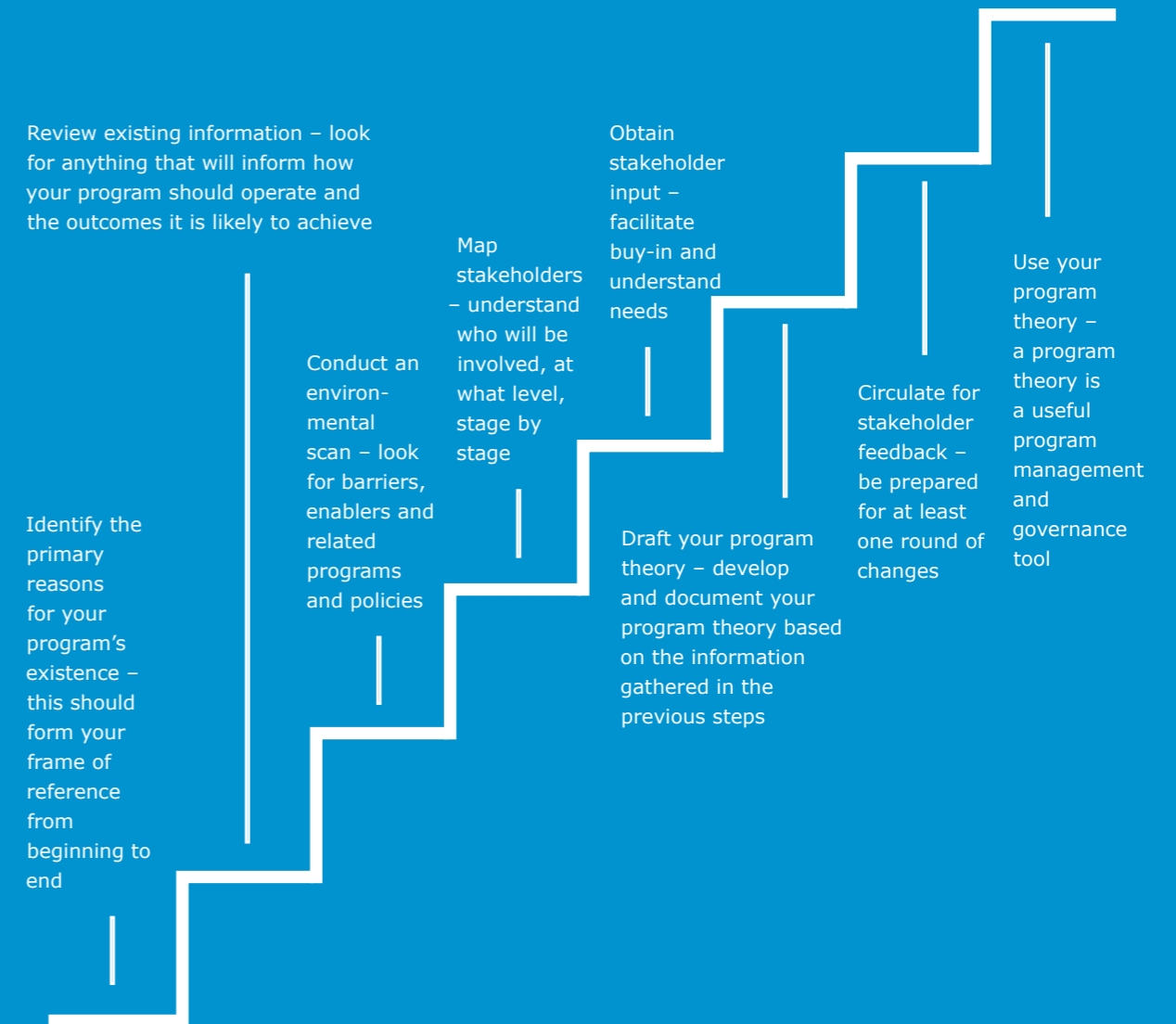
- 1 Creates a shared understanding of the program among stakeholders.
- 2 Provides an opportunity to refine and improve the program at the design stage.
- 3 Allows you to identify potential supporting and disrupting factors – and be prepared for them.
- 4 Provides a time-bounded roadmap, promoting shared expectations among stakeholders.
- 5 Provides an opportunity to pressure-test the beliefs and assumptions underlying the program.
- 6 Ensures the long-term goals are kept in sight while short-term goals are implemented.
- 7 Helps to identify suitable performance measures for the program.

How to develop a program theory

To the right is a list of the key activities typically involved in developing program theory.

If the list looks daunting, don't worry! You've probably already ticked off some of the stages in the early development of the program, or perhaps someone else in the organisation already has the information you need. In this case, just a short review and / or a workshop may well be sufficient.

Figure 10. Steps for developing a program theory



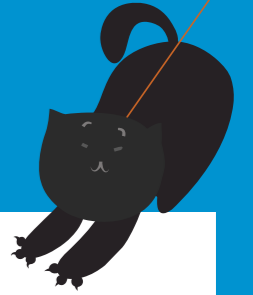


Figure 11. Sample program logic: table format

Resourcing your program theory appropriately

Program theories come in all shapes and sizes, so it's important that the effort expended in developing the theory is proportionate to the scale of the program itself. A smaller-scale program, for instance, would certainly merit less investment.

