

## **Title**

Implementing impact evaluation in professional practice: a study of support needs within the museum, archive and library sector.

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports on research into the professional needs of those embarking on impact evaluation in the museum, archive and library sector. The research used a web portal providing impact evaluation research findings and examples of methods and toolkits as a means of facilitating response and discussion about practitioner attitude to, and resource needs for, impact evaluation in their own organisations. The various challenges associated with impact evaluation are briefly explored in relation to the conflicting interests of policy makers, managers and practitioners working in the frontline. Respondents' reactions to issues associated with information accessibility are discussed and reflect the complexity of providing adequate support for a wide range of professionals with varying experience and potential or perceived needs. Although the study focused on one sector of practitioners, the findings are relevant to all professionals aiming to develop high quality information services and systems in relation to their end users.

*Keywords:* Impact evaluation; Professional learning; Museums; Archives; Libraries

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## **1. Introduction**

This paper reflects on a study, funded by Resource, the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries (now Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, MLA), which investigated practitioner support needs for impact evaluation in museums, archives and libraries (Williams, Baxter, Wavell & MacLennan, 2003). The study was conducted as a result of the findings of an earlier report, also commissioned by Resource, which reviewed the available evidence of the social, learning and economic impacts of museums, archives and libraries, that is, what difference these services make to their clients and the wider community (Wavell, Baxter, Johnson & Williams, 2002). During this review of evidence, it became apparent that impact evaluation posed a number of challenges for practitioners, policy makers and indeed researchers, including mechanisms to assess impact locally and to demonstrate evidence to policy makers and financial stakeholders at a regional and national level. There is evidence that practitioners themselves need to be involved both to buy into the evaluation process and findings (Torres, Stone, Butkus, Hook, Casey & Arens, 2000) and as a means of encouraging reflective or evidence-based practice and organisational learning (Preskill & Torres, 1999). Some organisations employ external consultants to conduct project evaluations. However, other practitioners have attempted to undertake the task themselves and, while Feinstein warns of the difference between the capacity to produce evaluations and the capacity to use them (Feinstein, 2002), the process of self-evaluation itself can be seen as a means of engaging in reflective and evidence-based practice. The question then arises as to the kinds of support which may help practitioners engage in meaningful impact evaluations which can lead to improvements in services and benefits to end-users.

This study examined the views of a range of practitioners, using the trigger of a small-scale web portal to elicit feedback on the relative value of different kinds of information and how it would support their needs. Their responses reveal something of the way in which practitioners in these sectors approach evidence-based practice, the problems they face, and the issues which most concern them.

## **2. Climate of evaluation**

The need to evaluate impact has been driven by a general climate of transparency and accountability to stakeholders in all public sector organisations which has increased awareness of service provision in relation to client needs and value for money. The introduction of standards, performance measurement and best practice, which follows government and industry lead in providing the basis for accountability, has led to the identification of over one hundred different standards, guidelines and advisory documents across the museums, archives and libraries sector in England alone (ABL Cultural Consulting, 2001). In addition to professional standards and guidelines, individual institutions may also be required to adhere to similar quality assurance frameworks stipulated by the parent organisations. Many of these schemes and frameworks have more to do with quantifiable measures of organisation outputs, i.e. direct service products, rather than the less tangible outcomes, in terms of impact on users, which are proving more elusive for evaluation.

Impact can be seen as the overall *change* in state, attitude or behaviour of an individual or group after engagement with the service output. For example a visitor may change their

attitude towards an aspect of life, or the information gained from a museum, library or archive may change the nature or quality of decision-making undertaken by the user. Thus, impact evaluation goes further than performance output measures and focuses attention on the use of services, and the effect of those services on users, rather than the nature of services themselves. As such it is concerned with tracking *outcomes* and understanding the *conditioning factors* (Williams & Wavell, 2001) which influence those outcomes rather than measuring service outputs. The impact on an individual of their interaction with museums, archives and libraries has parallels with 'enlightenment' described by Weiss, when discussing the use of evaluation reports, as '*the percolation of new information, ideas and perspectives into the arenas in which decisions are made.*' (Weiss, 1999, 471).

