

Review of Voluntary Sector Organisations (Community Learning and Development)

**Evaluation Support Scotland
9 August 2011**

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1. Introduction

In May 2011, Scottish Government (SG) selected the organisations to visit and commissioned HM Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) to undertake a review of Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS). HMIE and SG agreed the quality and performance indicators to be used in the review from the framework of indicators within the HMIE publication *How Good Is Our Community Learning and Development?* (HGIOCLD?).

The scoping and fieldwork for the review took place in May 2011. HM Inspectors visited stakeholder organisations in Edinburgh and Glasgow. They interviewed stakeholders, members of staff, the Director of ESS and members of the Board of Trustees. They also carried out telephone interviews and distributed questionnaires to gather the views of other stakeholders.

2. Context and background

ESS is a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. It receives funding from the SG and generates income through delivery of training and support programmes. It was established in 2005, following research on the voluntary sector's need for an evaluation support service. Its core purpose is to work with voluntary organisations and funders so that they can measure their impact, report on the difference they make and improve their services. ESS is based in Edinburgh. The Director is managed by a Board of Trustees which agrees the vision and strategy. The Board employs eight members of staff including the Director.

The organisation seeks to promote effective self-evaluation in the voluntary sector through a number of programmes and activities including:

- production of information, tools and support guides;
- workshops and tailored support for voluntary organisations and funders;
- strategic programmes to improve practice and learning; and
- work to influence the policy and practice environment.

At the time of the review, ESS was restructuring following a review by the Board of Trustees on the impact of budget reductions. This restructuring included a planned reduction in the number of posts.

3. Key strengths

The review of ESS identified the following key strengths.

- Clarity of purpose to ensure continued focus on building voluntary sector capacity for effective self-evaluation.
- The impact of work to improve evaluation practice in the voluntary sector.
- High quality support, advice and engagement.
- Very positive and purposeful relationships with stakeholders.
- Strong leadership.

4. How well did Evaluation Support Scotland meet the needs of its stakeholders?

How well did Evaluation Support Scotland impact on voluntary organisations?

ESS has increased the number of training and support sessions over the past four years. It engaged with 338 voluntary organisations in the past year. Good national coverage has been achieved in a relatively short time. Effective and well received support has been delivered to organisations operating in almost all local authority areas in Scotland. High quality training and tailored programmes make an excellent contribution to building capacity for effective self-evaluation and improved performance reporting within the voluntary sector. Work with Scotland's Funders Forum to harmonise funding and reporting arrangements has helped funding bodies to be clearer and more outcome-focused in the reports they require from funded organisations.

Organisations and funding partners place great value on input from ESS. It has established an excellent track record for delivering programmes to the highest standard. Increasing numbers of diverse community group members now report that they are more confident, skilled and active in outcome-focused planning and evaluation. Planning and evaluation is greatly improved and sustained. There is a strong and positive impact on the ability of community organisations to identify outcomes and measure progress. Supported organisations are better able to clearly articulate the difference they make. Groups make effective use of tools to improve everyday practice. In Aberdeenshire, users of learning disabilities services were actively engaged in setting outcomes for service commissioning. Support to Inspiring Scotland's Go Play programme contributed to a clearer outcomes framework and improved understanding of the impact of play organisations. Youth Scotland has begun to shift its evaluation focus to better assess the impact of participation by young people in award bearing programmes. Negotiated training is tailored to best meet the needs of participants, is of a very high standard and is delivered in a flexible and responsive way. Trainers engage with participants very well. Ongoing support helps groups to reinforce learning and practice. ESS works effectively and consistently with a very wide range of organisations. It helps to simplify planning and

evaluation systems through effective training and production of toolkit guides. Impact on organisations receiving support is consistently evaluated. Positive and productive networks ensure developing practice is shared across Scotland and further afield.

How well did Evaluation Support Scotland impact on its staff?

The enthusiastic and committed staff work effectively to negotiate and meet the needs of participants in training and support programmes. Positive responses to an annual staff survey highlight ESS as a friendly and accessible organisation. High quality training and development undertaken helps staff members to make a positive and strong contribution to policy and practice. Access to Continuous Professional Development, including self-directed training, is very good and well supported. A clear and effective staff development policy is in place. Annual appraisal is clearly linked to agreed organisational outcomes and is used to build on individual team members' strengths. Staff work well together as a team, enjoy regular opportunities to share their learning with colleagues and benefit from regular recorded support and supervision delivered by the Director. Clear procedures ensure that learning undertaken makes a positive contribution to the organisation as a whole. Staff are held in high regard by stakeholders and ESS enjoys very positive and productive relationships with partners. Members of staff have good opportunities to work with the Board of Trustees and this has helped to develop leadership capacity across the team. Staff absence and turnover is low. A recent funding review has required reduction in staffing levels and this has had a strong negative impact on the extent to which staff feel secure and valued. There is recognition by the Board and Director of the importance of addressing staff morale to improve relationships with management. Action on this is planned to follow completion of current organisational restructuring.

