

Our response to and comments on recommendations in the dissemination report



Recommendations	Comments
<p>a. BIG should be more consistent, imaginative and skilful in its chosen modes of dissemination:</p>	<p>We agree, and our dissemination working group aims to do this by supporting staff to follow standardised procedures and to choose between possibilities. By offering this framework we hope to encourage more imagination and flexibility.</p>
<p>a.1. Every evaluation and research project should identify its purpose and the main potential users of its findings, both inside and outside of BIG over the lifetime of the project, and tailor the chosen modes of communication to them; such an assessment must though be open to revision as findings emerge.</p>	<p>Dissemination is an essential part of the design process. Our increased involvement in project teams also builds this process into programme design. As part of our discussions of theories of change and of programme aims (as well as wider involvement in programme development) we should identify key issues (sometimes on the basis of areas of disagreement) that will help us to focus an evaluation more usefully. Involving stakeholders in development of specifications will also help make initial approaches more relevant. Completed specifications should be clearer about the overall purpose of the study, but we need to build in a certain amount of flexibility, accepting that the context may change, and that findings may lead to a change of focus. Our standardised process will set out the need for an initial but flexible dissemination plan at an early stage of development.</p>
<p>a.2. Should regard the brief, readable summary report as the core product of its projects that serves as a basis for dissemination; a fuller report may be needed for internal purposes and may be made available on request or even put on the website.</p>	<p>This depends on the evaluation or research project in question. This is certainly the case in our programme evaluations, but it does require us to take ownership of findings and to present them to a range of audiences. Many of the best reports from consultants will achieve these aims in the first place, and better-specified projects may encourage this further. We will continue to publish all reports in full on the website in line with the Freedom of Information Act.</p>

<p>a.3. Annual or interim reports should only be prepared when they have a clear purpose; one or more highlighting process issues for programme management that require attention; identifying promising good practices to communicate to grant holders; and providing a potential source for BIG's promotional work.</p>	<p>In line with commitment to greater flexibility and better planning, we will need a certain amount of flexibility in outputs. But in general, we should expect some sort of annual report for longer-term studies, notably programme evaluations. It is the level of detail and the focus that may change. We need this for accountability, but also to promote discussion and raise awareness of the evaluation itself. The contents and length of reports can vary and should be open to negotiation and review. Providing information for "promotional work" needs to be done in a way that does not compromise the integrity of the research.</p>
<p>a.4. More should be made of oral presentation – briefings, seminars, workshops, and conversations – rather than relying on written documents.</p>	<p>We agree and will promote these approaches in our resources for staff. There are associated needs of timing and of the availability of staff and consultants. We will consider approaches to covering opportunistic presentations in specifications.</p>
<p>a.5. BIG should specifically state its expected division of labour between itself and its contractors in dissemination and, where it envisages a role for contractors, only employ those with demonstrable competence.</p>	<p>Our staff have particular responsibilities for overseeing dissemination and have to date generally undertaken most of the work. Given our role within a wider grant-making organisation, this approach is both logical and necessary. This should not however preclude enabling and encouraging consultants to take on more of a role in dissemination, particularly to external audiences where we can capitalise on their wider reputation and networks. Understanding of and skill in dissemination and promoting utilisation is an essential component of good research practice and should be included in specifications. Even where staff will undertake a large part of the work, consultants should write to the correct audience. Skills and experience in this area should be tested as part of the selection process.</p>
<p>b. BIG should refine its procedures for the design and management of evaluation and research projects to give more emphasis to maximising their impact. In particular:</p>	<p>We will achieve this by considering dissemination and utilisation from the outset of evaluation planning, and by considering evaluation and research more centrally within the programme development and management process.</p>
<p>b.1. Identified users should be engaged more fully and continuously with the design and management of evaluation and research projects and the interpretation of findings. So that their role moves from 'steering' or 'advising' the project to 'co-</p>	<p>We want to work towards this goal, but it is not straightforward, so we will continue to consider how to achieve it. We will review the best way of structuring and running our evaluation steering groups and the processes of consultation in their development. We are currently exploring various ways of ensuring that stakeholder perspectives on early findings are taken account of at later stages. We</p>