This raises complex issues for practitioners seeking to identify impacts involving individual and collective use of information or learning experiences. Museums, archives and libraries are particularly concerned with examining and reporting their impact in relation to current government policy priorities which have been interpreted in relation to a variety of inter-related aspects of society, i.e. children, young people, adults and communities and their learning, the local economy, and modernising delivery. Thus there is an interest in social, learning and economic impacts, all involving complex processes and interactions. As stated by Wavell, et al. (2002), social impact encompasses inclusion or overcoming exclusion of individuals or groups in terms of poverty, education, race, or disability and may also include issues of health, community safety, employment and education. Learning impact is interpreted in a broad sense to encompass an individual, organisation, or community's formal, informal and lifelong progression towards, and change in, knowledge and skills through a variety of real and virtual channels. Learning can be surface or deep, immediate or long term, the acquisition of skills or an interaction with established knowledge. Economic impact encompasses economic implications for individuals, small or large groups, or for communities in terms of urban or rural regeneration, renewal or sustainability. An important additional aspect is access to services provided, and this is concerned with the provision of opportunity, whether physical, emotional or intellectual, to accommodate learning, social or economic wellbeing (Wavell, et al., 2002, 6).

The complexity and challenge is compounded by the fact that the perceptions and interpretations of the term 'evaluation' can vary. Patton indicates that the definition of evaluation '*is a matter for discussion, clarification and negotiation*' (Patton, 1997, 25). While professionals understand inputs, outputs and processes and the need to gather evidence to maximise potential efficiency and effectiveness by bridging the gap between service pressures and client needs, the concept of impact assessment can be alien (Markless & Streatfield, 2001) and a number of different interpretations of evaluation and impact can be identified in the literature and terminology is not always used consistently (Wavell et al., 2002). As the literature resulting from impact evaluation shows, the aims of the evaluation are often not clearly defined and even defining the *subject* of evaluation has proved problematic (Wavell et al, 2002). Some evaluation reports focus on outcomes and impact from the point of view of the organisation or describe the impact of the evaluation process on organisers and evaluators, both valuable but limited perspectives. Other evaluations tend to report on a project organisers' perception of impact rather than identifying the clients' own interpretation of impact. The fact that evaluations can include all these elements in varying degrees reflects the complexity of the evaluation process and the need for greater clarification over what any particular evaluation is intending to achieve. To gain maximum effectiveness from evaluation practice, organisations must 'focus' their evaluation and ask themselves the basic questions posed by Patton: '*What is the purpose of*

*the evaluation? How will the information be used? What will we know after the evaluation that we don't know now? What actions will we be able to take based on evaluation findings?*' (Patton, 1997, 189). A further complication is the implicit requirement for data to satisfy the dual purposes of supporting organisational decision-making and providing government agencies with sufficient evidence to inform policy making and financial priority commitment on a national scale.

Despite the complexity and challenge involved, impact evaluation can be seen as a potentially useful management tool to be used to interpret changes resulting from a particular intervention, programme or policy on individuals, groups, organisations. During the past decade, both in the UK and elsewhere, there has been increased interest in evaluating services in terms of outcomes and impact rather than outputs. Professionals have begun to recognise the value of assessing services as part of evidence informed practice in order to understand what works and why, and how this relates to organisational aims and objectives. Yet many evaluations conducted in the museum, archive and library sector are the result of special projects or programmes rather than an examination of core services, which would presumably provide useful evidence for internal planning and be of equal interest professionally.

The museum, archive and library professions are encouraging practitioner involvement in impact evaluation and there are research and toolkits to aid the practitioner embarking on impact evaluation (for example Information Management Associates, 2000; Lance, et al., 2001). However the challenges outlined in the preceding paragraphs point to the need for changes in the way professionals think about services, and the need for accessible tools and enhanced training to enable professionals to gather and analyse this type of data. Durrance and Fisher-Pettigrew, evaluation researchers working in the US library domain, echo this need by stating that there is *'increasing recognition that current evaluation tools used by the public sector are inadequate'* (Durrance & Fisher-Pettigrew, 2002, 44). Interest in impact evaluation is not restricted to the museum, archive and library sector and there is useful evidence and examples of evaluation studies and methodologies used in other leisure industries, such as the arts, heritage and culture, tourism and sport which may well offer lessons to practitioners in museums, archives and libraries. There is clearly scope for the sharing of different kinds of information to support practitioners in impact evaluation, provided that information can be made accessible.