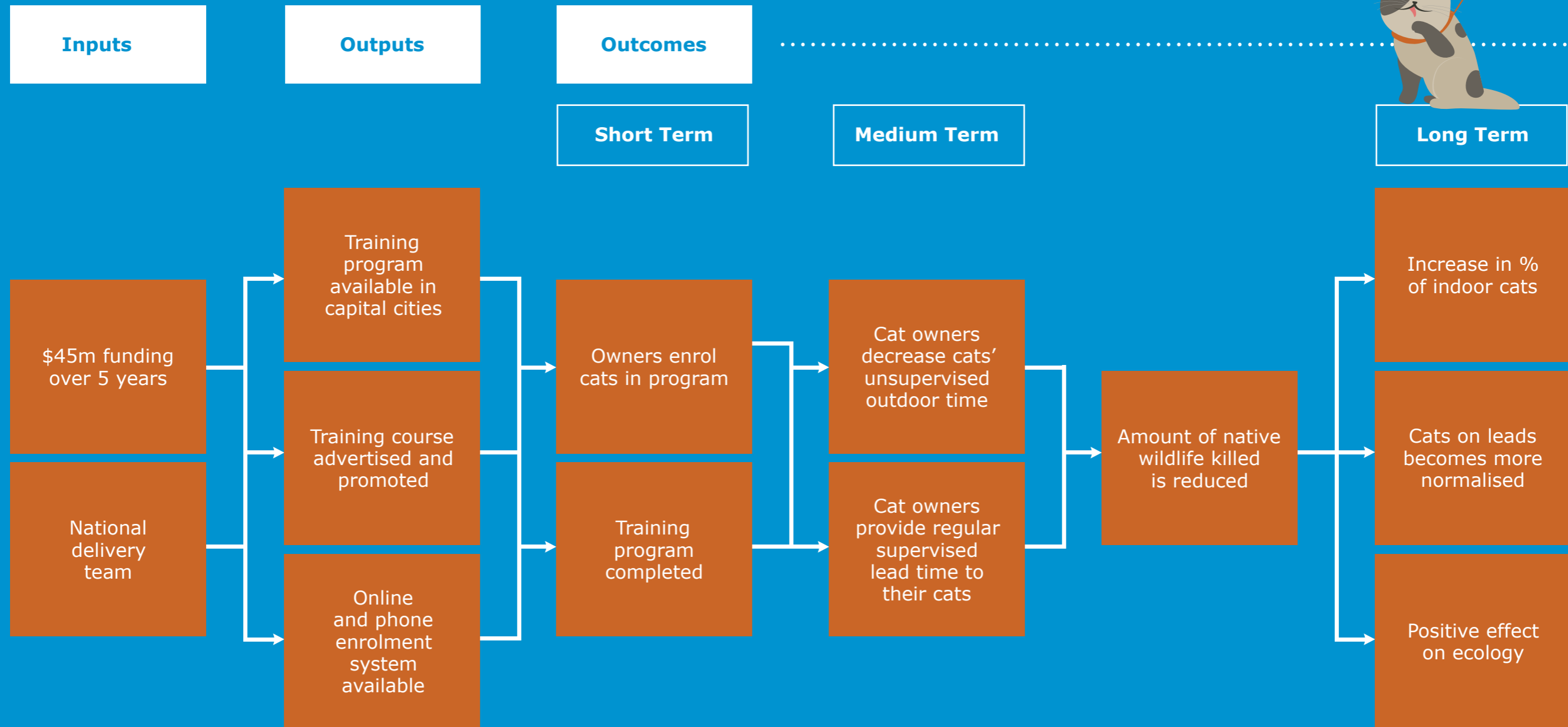
What? Program logic formats

Now you have captured the detail, you may like to sum up your program theory in the form of a program logic: this is simply a graphical portrayal of your theory that is succinct and easy to understand.

Your program logic can take the form of words, diagrams, tables, or a combination of all three. Program logics are often (but not always) captured in one page, and are typically divided into inputs, outputs and outcomes. See Figure 11 and Figure 12 for two very simple examples.

Inputs	Outputs	Outcomes		
		Short term (1 yr)	Medium term (2-4 yrs)	Long term (5 yrs +)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → \$45m funding over 5yrs → National delivery team 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Website and promotional materials → Enrolment and delivery ICT system → Training program → Trained trainers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Owners enrol cats → Training delivered → Cat owners and cats complete training course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Attendees decrease unsupervised outdoor time → Native wildlife killed is reduced → Owners provide regular supervised lead time to their cats 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> → Increased indoor cats → Cats on leads becomes normalised → Positive effects on ecology

Figure 12. Sample program logic: flowchart format



5. Types of program evaluation



Program evaluation can be confusing. Not only are there different types of program evaluation, but different people use different terms to mean different things – or the same thing! (As if there wasn't enough confusion already!)

Although evaluations often share a similar purpose - to inform decision-making about future program development, planning and delivery - they all differ in terms of what they cover and when they happen.

For simplicity, we're limiting this to two of the most common terms used to describe the many types of evaluations:

- ➔ Formative evaluation
- ➔ Summative evaluation.

Formative evaluation

Formative evaluation is typically conducted during the program period to improve or assess the program delivery or implementation. With a formative evaluation, you have the opportunity to apply your learnings as you go. The term formative evaluation can also refer to evaluation activities involving the design or development of a program. Figure 13 shows other terms which may be used to describe formative evaluation.