5. How effective was Evaluation Support Scotland in key aspects of management?

Inclusion, equality and fairness

ESS demonstrates strong commitment to inclusion, equality and fairness. A statement of commitment defines types of discrimination, sets out clear responsibilities for the Board, the Director and staff and clearly articulates steps to be taken. The impact of policy is monitored and evaluated to ensure that identified barriers to participation are identified and addressed. The needs of participants requiring additional support to take part in training workshops and events are carefully considered, including ensuring suitable access to venues and facilities and the provision of additional resources required. ESS works with a wide range of organisations which are focused on promoting equalities and addressing the needs of groups at risk of exclusion including older people, women, young people black and minority ethnic communities, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities, faith communities and refugees. ESS support enables those organisations to more effectively evaluate the impact of their work. Effective analysis and monitoring enables staff to identify and act upon trends in participation by minority groups. Recruitment to the board through advertisement is targeted to promote diversity. Overall the organisation takes an effective and well-informed approach.

Participation of service users and other stakeholders

Stakeholders are regularly involved in dialogue about the quality and impact of programmes. Follow-up interviews are consistently conducted to listen to the views of those who have participated in workshops and tailored support sessions. Communication and consultation is undertaken through a high quality website, regular newsletters and an annual stakeholders' survey. A well-attended stakeholders' conference held in January 2010 informed a report on stakeholder feedback and the shape of evaluation support needed by the voluntary sector. ESS has developed positive and productive relationships with a broad range of organisations and with policy officers within the SG. The Board of Trustees established a sub-group to review the organisation's strategic plan to which staff contributed. Stakeholders are highly positive about their experience of the organisation's work and their relationships with staff. However, few stakeholders report that they have a direct opportunity to engage in informed and detailed discussion on the organisation's policies or strategic priorities. Information from surveys undertaken is mainly related to satisfaction with services provided. There is scope to build on effective relationships with key stakeholders and to involve them more fully in informing priorities.

Operational planning

ESS undertakes effective thorough and systematic evaluation of performance against priority programmes. Clear time-framed planning documents, based on detailed preparation with organisations receiving tailored support, ensure clarity and agreement on intended outcomes. ESS' strategic priorities are delivered through well designed programmes. Service agreement documents include details of activities to be delivered together with amounts of staff time allocated and overall costs. Staff performance in implementing operational plans is regularly reviewed in appraisal. Staff use a range of different planning tools according to personal preference to manage their own workloads and remits. The team workplan does not provide sufficient information to help staff monitor performance overall or enable the team to consider the collective impact of their work. Whilst the Director is currently able to have a clear overview of the team's work, a more unified and consistent operational planning system would ensure better transparency. A review of the annual work plan is planned to follow a current restructuring process. ESS is also engaged in providing support for evaluation to voluntary sector youth organisations and to organisations developing children's play initiatives. Within this context, they should now give more consideration to Curriculum for Excellence, particularly through linking effective evaluation with informed assessment of learning experiences and outcomes.

6. How effective was the leadership of Evaluation Support Scotland?

The Board of Trustees is well informed and members have a range of appropriate professional expertise. The convener of the Board provides strong and clear leadership, drawing from broader experience of governance, funding bodies and the voluntary sector. Recruitment and induction of Board members is effective. The roles and responsibilities of Board members are very clearly set out in the Trustees' Handbook. The Board has recently developed a plan to ensure the financial sustainability of the organisation. This has presented a significant challenge and has required the Board to make difficult decisions to secure the future of the organisation. The Director is highly respected by both stakeholders and Board members. He provides clear leadership and direction and is very well informed on challenges and opportunities facing the organisation. ESS has established a strong influence on wider policy for funders and voluntary sector organisations. This has enabled stakeholders to improve outcome-focused planning and reporting. Different members of the team work with a number of Board sub-groups to develop aspects of the organisation's strategic plan. There is a very clear and well-informed overview of need for the organisation's services and of current trends in policy.

7. What is Evaluation Support Scotland's capacity to improve?

ESS has a strong capacity to improve. Risks are appropriately identified. Staff and Board members are clear about their role and have a good overview of challenges and opportunities ahead. The organisation has established a strong reputation for providing high quality advice, support and tools for effective self-evaluation and planning for improvement. Strategic plans are regularly reviewed. There are current plans to review operational responsibilities, relationships and other aspects of the organisation's work in the light of recent reductions in staffing levels.

8. Main points for action

ESS should take action to address the following main points for action.

- Implement plans to ensure effective staff relationships with the Board following restructuring;
- Review operational planning to achieve a consistent and clear approach; and
- Ensure that evaluation support to children and youth sector organisations takes sufficient account of Curriculum for Excellence.

9. What happens next?

HMIE will take no further action in respect of this review.

Peter Hamilton
Managing Inspector

Appendix 1: Quality indicators used to evaluate Evaluation Support Scotland

HM Inspectors use performance measures and quality indicators when making judgements in their reviews of national voluntary organisations. The quality indicators used were selected from those published in June 2006 in the publication *HGIOCLD?2*. This publication is available on the website www.hmie.gov.uk.

Improvements in performance	good
Impact on the community	excellent
Impact on paid and voluntary staff	very good
Inclusion, equality and fairness	very good
Participation of service users and stakeholders	good
Operational planning	good
Leadership and direction	very good

This report uses the following word scale to make clear judgements made by inspectors.

excellent	outstanding, sector leading
very good	major strengths
good	important strengths with some areas for improvement
satisfactory	strengths just outweigh weaknesses
weak	important weaknesses
unsatisfactory	major weaknesses

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