The study reported in this article explored the role of, and attitude towards, impact evaluation by a number of professionals practising in different capacities and attempted to establish some of their support requirements for implementing impact evaluation. The researchers were particularly interested in practitioner awareness and understanding of impact evaluation as opposed to performance evaluation; of their reaction to issues concerning credibility and applicability of evidence; their interest in developments within each of the three museum, archive and library domains making up the sector and also developments outwith the sector; and finally, the most convenient and appropriate presentation of potentially useful material. This paper describes the methodology and findings of the study and concludes with a discussion of the implications for practitioner awareness and needs.

### **3. Methodology**

The primary purpose of this study was to stimulate discussion and explore practitioner awareness of, and support needs for, impact evaluation across the museum, archive and library sector. A small-scale web portal, providing impact evaluation research findings and examples of methods and toolkits, was used as a means of facilitating response and discussion about practitioner attitude to, and resource needs for, impact evaluation in their own organisations. Dissemination of research evidence and good practice is essential to ensure lessons are learned and recommendations are considered beyond those participating in the original project, programme and evaluation. It was important to identify the kind of content and information presentation which practitioners felt would best serve that purpose. It is recognised that web support can be an exciting means of delivering a message and encouraging communication for learning but is only one of many avenues used by practitioners to further their professional understanding and development (Granville, 2003). The web portal therefore was not intended to be used as a template for future support but rather as a vehicle which would allow the respondents to view a range of available information presented in a range of different ways incorporating examples from different disciplines and geographical areas. The intention was to overcome some of the difficulties encountered in using conventional questionnaire surveys to examine 'needs', i.e. difficulties for the respondent in identifying 'needs' in situations where their knowledge of the possible solutions may be limited. Thus the web portal allowed respondents to visualise and respond to a range of concrete examples of the kinds of information and tools which are already available but which are presently scattered and/or available in formats and sources which are not necessarily accessible to practitioners.

### *3.1. Design and content of portal*

The portal was arranged in two main sections linked by the homepage which provided background to the subject. One section considered the available evidence of impact, subdivided into social, learning and economic impacts and further sub-divided by domain, i.e. museums, archives and libraries, and was intended primarily for awareness and advocacy. Some of the evidence was presented in differing levels of detail, e.g. whole report, references or links to reports available elsewhere, summaries. The other section, intended primarily for skills sharing, concentrated on support mechanisms and included guidance on gathering evidence and was subdivided into evaluation practice, electronic forum/discussion list, noticeboard, e-mail alert service, an electronic facility for submitting practitioner research and toolkits.

The sample of material included in the portal was chosen to reflect evidence of impact, potential methods of implementing impact evaluation and a variety of possible support mechanisms available at the time of the study. The content reflected the analysis of the situation in the previous review conducted by the research team (Wavell, et al, 2002):

- a. At this early stage in the development of impact evaluation, there was limited published evidence of actual impact of museums, archives and libraries (as opposed to potential impact) available in a form that provides clear and consistent messages. Accumulated evidence from the various reports examined during the literature review indicated that the sector does make a positive impact in supporting personal development, where the immediate outcomes are more easily identified. Establishing causality for the impact of the sector in social and economic growth and well-being is more problematic and the studies examined were more exploratory in nature demonstrating potential for impact rather than actual impact.

- b. The spread of this literature across the domains and policy areas is uneven with very little work to date in the archives domain and the less evidence on economic or social impact than on learning, although it is recognised that learning underpins developments in social cohesion, community empowerment, cultural identity, health, well-being and economic development.
- c. A widespread challenge in any discipline is the extent to which members of that profession are prepared to look beyond their own field to adopt and adapt practices from other disciplines. Resource, the strategic body for the museum, archive and library sector as a whole, encourages integration and sharing of knowledge and skills between the three domains and awareness of developments in other cultural fields. Careful consideration was given to the arrangement of the key evidence section in order to reflect the separate entities of the domains while encouraging exploration of developments within and across the domains and outwith the sector.
- d. The material also reflected the range of different research approaches which had been used to gather evidence of impact. For example, the individual project evaluations undertaken in the museum domain have tended to use formative reflection and summative questionnaires which were qualitative in nature with some attempting basic quantification. The archives domain has developed a question within a large-scale survey which aims at capturing impact of services on the individual which is analysed quantitatively. Empirical research conducted by academic institutions use a similar variety of approaches and techniques.

Although the aesthetics of any site are a significant aspect both in attracting users and maintaining ease of use, this was not fully developed or refined for the web portal because the study was primarily concerned with content. Despite the fact that this was clearly stated, aesthetic issues were alluded to by several respondents thus suggesting that they are difficult to divorce from issues of content and information presentation.