Summative evaluation

Typically occurs at the end of a program with a retrospective and holistic scope that assesses all program aspects including delivery, activities, impacts and outcomes. This form of evaluation helps make judgements of the program's overall success in terms of its:

- ➔ Effectiveness - were the intended outcomes achieved?
- ➔ Efficiency - were resources used cost-effectively?
- ➔ Appropriateness - was the program a suitable way to address the needs of the group targeted by the program?

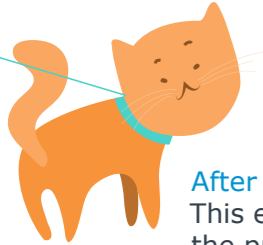
Figure 14 shows other terms which may be used to describe summative evaluation.

Figure 13. Types of formative evaluation



Which type do you need to consider?

This depends entirely on the objectives of your evaluation and the circumstances of your program. Many program managers find a combination of both works best for them.



Example: Cats on Leads program evaluation

As shown in Figure 9, Cats on Leads has three different evaluations planned.

After one year: formative evaluation

This evaluation is planned for the end of the first year, when implementation is complete and the program is fully operational. The purpose of the evaluation is to assess the program delivery and identify any opportunities for improvement early on in the program's life.

After 2.5 years: formative (interim) evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation is to assist in determining if the program should continue in its current form, or whether further adjustments are required.

End of program: summative evaluation

The purpose of the summative evaluation is to assess the overall success of the program and advise whether the program should be continued beyond its initial timeframe. Here the evaluation will seek to establish the impact the program has had, including whether it has performed to expectations.

Talking the same language

As you can see, there are different types of program evaluation and different terminologies to describe them. It will be up to you to choose the type of evaluation, based on your program management needs.

Whichever you choose, it's vital that the entire project team – internal and external – is aligned on the evaluation purpose, type, and terminology being used. This way you can ensure buy-in and manage expectations from the get-go.

Figure 14: Types of summative evaluation

outcome evaluation

impact evaluation

cost-benefit analysis

cost-effectiveness analysis

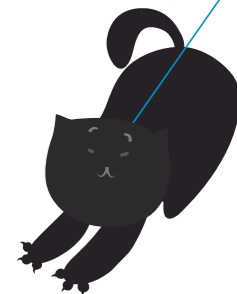
secondary analysis

meta analysis

return on investment assessment

6. Tools for planning program evaluation A: evaluation framework





There are hundreds of tools you can use for program evaluation. In this chapter we're going to focus on one of the most common and useful: evaluation frameworks.

(And because nothing is ever simple in program evaluation, you might also hear these referred to as "monitoring and evaluation frameworks", "reporting and improvement frameworks", "learning frameworks" or a combination of all three!)

What is an evaluation framework?

Put simply, an evaluation framework is **the overall approach to the evaluation of a program** (or policy, system or organisation) over a period of time. It's a macro picture of the program's evaluation activities and is typically developed at the beginning of a program. Here's how to do it:

1. Revisit the program's rationale

Confirming the rationale for the program with stakeholders ensures a common understanding and ensures you're all working towards the same outcomes.

2. Identify measures for program performance

Ask yourself: "How will I know if the program has been a success?" for each relevant stage of your program's evolution.

Next, think about how you can measure success: plan the data collection and reporting you'll need at each stage.

3. Document your plan as soon as the program starts

In order to effectively measure the impact of your program, it's important to plan your program evaluation from the outset. Considering questions such as "What will success look like in three years?" and "How will I know the program is on track to achieve success?" will help ensure your program is on track from the get-go.

4. Plan what you will measure and when

In order to plan when your program evaluation will happen, consider the key points when important decisions about the future of the program will be made. Refer to chapter 3 to plan your timeframes effectively.

Next, identify the questions that will need to be asked to support those decisions, remembering that each evaluation project should focus on providing insight into a particular aspect or aspects of the program.

Example: Cats on Leads evaluation framework

We've already discussed that there will be three evaluations over the five-year course of the Cats on Leads program.

In order to make sure these evaluations work well and work together, they all need to be planned upfront, with a second, more detailed planning phase just before each evaluation starts.

Here's how it's done:

- 1 The program theory for Cats on Leads is developed and designed as a program logic, with input from a series of workshops with key stakeholders
- 2 Key expectations are established, including 2,000 cat owners enrolled within one year of launch date, resulting in an overall 20% reduction in unsupervised outdoor time for enrolled cats.
- 3 The evaluation framework is established during the program design phase, ready for program commencement.
- 4 Data is collected throughout the course of the program. E.g.: an enrolment form captures the current outdoor/indoor time of cats. This data collection is repeated upon course completion and six months after the program completion.

7. Tools for planning program evaluation

B: evaluation plan



One of the most important tools you will come across in program evaluation is an evaluation plan. Put simply, an evaluation plan is the step-by-step project plan for a specific evaluation project. It identifies (in more detail than the evaluation framework) the what, when, who, why and how to complete the evaluation.

Evaluation plans are typically developed at the beginning of an evaluation. Here's how to create one:

Articulate the reason for the evaluation

What do you expect your program evaluation to achieve? What is it not going to do? Articulating your evaluation's raison d'être helps to ensure the evaluation project is correctly focussed and delivers on stakeholder needs.

Allocate resources and budget

The resources and budget you have available will influence the scope of your evaluation; it's important to get this agreed from the outset.