<p>production of the output; the current clustering of projects for oversight should make such engagement more economical and attractive.</p>	<p>will also reiterate the importance of responding to stated purposes and audiences of studies. There are however a number of risks associated with this process. Most importantly, we need to ensure that consultants and their reports are and are seen to be independent of undue influence by BIG or by other interested stakeholders. This does not preclude targeted dissemination and communication. We will improve guidance on ethical concerns in our work as an early stage in responding to this recommendation.</p>
<p>b.2. The design of multi-country evaluation and research should ensure both sensitivity to the contextual differences between countries and adequate coverage of those countries to ensure reliable, country-relevant findings are achieved – this may require ‘booster samples’ in surveys or case studies or more explicitly addressing the universality and/or transferability of findings and conclusions.</p>	<p>The evaluation and research team works across the UK and is committed to doing so. There are many issues to consider in responding to the differing perspectives of the four countries. We already ask tenderers to demonstrate their sensitivity to differing contexts and we will reinforce this in future selection procedures. We will also ensure that selection panels include at least one representative of a country other than England in all relevant studies. In addition, we already include an element of case-study and budgetary weighting to countries other than England, and will consider whether and how this can be further refined. In doing so, however, we need to take account of the research and sampling approaches of appointed consultants and to ensure that weighting is done for practical and defensible purposes. Where appropriate, we do and will continue to design work on a country-specific basis. We will continue to promote the transferability of findings and to engage closely with leads in each country to do so. In responding to this recommendation, we will also have to consider such issues as staffing resources in each office (which is more pronounced in dissemination than in other aspects of our work) and wider budgetary concerns. An obvious example of the latter is that by boosting samples we necessarily reduce the overall level of resources available to disseminate findings.</p>
<p>b.3. Clarity and realism about the needed resources of money; time and skills for dissemination should be part and parcel of evaluation and research project planning and management.</p>	<p>We agree that there needs to be more focus on planning for dissemination throughout and that this will also involve planning and allocation of resources. We will ensure that specifications refer more to dissemination and that selection processes for tenderers take more account of consultants’ experiences of and approaches to dissemination. But we would not wish to be too prescriptive about these matters, particularly because effective dissemination relies on flexibility and</p>

	<p>being able to respond to changing circumstances. This might imply holding a certain proportion of budgets as a contingency for dissemination. The whole issue also raises important issues about the ability of BIG staff ourselves – both within the evaluation and research team and elsewhere – to be able to respond flexibly when opportunities arise.</p>
<p>c. BIG should improve the presentation and accessibility of the results of its evaluations and research to potential users:</p>	<p>We agree and consider matters below.</p>
<p>c.1. It should, in agreement with communications staff, define quality standards for the various modes of dissemination that it uses – such as summaries, reports, presentations, website content – and communicate these to both staff and to evaluation and research project contractors. An online handbook with good practice examples might be appropriate.</p>	<p>This recommendation concerns two sets of authors and we consider them separately. First, for external consultants, some of the tendering and selection arrangements outlined above should ensure that reporting and other forms of dissemination respond more effectively to the needs of audiences. We would not wish to impose strict standards on consultants because we respect their independence and ability. But we do expect consultants to report coherently and in plain English in response to the needs of specified audiences. BIG staff, on the other hand, are subject to house style and various templates for publications. Relevant training is also available and encouraged.</p>
<p>c.2. The communication of findings should be done, in terms of both time and place, with regard to the business and agendas of potential users, not just done annually and/or when a project is complete; this will require intelligence gathering by BIG staff to identify such opportunities.</p>	<p>This reflects some of the earlier discussion of flexibility and of engagement with stakeholders. It also requires us to consider how to make best use of limited resources and availability of staff; ensuring good and efficient modes of internal communication and information-sharing is the basis for achieving this.</p>
<p>c.3. Existing occasions that already involve research users should be preferred over special occasions created just for dissemination – this is so both inside BIG (e.g. Programme Management Team meetings) and outside (e.g. grantholder meetings, professional journals, policy or practice events).</p>	<p>This approach will help promote evaluation and research in the mainstream of programme development and management. We welcome our greater involvement in project teams and support the continued effective use of programme management teams as conduits for information and opportunities for reflection. We are keen to ensure further use of evaluation and research findings, notably at wider grant-holder seminars, where sessions on evaluation findings have proved popular and useful for all involved.</p>

<p>c.4. A specific dissemination programme should be developed for project grant holders, focused on good practices within programmes but also facilitating cross programme learning: this might have components such as email alerts, seminars and workshops, leaflets, newsletter and online resources.</p>	<p>Our grant-holders are one of the primary audiences for our work. We agree with the suggestions presented and will clarify them as part of the dissemination plan for each project. While this is fairly easy to achieve for specific programmes, we will need to consider how we can link this to cross-programme approaches.</p>
<p>c.5. BIG's website needs major development, including the integration of the surviving NOF and CF websites, to become a resource offering not just what has been learned from its own evaluation and research but also providing access to the findings of other relevant work – all to high levels for search and navigation.</p>	<p>The new Big Lottery Fund website should be launched by March 2006. This will give an improved presence to evaluation and research in particular and learning in general. We will work with the web team to ensure that search facilities are adequate and will consider how to present and link to other work in an effective way.</p>
<p>d. BIG needs – as part of its commitment to be a learning organisation – to develop an organisational culture that values the contribution of evaluation and research:</p>	<p>We aim to achieve this by focusing on learning and interpretation rather than simply by promoting bare research findings and processes. As part of a grant-making rather than a research organisation, we feel it more practical to link our work to the wider mission of the organisation rather than isolating “research” to be valued for its own sake. This difference in emphasis is slight but essential to building a learning organisation – and for making dissemination more effective.</p>
<p>d.1. Evaluation and Research staff should regard and develop themselves as the source within BIG of research-based knowledge, from both its own evaluation and research and related work elsewhere, as a contribution to learning within BIG.</p>	<p>The team accepts this role and has a key role in the development of BIG as a learning organisation.</p>
<p>d.2. Evaluation and Research staff should become involved in BIG's core business including priority setting, programme development, resource allocation, and promotion – and this in all 4 countries.</p>	<p>The team now participates more closely in these roles than had often been the case in predecessor organisations. Many of the challenges arising from the earlier projects considered in the dissemination study simply do not arise now.</p>
<p>d.3. Given the devolution of policy, operations and</p>	<p>There are already strong links between members of the evaluation and research</p>