### *3.2. Capturing practitioner feedback*

It was not within the scope of this project to conduct an extensive survey of practitioner needs or to elicit extensive discussion of support issues. However, it was important to gather data from a cross-section of the museum, archive and library domains and types of institution within each. A purposive sampling approach was adopted and a sample of 50 practitioners from across the three domains was invited to evaluate the website. Feedback was collected by means of a brief questionnaire.

The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather data on the appropriateness of the type of material presented, the helpfulness of the arrangement of the material within the sections, and the presentation of material in terms of detail. A recurring theme of research into evidence-based practice is finding the time to read, digest and adapt literature for local use and the questionnaire aimed to explore the issue of presentation in a way that enables practitioners to access material easily for a variety of different purposes. It also sought to assess the anticipated level of use and the usefulness of a variety of support features.

Thus the questionnaire provided the opportunity for respondents to:

- indicate their information needs and preferences for particular types of material to support impact evaluation,
- indicate their preferences for the presentation of information,

- comment on approaches, methodologies and tools that were thought to be appropriate for evaluating impact in their organisations, and
- comment on the perceived value of support features.

The questionnaire followed a structure similar to the organisation of the website to encourage evaluators to explore all aspects of the site. Open and closed questions were designed to enable respondents to answer questions as fully as possible while making the task as easy and straightforward as possible. The qualitative data was analysed for key issues and common themes and grouped accordingly. A quantitative element was introduced to give an indication of the extent of agreement across these key and/or common themes. Respondents were encouraged to give a number of responses to questions so analysis reflects the frequency of responses rather than the number of respondents.

Background information completed by practitioners provided a check that the sample did cover a cross section of the sector community and gave some indication of the extent of evaluation experience within the practitioners' organisation. This data was used in a very limited way to consider differences in responses. Full analysis was not possible or desirable with such a small sample but limited analysis serves to highlight possible areas for further consideration. It was anticipated that the issues raised by respondents were likely to reflect their level of experience in relation to impact evaluation and therefore data was sought on whether impact assessment had been applied, was planned and in what capacity. Although clear distinction between practitioners could not be made there did appear to be two broad groups of respondents, those with limited evaluation experience and those more familiar with evaluation processes. (The full questionnaire is available online in Williams, et al, 2003)

## **4. Findings**

### *4.1. Distribution of respondents*

The response rate of 49% from the questionnaire returns was disappointing although not unexpected considering the 'cold-call' nature of the questionnaire and the busy working schedules of professionals in the field. The table below outlines the distribution of sent, completed and returned questionnaires according to three domains.

Table 1: Distribution of questionnaires sent, completed and returned across the domains  
<insert table 1>

Given the larger number of questionnaires sent to the museum domain (n=19), it was not surprising that the highest returns (n=10) were also recorded from this domain. The return rate of questionnaires from the archives was encouragingly high (n=6) given the number of questionnaires disseminated (n=10) and it is speculated that this higher response rate (60%) reflects the current interest in impact evaluation in this domain. The number of completed questionnaires from the library domain was disappointingly low (n=4), considering the number of questionnaires dispatched (n=15) and there is no evidence to indicate the reason for this low response rate (27%). Despite the overall low response rate the more important aim, to ensure that a range of different types of organisation was represented, was fulfilled:

approximately half were public or local authorities, while the others were academic or independent organisations.

#### 4.2. *Practitioners' experience of impact evaluation*

Responses illustrated a great difference in knowledge and understanding of impact evaluation ranging from those who were well versed in the subject '*The 'impact evaluation' section was all familiar to me*' (respondent 1) and those with no experience '*...before visiting the site I did not even know what 'impact evaluation' referred to so it was a rapid learning curve*' (respondent 17). Although this poses problems for the organisation of any support mechanism, it also suggests opportunities for an effective solution, whereby experienced practitioners share their expertise with less experienced practitioners.

Just over half of organisations represented (52%) had been involved in assessing social, learning or economic impact. Where stated, museum respondents indicated evaluation had been conducted on social and learning impact, and new programmes; archive respondents indicated involvement with Best Value and Public Services Quality Group and website evaluation; and library respondents indicated involvement with Best Value and evaluation of learning. This suggests that impact evaluation is being considered alongside performance evaluation and that consideration needs to be given to the most appropriate methods for linking the two types of evaluation, to avoid duplication and confusion.