Identify information needs

Go back to the reason for the evaluation. What information do you need to address the evaluation's purpose? Consider:

- ➔ What documentation needs to be reviewed
- ➔ What data will be analysed
- ➔ Which stakeholders will be consulted
- ➔ The topics that need to be researched and understood.

For ease of planning, group the project's information needs into those that are already available and those that need to be specifically collected during the project.

Specify project deliverables

Determine what documentation and deliverables the project will produce.

Examples of potential deliverables are:

- ➔ Final project report
- ➔ Findings and recommendations presentation
- ➔ Revised program logic
- ➔ Revised monitoring and reporting templates/tools.

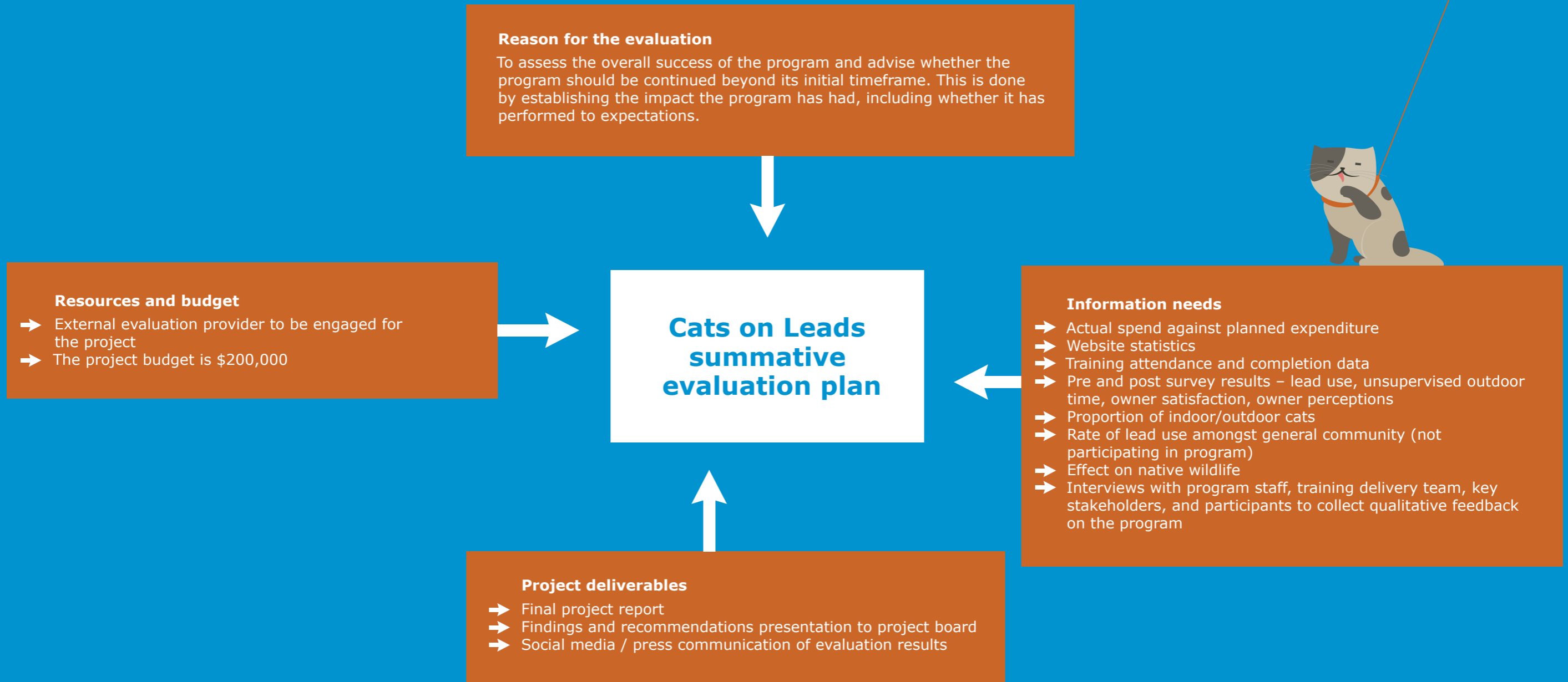
Consider the immediate program needs, as well as future applications of the learnings.

Design your evaluation approach

Once you've done your research it's time to design your evaluation approach. This involves articulating the entire process of your program evaluation, taking into account what you already know about the reason for the evaluation, resources and budget available, information needs and project deliverables.

Last of all, don't forget to plan how you will achieve stakeholder buy-in and communicate the results and recommendations to those who need to know.

Figure 15. Example inputs for the Cats on Leads summative evaluation plan



**8. How is your
program going...
really?
Performance
monitoring**



Monitoring and managing the performance of a program is an integral part of program management. This chapter helps you identify the factors you need to consider when developing a performance management framework.

Performance monitoring

When we talk about performance monitoring we're referring to the continuous, systematic collection of data. Done well, this gives you an ongoing indication of how well your program is doing.

Performance monitoring helps you to:

- ➔ Track progress against the program's aims and objectives
- ➔ Ensure the program delivers the intended outcomes
- ➔ Account for the efficient and effective use of funding
- ➔ Identify improvement opportunities.