<p>communications work to the country offices there should be a 'champion' for evaluation and research in those offices, with the tasks of encouraging, overseeing and supporting interactions between the office and the E&R team.</p>	<p>team and staff in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, as well as with developing structures in England. Our most obvious link is with policy staff. While this recommendation might help improve the situation, the range and scale of our work is such that it might well be a daunting task for a single individual. To be effective, this role would have to be written into a job description with a clear time allocation for staff concerned. We are seeking views from relevant offices about this matter.</p>
<p>BIG staff should accept that independent evaluation of its programmes will produce criticism as well as praise and recognise that both help them and the organisation to learn and improve in future.</p>	<p>This is an essential part of being a learning organisation. We recognise that this has sometimes led to difficulties in the past, but there have also been some notable successes where negative findings have been accepted, publicised and acted upon. The evaluation and learning strategy emphasises this point and we will highlight the relevance of accepting negative findings in order to improve practice.</p>
<p>5.4. These recommendations are not costless. It will be for BIG to consider their likely value for money. But we draw attention to three constraints that we believe must be overcome if the recommendations are to achieve more effective dissemination of evaluation and research and greater consequent impact.</p>	<p>This constraint is essential to considering how we respond to the recommendations.</p>
<p>5.5. We noted above (para 4.4) a commitment to spend a minimum of 5% of project budgets on dissemination. To this should be added the cost of the staff time spent on dissemination, mainly by evaluation and research staff but also some others. This seems to us rather low for a learning organisation. (In comparison, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation reportedly spends 40% of its budget on dissemination.) In our view it would be better to commission less evaluation and research and ensure its effective dissemination by shifting the balance of</p>	<p>Effective dissemination clearly requires time and money. We will consider the balance of research and dissemination activity as discussed throughout this document. This applies to both contractors and staff. A particular constraint will be providing adequate resources to robust and credible research. To date, we have tended to respond to this challenge by encouraging consultants to focus on research and staff to lead on dissemination. This response seems practical, but is certainly open to reconsideration in the light of findings from this study. It does mean, though, that the 5% figure in research budgets does not reflect the total spent on dissemination. While JRF's balance seems desirable from a research perspective, we have to remember that BIG is first and foremost a lottery distributor, so research and evaluation contribute to rather than constitute the</p>

resources between production and dissemination.	organisation's core function.
<p>5.6. We recommend (in para 5.3.a.5 above) more clarity about the role of contractors. As a minimum, their contribution to dissemination should include writing reports and making presentations: recommendations a.2, a.3 and a.4 therefore impinge on them. Even in this case, and more so if more is expected of them, only contractors with demonstrable competence should be used for the dissemination of evaluation and research, as stated in recommendation a.5. It may also be necessary to act outside individual project commissioning and management to achieve this. Our proposal (in recommendation c.1) for guidance on the quality standards for dissemination should help. But BIG may need to be more pro-active in nurturing a cadre of preferred contractors – for example through briefings and calling for expressions of interest.</p>	<p>We have commented on many of these issues earlier, agreeing with the thrust of this and similar recommendations. While we are keen to consider more imaginative approaches to commissioning research, we must again take account of our responsibilities as a public body to procure services in an open and accountable way: we are subject to UK government and EU procurement regulations. In general, these impose a requirement to brief tenderers and to use an expression of interest stage.</p>
<p>5.7. Current Evaluation and Research staff have come from diverse backgrounds and experiences. The skills needed for the expanded roles proposed for them in many of our recommendations may need developing – in particular, understanding how evidence is used (or not) in policy and practice, different forms of written and oral communication, and working with contractors and colleagues in 'co-production' of findings. We believe that there may also be a need for formal 'awareness raising' about evaluation and research for policy, operations and communications staff.</p>	<p>We encourage staff to undertake learning and development and welcome interest in evaluation and research from staff elsewhere in the organisation.</p>