Another significant point is that the respondents' organisations are tending to undertake impact evaluation in relation to specific projects, mostly externally funded projects, rather than evaluating the entire or core service provision, where there is also much to be gained from the evaluation process in terms of internal planning. This pattern, also noted in the earlier review (Wavell, et al., 2002), was highlighted by the responses to future plans for impact evaluation in which individual projects were cited for consideration. However, there appeared to be some variation within this overall pattern: museums had tended to conduct evaluations of internally and externally funded new developments or projects, while archives and libraries were more evenly distributed across internally and externally funded projects and core services.

It was also noted that nearly a quarter of organisations (24%) had not undertaken any impact evaluation. These results confirm that impact evaluation is still at an early stage and is being considered alongside other performance related evaluations. This may well be the most practical and effective approach to be taken but it may also result in findings which do not fully address 'impact' as defined in the introduction.

#### 4.3. *Information needs and content preferences*

Overall, the respondents were positive about a mechanism which brings together evidence and support for impact evaluation, confirming the need for additional support in this area. The quality of evaluation practice was also brought up as an issue: '*...too much of the evaluation undertaken in the museum sector is vague & woolly, and not subject to critical thought. I'm sure this arises from professionals not having easy access to quality information on all the issues*' (respondent 47). At the same time, they expressed concerns regarding implementation and expectations of impact evaluation use. The majority



indicated that they found the introduction to impact evaluation useful, particularly the definitions of terms. Respondents also viewed the endorsement by Resource of research into impact evaluation as a vital element in encouraging trustees to recognise the value of evaluation practice. This is particularly relevant considering the current emphasis on accountability in museums, archives and libraries.

The breakdown of portal sections into domains and type of evaluation was thought to be appropriate by a small majority. However, they considered key requisites for any longer-term information resource would be some form of keyword or search mechanism to enable more precise identification of useful information, for example the key learning stages, and the inclusion of a separate section for cross-sector work. This suggests an early concern about the volume of material which might be available and possible difficulties in meeting precise needs quickly in the limited time available. Other respondents suggested different arrangements for the organisation of information reflecting their own priorities. For example, one respondent also felt that a breakdown of learning into stages (school, FE/HE and lifelong learning) would be beneficial to practitioners.

Table 2 illustrates the overall breakdown of responses to material included in the key evidence section.

Table 2: usefulness & relevance of material in key evidence section

<insert table 2>

Overall, responses indicated that the information included in the evidence section was seen as relevant and useful and provided a convenient means of accessing information appropriate to current needs.

The main consideration for practitioners was whether the material was relevant to their perceived needs and judged by the extent to which the issues being addressed in the material on offer appeared to relate to their own specific context, such as the similarity of organisation, project type or audience. Practitioners also expressed a need for methods and examples to be readily transferable to their specific circumstances. There was only limited reference to the credibility, timeliness or quality of presentation of evaluation reports or methodologies as a means of determining appropriateness and relevance of material. A few practitioners identified factors for assessing appropriateness in terms less to do with immediate need but more to do with assessing the value of information in decision-making in general.

Several practitioners indicated the section would provide a means of keeping up to date and that it could save time or duplication of effort. A clear indication of inclusion criteria had been given for both for the site as a whole and for individual sections and had included statements relating to gaps in available literature such as evidence of economic impact, impact of the archive domain and tested, usable toolkits. Nevertheless, several respondents commented on the lack of material in these areas, reinforcing the interest and need for more support and possibly also indicating a lack of motivation to explore material from other fields.

All respondents indicated a preference for information relating to the sector as a whole, i.e. museums, archives and libraries. Several indicated the value of cross-domain comparison

although it was also pointed out that broadening the scope of any available material, either across or outwith the sector or internationally, has the potential for creating information overload, duplication, a loss of focus and time limitations for effective assimilation: *'Despite fears of a deluge of information, drawing on as broad as possible range of approaches is probably preferable'* (respondent 21).

Respondents indicated little preference between local, regional and national information to support their evaluation practices, but stated that it should be clearly identifiable to enable local work to be set in a wider context and showing how it contributes to the broader picture. Practitioners were concerned with the need to integrate impact evaluation into community planning as a whole. International information was viewed as a useful means of introducing innovation and expertise in evaluation practices. However, they saw a need for international material to be selected against clear criteria for inclusion, to ensure reliability and relevance as well as reiterating the risks of becoming counter-productive by extending the scope too far.