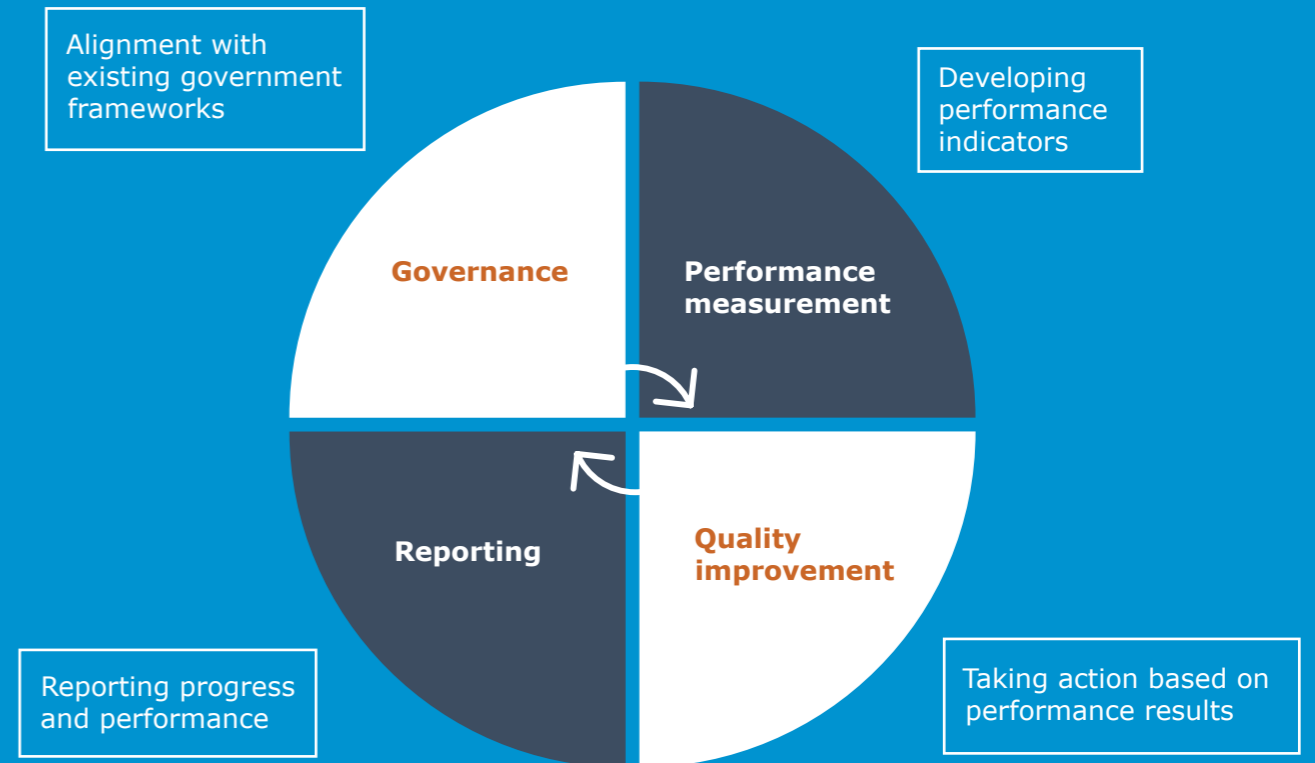
Ongoing monitoring will help you to identify any areas not performing to expectations, and determine whether any adjustments to the program are required.

Performance management framework

Establishing a solid performance management framework (one that's closely aligned with the organisation's strategic goals, and is rigorous and transparent) will help you to monitor the performance of your program where and when you need it.

Performance management frameworks should consider: governance, performance measurement, quality improvement and reporting.

Figure 16. Performance management framework considerations



Considerations for developing a framework

Governance

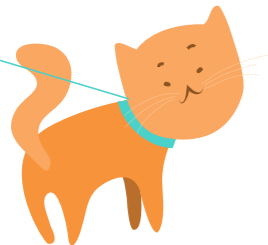
Your organisation's existing governance mechanisms provide a good starting point when establishing performance monitoring for a specific program. Start by reviewing existing governance arrangements (this may be all that is required for some programs) then look to align your program with them, and / or develop additional governance mechanisms. Make sure you're aware of any existing governance arrangements such as:

- ➔ Executive management groups
- ➔ Personnel reporting relationships
- ➔ Financial reporting and annual reports
- ➔ Steering committees and advisory groups
- ➔ Contractual or grant reporting requirements
- ➔ Role descriptions and accountabilities for specific programs.

Example: Cats on Leads program

- ➔ Agency has quarterly executive meetings at which each program needs to report
- ➔ Program manager needs reporting on a minimum monthly basis.

Therefore, monthly reports are the most suitable reporting frequency for this program.



Performance measurement

Successful performance measurement is all about developing and using performance measures that are appropriate to your organisation and program. Key performance indicators (KPIs) are a great place to start.

Here's how:

Ask yourself: what aspects of the program need to be measured? (Hint: your program theory provides a good starting point.) Don't forget to focus on the outcomes expected as well as the activities that are delivered.

Ensure every KPI is:

- ➔ Well-defined, relevant and informative: does it tell you something important about how the program is performing?
- ➔ Something that can be influenced by the program: avoid performance measures that can be heavily influenced by outside factors
- ➔ Based on data that is available and cost-effective
- ➔ Comparable with a benchmark or previous results: you will need a comparable starting point in order to track whether you're improving.