Those practitioners who were already familiar with the issues were more inclined to see the advantages of looking to wider related and unrelated fields for expertise in meeting the challenges of impact evaluation within the sector. Those with less experience or limited time for this aspect of their work were more inclined to prefer information related to the sector. Those practitioners with less experience also indicated a preference for tools, guidance and examples of methodologies rather than actual evidence of impact. Although not possible to examine with the study sample, this preference may well reflect position or role within an organisation and their intended use of impact evaluation as either a planning tool for ensuring effective service for users or as a financial tool to present to internal or external funding agencies.

Cost and staffing issues were both factors which were mentioned in relation to the implementation of impact evaluation and it was considered a gap in the information available that some indication of the financial implication was not included.

#### 4.4. *Presentation of information*

The portal used a variety of ways of displaying the material, including lists of bibliographic details, tables of summary information and annotated bibliographies. Respondents were asked to give their preferences to full reports, annotated bibliographies, whether it is useful to summarise literature according to themes, and if so, whether in a tabular or linear format. Practitioners' choice of particular presentation format appeared to reflect personal preference. The findings indicated that practitioners preferred material to be summarised under meaningful headings with clearly differentiated bibliographic details. The tabular format caused problems viewing on the screen and was not always thought to be appropriate: *'far too much information to be presented in a table'* (respondent 15). However it was appreciated by others as a means of gaining an overview of studies and enabling scanning and quick reference: *'I could pin a tabular format on a noticeboard for easy reading'* (respondent 2). The annotated list with notes arranged under bold headings was the preferred option or second favourite option for the majority of practitioners: *'very useful and relevant – I found citations of work I didn't know, and the annotations help sort the wheat from the chaff!'* (respondent 45). The annotated bibliographic list without headings was not highly rated by practitioners. This indicates a need for some form of

synthesis or analysis of information under clear headings within the documents. Ease of browsing was the major factor determining the choice of headings and groupings and comments suggested this helped assess relevance for particular purposes and would reduce time spent searching through irrelevant material. There was also a need for distinctive bibliographic details and a request for details enabling the credibility and reliability of the source to be assessed.

Respondents also commented on the fact that the presentation would benefit from graphics which lighten the text and the use of diagrammatic illustration or flow-charts to enable quick reference of the evaluation process, statistical information and possible methodologies.

A number of reservations were expressed about the volume of information and the ability of either particular structures or formats of presentation to cope with this while maintaining ease of reference. It is fundamental for information providers to establish the balance of clearly highlighting key points from complex subjects matter while ensuring readers have the opportunity to gain real understanding of relevant issues. Moore and Page refer to the problem of distilling complex information for busy professionals when discussing a trial online professional development package for teachers in information literacy (Moore & Page, 2002).

#### 4.5. *Preferred methodology for impact evaluation*

Moving beyond an examination of overall information content, it was also of interest to understand which kinds of support would be of practical help to practitioners conducting impact evaluations. One aspect of this issue is the type of methodological approach which practitioners perceived to be relevant to their evaluation needs. The examples of evaluations illustrated in the web portal reflected a variety of approaches and techniques for gathering data. When asked about the perceived value of quantitative and qualitative data, there was a preference for a mixed approach, combining the two types of data: *'the two are mutually dependent – they each give a context for the other...'* (respondent 44) and *'quality of what we do, and the numbers of people we reach with this work are both equally important'* (respondent 47). A small number of respondents (3, 14%) expressed a clear preference for quantitative data which they saw as providing evidence for management purposes, when influencing policy makers or when attracting funding, for meeting targets and benchmarking. Their perception was that, while not explicitly stated, there is an inherent message portrayed through the government funded bodies directing policy and finances that anecdotal, human stories are necessary for promotion but figures are what matter when accounting begins: *'Although funders & policy makers often say they want quantitative information I think they are often more impressed by anecdotal information from users'* (respondent 36).

There was also an awareness and understanding that both quantitative and qualitative data had their own advantages and disadvantages. Respondents tended to see the challenge as that of harnessing both in a meaningful manner and the need for both to be conducted and presented soundly: *'the challenge is to be rigorous'* (respondent 42).

#### 4.6. *Perceived value of support features*

In addition to the specific methodological interests, it was of interest to identify the kinds of support which might encourage active involvement in impact evaluation by practitioners. This includes the practice of dissemination of evaluation findings by practitioners. Marra expresses an obvious maxim, which is nonetheless not necessarily followed: *'What is critical for evaluation to have an impact, is that findings be widely disseminated'* (Marra, 2000). In a technology driven world, various electronic support features are now available to distribute evaluation findings that could raise the profile of evaluation and aid evaluation practice.

A number of support features were used in the study as illustrations of what web sites are able to provide to support and, potentially encourage, dissemination and interaction. The responses to this section of the site were based on samples only and not a fully functional website. Table 3 summarises practitioners' perceived values of various web portal support features.

Table 3: Breakdown of responses to the support features  
<insert table 3>

The majority of respondents indicated that guidance and toolkits and the email alert service were the support features that would be most useful. Readily available tools and techniques were considered important to enable efficient use of time by practitioners with demanding schedules, and drawing on practice from evaluation experts would minimise *'reinventing the wheel'* (respondent 45). Although the idea of a directory of service providers was received relatively favourably this was thought by some to conflict with the current climate of self-evaluation and the need to equip practitioners with the expertise and tools to conduct their own impact evaluation. The need to have a step-by-step guide for practitioners to follow was implied, or explicitly mentioned, by several respondents. Other suggestions included the ability to download and print tools ready to use; checklists and resources to support quality provision; star rating against a quality framework; and comparison of methodologies to allow matching to appropriate activity.

An alert service (either by email or *'monthly newsletter?'* (respondent 40)) would enable practitioners to access relevant and up-to-date information without necessarily visiting the website and would enable targeted use of available information: *'this would be essential for me to get the best from several bits of the site'* (respondent 44). It was also thought that providing the means of selecting the most relevant material for individual circumstances would also enhance the potential value of any support service. The alert service was generally seen as a more effective means of keeping up to date than a noticeboard which was perceived to require busy practitioners to spend more time in actively seeking out information.

A section on evaluation practice, i.e. how practitioners have tackled evaluation, was also considered to be useful. One practitioner elaborated on this, suggesting that it would be useful to see examples of similar local projects for comparison, while another suggested that examples could illustrate how relatively simple impact evaluation can be in practice. Respondents were also willing in principle to share practice although reservations were expressed about an organisation's ability to write up, collate and select evaluations for

dissemination in terms of staff time and capacity, and the difficulty of deciding the most appropriate time to report when work was in continual progress.

The use of online communities and discussion forums as a form of professional awareness and development tool has received some attention by the educational community (for example the closed communities English Talking Heads and Scottish Heads Together Projects, and the SENCO Forum for special educational needs co-ordinators). However, there are indications that practitioners in the impact evaluation portal sample have limited time to participate *'most of us never have time to read them'* (respondent 26) or *'sometimes can be time wasting'* (respondent 2). The need for moderation or the provision of an issue each week for discussion were suggestions to maintain focus and indeed moderation has played a major part in some online communities (Bradshaw, 2002). Despite this potential value it is also recognised that discussion forums create problems such as those mentioned by respondents: *'tend to degenerate'* (respondent 24), potential difficulties in *'attracting use'* (respondent 33), *'difficult to maintain'* (respondent 15).

Views on the value of e-journals were mixed. The lack of time to view and potential cost of subscribing to e-journals led to a reluctance by practitioners to commit to this feature: *'you tend to end up deleting them after a while, no time to read them though again when I do read them they can be helpful'* (respondent 26). Two respondents from the information domains (library and archive) felt journals were available through other channels and might not be appropriate here. However, there was an indication that providing a list of potentially useful journals specifically on impact evaluation would be worthwhile, thus raising awareness of publications not normally viewed within the sector: *'even knowing of existence'* (respondent 18) and *'The idea could be ideal as their [sic] must be as many journals I do not know about as there are ones I don't buy.'* (respondent 8). Thus a list of reference material and access points might be of more immediate value, allowing practitioners to make decisions about whether they wished to subscribe to services offering full-text or abstracts of articles. Another view was that the sector needed *'a general management e-journal with impact evaluation as one element'* (respondent 36).

Overall perceptions were that there was a definite need for support and for practitioners to undertake evaluation studies themselves. However there was also an ongoing concern about factors such as cost and lack of time, particularly amongst those from smaller organisations.