Example KPIs: Cats on Leads program

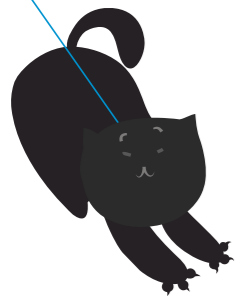
- ➔ Actual spend against planned expenditure
- ➔ % of enrolment target met
- ➔ % of enrolments completing training
- ➔ Owner satisfaction with quality of training: net promoter scores.

Quality improvement

Creating a performance management framework involves not only generating performance information, but also using this information in decision-making. This includes identifying performance that does not meet expectations, and acting on opportunities to improve.

Example: Cats on Leads program

To tie in with the quarterly executive meetings, it is decided that a quarterly improvement cycle will be used. Each quarter the program team holds a half-day workshop to assess results and identify and plan improvements for the next quarter.



Reporting

Reporting the progress and performance of a program involves documenting how well the program's objectives are being met, and sharing this information through appropriate feedback and governance channels.

Reporting should provide sufficient detail to inform decision-making, without going into information overload.

In order to provide an accurate picture of the program's performance, your data should always be credible, impartial and relevant.

It's important to select the right reporting format for the group that will be reading it. Here's what you need to consider in order to get this right:

- ➔ Who needs to be aware of the results?
- ➔ What results do they need to know about?
- ➔ How often does the data need to be reported?
- ➔ What's the best way to communicate the results?

Example: Cats on Leads program

A range of program management reports are set up to be run monthly, along with a quarterly summary report designed for the executive team.



9. Communicating your program evaluation findings effectively



For most of us (even the most seasoned program managers!), writing program evaluation reports can be a daunting task. In this chapter we look at the three main challenges most report writers face, and how to overcome them.

Challenge 1: writing for a broad distribution network

The usual report-writing mantra of keeping the audience in mind applies equally to program evaluation reports. The problem is that the intended audience for program evaluation reports is often very wide. Here's how to overcome that:

Confirm your audience early on

Not only will this influence the report's language and content, but may also influence the evaluation approach, stakeholder engagement and data collection. If your audience is unusually diverse, you might need different reporting methods to suit their needs.

Identify sensitivities, privacy and confidentiality requirements

The sensitivity of information and privacy and confidentiality requirements may shape the distribution of your report, or require you to produce different versions for different audiences.

Challenge 2: the tricky matter of the 'findings' section

Evaluation reports tend to follow a classic report structure of executive summary, introduction, approach, findings and conclusions, followed by recommendations.

Sounds easy enough, right? And for many program managers it is: until you get to the findings section. Many of us are tempted to structure our findings section around our key evaluation questions, leading readers to expect conclusions (or come to their own) too early.

Here's what to do instead:

- 1 Organise the information into discrete topics and themes
- 2 Order the topics logically and group them using headings and subheadings
- 3 Be ruthless: consider the purpose of the report and exclude any information which is not 100% relevant

- 4 Interpret the information in a way that answers the overarching reasons for conducting the evaluation
- 5 Save your key evaluation questions for the conclusions section: it's a neat way to wrap up and ensures that the report addresses each of the key questions

Challenge 3. Sharing the results

Many program managers forget this penultimate part of the program evaluation journey. And it can be hard to ensure the right amount of coverage for your findings while managing organisational sensitivities.

Here's how to do it:

Use your organisation's existing channels to share evaluation results externally and internally. Publishing an evaluation report on your organisation's existing website is one of the easiest ways to share the report with others. Bring attention to the publication by engaging through social media sites such as Twitter and LinkedIn.

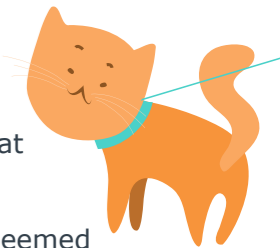
Remember that you may need to produce the report in different lengths and formats to suit different audiences. Possible formats include summary reports, infographics and multimedia. You will also need to take precautions to ensure ethics, privacy, confidentiality and organisational or political sensitivities are suitably handled.

Example: Cats on Leads program

As Cats on Leads is the first program of its type it is agreed that it is important to share the learnings and invite discussion of the results. Because of this it is decided that each evaluation report will be made publically available.

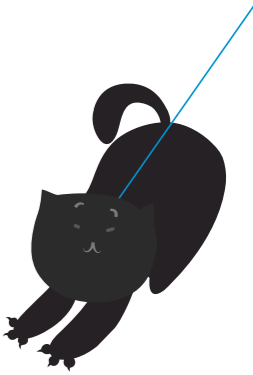
Each report is risk-assessed prior to publication, and a summary report is developed if deemed necessary for sensitivity, privacy or confidentiality reasons.

Cats on Leads is now at its midpoint and has been wildly successful so far! (In fact, if you're not on a lead, you're not a cool cat.) The program manager creates a communication plan to share the results, including engaging with social media and online "light news" channels, as well as more traditional channels (the conference circuit, other internal governance peer networks) to promote the program.



10. Breaking bad news





By their nature, program evaluations seek to determine if a program is working. Which means that, in reality, the answers are not always going to be positive.

So how do you deliver bad news without ruffling feathers or watering down the truth?

Here's what to do when your evaluation results don't meet expectations.

1 Create openness to all results – positive or negative

Start the discussion of possible results at the very beginning of a project. Just raising the possibility of both positive and negative results can begin to create an environment of openness and acceptance of the possible outcome.

2 Keep everyone informed from the get-go

Bad news should never come as a surprise. The final report should never, ever be the first time a manager hears about their program's underperformance. Keep the entire project team and management well-informed throughout the project, ensuring you provide sufficient opportunities for findings to be digested and responded to.

3 Frame under performance as an opportunity, not a failure

Less-than-positive results are opportunities for improvement. Frame them as such where possible. Be thoughtful in your use of language and how you pitch solutions.

4 Celebrate success

It is important to document what the program has achieved – even the small things. What worked well? Celebrate the successes to provide balance and context to overall performance.

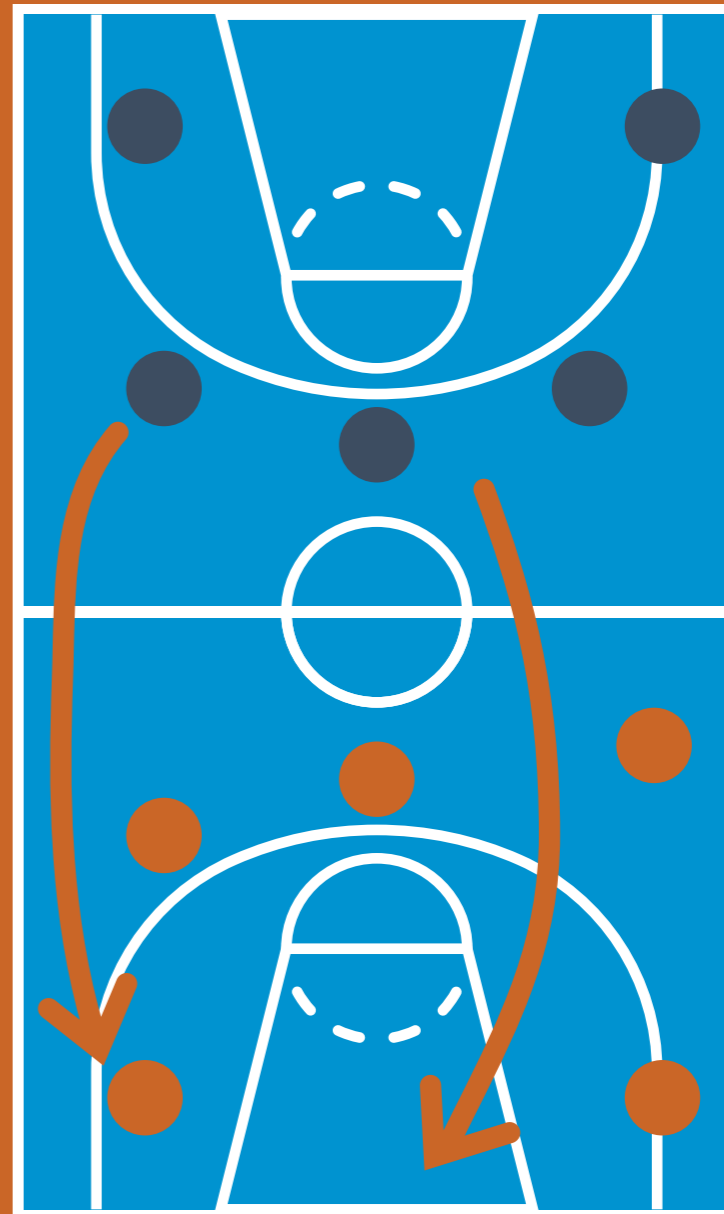
Example: Cats on Leads

At the 2.5 year midpoint evaluation, it transpires that while the program is extremely popular overall, there are two small areas which need improvement:

- 1 While the website has received plenty of visits, there have been a slightly lower-than-expected number of sign-ups to the training.
- 2 There have been a couple of issues with cats fighting and escaping during the training programs, which has led to an unexpectedly high dropout rate!

Luckily, you've prepared the project team for the potential evaluation outcomes from the outset, and you've framed the negative feedback in the context of the many good findings about the program. So the findings are seen as a constructive opportunity for improvement, rather than a failure, and the feedback is met with good spirit overall.

11. Putting improvements into practice



You've done all the hard work: you've planned your program evaluation, undertaken the evaluation and written your report. Now it's time to action the improvements you've identified. This chapter shares practical tips for the best way to do this.

1. Prioritise improvements

While a program evaluation generally throws up multiple improvement opportunities, not all will be equally important. A great way to prioritise recommendations is to rank them according to:

- ➔ The impact the recommendation will have
- ➔ The risks involved
- ➔ The level of effort/cost.

The decision-making matrix in Figure 17 is a handy way of deciding which improvements need to be tackled first.

2. Plan the approach

You will need to develop an appropriate plan for actioning each recommendation that you choose to take forward. Make sure you scope any constraints and risk-assess any possible fall-outs beforehand.

3. Assess resourcing requirements

Can the improvements be undertaken with existing resources and budgets, or will you need additional resources or expertise? If it's the latter, changes to resourcing allocation, recruitment or procurement may be needed.