## **5. Conclusions**

Although this sample cannot be considered representative of the sector as a whole, the overall reaction to support for impact evaluation in the form of research evidence, practical guidance and other mechanisms to maintain practitioner awareness was positive. What, then, are the implications of the findings for professional learning?

The general impression from the study is that evaluation itself is at an early stage, and practitioner understanding of *impact* evaluation is one step behind that, both conceptually and in implementation. There is an awareness of evaluation in general and the need to look at users in more depth and the role this has for policy makers and professional understanding of services. However, the reaction to conducting impact evaluation was mixed. Some appear to be incorporating impact evaluation alongside performance

measurement while others, particularly the small organisations with limited staff and resources, expressed reservations about their ability to find time to either get to grips with the subject in sufficient depth, or be able to conduct evaluation themselves.

The primary goal for practitioners in undertaking impact evaluation was one of professional and organisation learning and the findings indicate that, in order to achieve this, there is a need for practical help and guidance. The advocacy role was of minor significance to the respondents in this sample, although the limited amount of *actual evidence* of impact available to date may have influenced this. However one factor determining the potential use of any information and support service is that of perceived need. The respondents appeared to fall into two groups: those embarking on impact evaluation with limited experience who wanted help in the form of practical tools and examples of techniques and instruments, and those with greater understanding of the issues who viewed the resources in terms of maintaining professional awareness, keeping up to date and being provided with pointers to relevant resources outwith their normal professional sources of information. Irrespective of level of experience, respondents were willing to learn from other sectors, and to a lesser extent other fields, both nationally and internationally, and to share experiences as a means of comparison and setting local evaluation in the wider context.

Despite the levels of interest in impact evaluation, both groups had reservations involving time, staffing, costs, focus and relevance (avoiding duplication and information overload). Time limitation was a significant factor recurring throughout the responses. Some responses indicated that a portal such as this would assist time management drawing together information on impact evaluation and alerting users to available material, while others appeared to consider it an additional burden on already limited time. The cost of implementing any quality impact evaluation was also the subject of consideration, particularly for the smaller institutions.

The constant tensions created by the provision of information can be reduced by using mechanisms to target information requirements enabling efficient use of the resources. Effective presentation of material is one means of enabling efficient selection and browsing of information for the particular need and context. The findings indicate that practitioners would appreciate a degree of analysis and synthesis in the presentation of information with the opportunity to explore further by means of annotated bibliographies arranged under appropriate headings. As already stated, maintaining the balance between key points and indepth subject matter is fundamental for information providers. Definitions and graphic representation of processes are also thought to be a useful means of enabling easy access to information.

An important part of any change in practice and developments in service provision requires professional learning and understanding and a need for practical guidance. Overall, practitioners agreed that support for impact evaluation in the form of evidence, tools, and shared experiences could contribute to increased awareness and understanding and help develop a common approach to impact evaluation, avoiding duplication across policy strategies and projects. The emphasis should be practical rather than research, although both the issues and practical aspects are important to improve the quality of evaluation and the quality of service provision. The comments, suggestions and warnings provide a useful summary of professional awareness and practitioner needs and any functional vehicle for providing impact evaluation support would require careful attention to content, presentation and mechanism for targeting use.

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<Table 1>

	Number (and %) of questionnaires sent	Number returned completed	Number returned not completed
Museums	19 (37%)	10	3
Archives	10 (20%)	6	0
Libraries	15 (29%)	4	0
Cultural or all	7 (14%)	1	1
Total	n=51 (100%)	n=21 (41.2%)	n=4 (7.8%)

<Table 2>

Type of responses	Frequency of responses Number of responses?				
	Museum	Archive	Library	Other	Total
Intellectually interesting, comprehensive, useful, relevant	9	4	4	1	18
Means of keeping up to date	4	1	1		6
Readily usable, able to extract information (ideas),	5	1	1		7
Time saving, avoids duplication	1				1
More attention should be given to work-place libraries, gaps identified in economic, archives and core functions		1	2		3
Too detailed for manager of small museum	1				1
Better navigation/layout needed as database expands	1				1

<Table 3>

	Very useful	Quite useful	Not useful	No response
Guidance and toolkits	16	4	0	1
Evaluation practice	10	9	0	2
Noticeboard	10	8	1	2
Directory of service providers	10	6	2	3
Discussion forum	5	11	1	4
E-journals	5	11	2	3
Email alert service	15	5	1	0