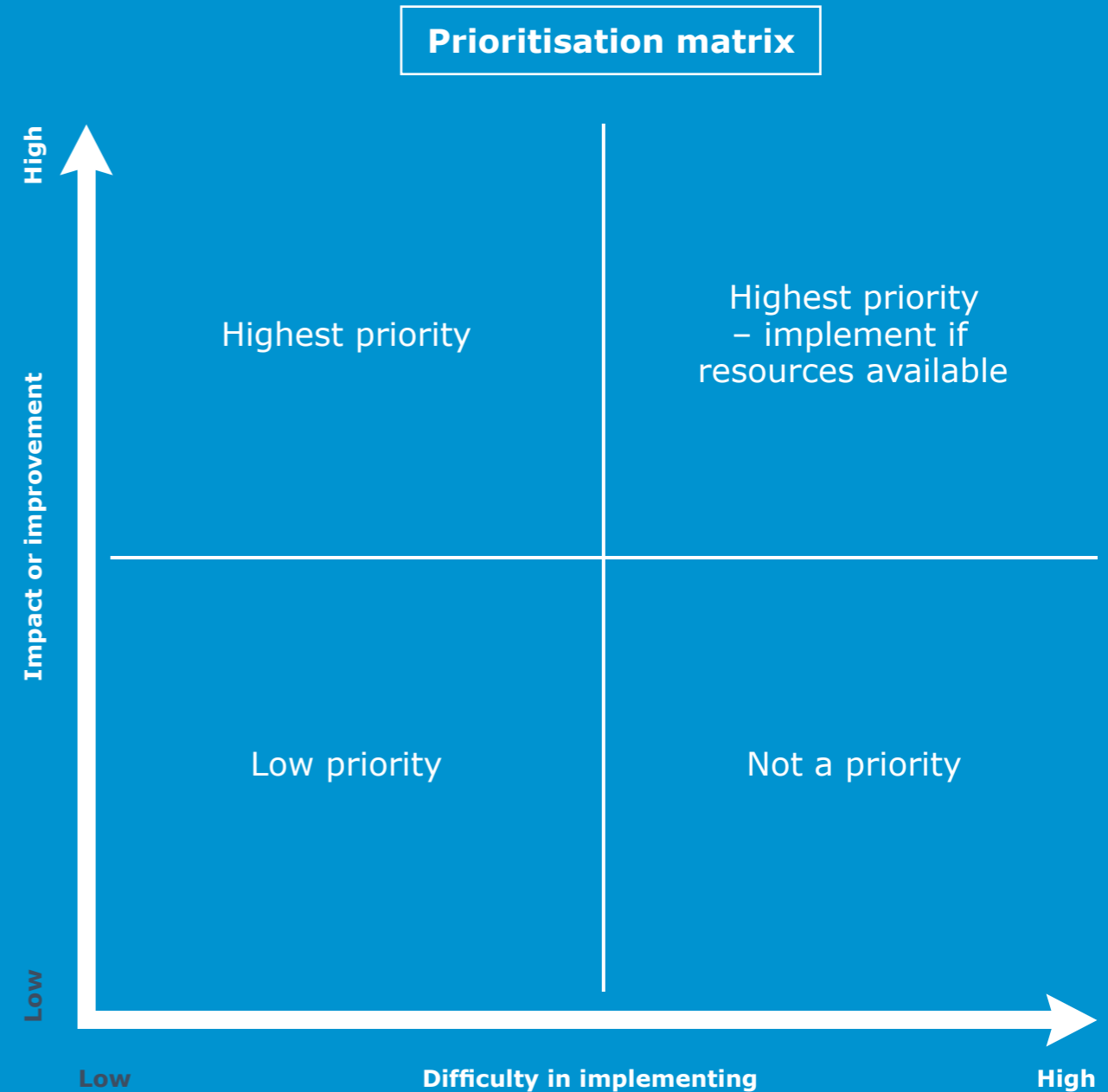
4. Set timeframes

Set realistic goals for the commencement and completion of each task.

5. Assign responsibility

Task individuals with responsibility for implementing each activity. Ensure your task allocation reflects the roles, skills and responsibilities of the individuals involved.

Figure 17. Example of a decision-making matrix



6. Monitor implementation

Just when you thought you were done with program evaluation, here's another place where you need to measure success! Ensure implementation plain-sailing by monitoring progress and reporting on it regularly. This could involve short-term monitoring activities, or form part of the program's broader monitoring and reporting regime.



Example: Cats on Leads

The three improvement priorities for the 2.5 year midpoint evaluation are identified as:

- ➔ Simplifying the website enrolment form, improving the calls-to-action
- ➔ Offering more flexible hours of training to increase the number of signups
- ➔ Changing the type of harness to reduce cat fights and escapes.

A detailed project plan and timeline are created for implementation of these initiatives, and extra resources are allocated for their implementation. It is agreed to review the impact of these changes in six months' time, in addition to the scheduled five-year summative evaluation.

You're there!

This eBook has taken you through the nuts and bolts of program evaluation, given you some tools to help, and shared with you the weird and wonderful world of Cats on Leads.

We hope you have found this eBook helpful in planning, implementing and realising value from your program evaluations.

Grosvenor Management Consulting:

The program evaluation experts

Grosvenor Management Consulting are program evaluation experts with extensive experience in government and not-for-profit sectors.

Meet our program evaluation specialist



Dana Cross, Senior Manager
BA, BSc

If you would like to talk through any aspect of program evaluation, contact Dana Cross, senior program evaluator and leader of Grosvenor's program evaluation practice.

Email: danacross@grosvenor.com.au

Phone: +61 2 6274 9200