



Department
for Education

Evaluation Strategy

2025-2029

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Introduction: An increasingly evidence driven department

The Department for Education (DfE) has a long history of being evidence driven and has been developing its evaluation programme for some years, including implementing the recommendations of the [2013 Goldacre review](#) and publishing our [2022-2025 Evaluation strategy](#). In this 2025-2029 strategy we outline how we will meet the evaluation needs of the new government and how evaluation can support DfE in contributing to the government's mission-based approach.

Robust evaluation is essential for delivering the opportunity mission

We believe that evaluation and high-quality research is key to breaking down the barriers to opportunity and driving growth. There are two primary drivers of policy evaluation: learning and accountability. Learning helps create certainty around policy planning and implementation as it provides an understanding of what works for whom, how, why, and in what circumstances. Accountability relates to DfE being transparent with its stakeholders. Publicly sharing how we are checking that public money is being spent to achieve greatest impact and how well our policies are targeted.

To ensure our evidence is robust, the Department for Education's approach to evaluation is shaped by HM Treasury's [Magenta Book guidance on evaluation](#) and the [Green Book guidance on appraisal and evaluation](#). We also ensure we are producing high quality research and analysis by following [government social research guidelines](#).

Purpose of this document

This document sets out how DfE will build its evidence-base to support the planning and delivery of the government's mission-based agenda and specifically the DfE's mission, and how we will use evaluation to monitor our progress, identify areas where we can improve and report on our outcomes.

It describes how we will routinely monitor the delivery and value for money of our large cost and high-profile policies. Where there is a particular need to be transparent or add to our evidence-base we will also seek to measure our impact.

Evaluation Strategy 2025 - 2029

In line with our [2022-2025 strategy](#), DfE's evaluation strategy remains that evaluations are prioritised where policies are **high cost**, evaluation is practically possible, and the policy is either:

- **novel**, or not based on a strong evidence-base or
- **high risk** (e.g. risk if it does not work or risk of not having evidence needed to inform a decision).

DfE has strong analysis and monitoring practices embedded within our ways of working. Over the past three years we have also been successful in increasing our level of robust impact evaluation activity. However, there is more to do to fully understand the change DfE is achieving to support the department in delivery of our new missions. Our 2025-2029 strategy builds on our successes and aims to drive improvement by learning from the previous three years.

Why we need proportionate, robust, evaluation

Robust impact evaluation is the key to learning from our success and from policies that do not perform as expected. Evaluation can tell us if a) delivery is occurring as expected (e.g. highlight unexpected barriers or unintended impacts of other contexts) b) our work is achieving the change that it was designed to accomplish and c) the impact realised is worth the money spent.

A proportionate approach to evaluation is needed within the department to ensure that we are spending taxpayer's money appropriately. As outlined in the Magenta Book, not all activities will require the same effort and resources for evaluation. Complex, costly and untested policies/programmes tend to require external evaluation so we can be confident in drawing conclusions about their success. Smaller, routine policies which have been already tested may only need light touch assessment, as well as policies that are already based on robust evidence, such as Education Endowment Foundation trials.

Barriers and enablers to evaluation in DfE

There are several barriers to successful impact evaluation of the policies within the department's remit, one example is the large number of policies, which feed into many of our core outcomes, such as attainment. Outcomes can either be difficult to isolate due to the complexity of the system, or hard to measure due to external influences. The department also operates in a complex system where 'success' can be difficult to define and may depend on context, for example measures of children being taken into care.

Within DfE there are unique data assets that enable evaluation. The department's data collection provides an opportunity for detailed long-term tracking of our programmes, such as Individual Learner Records (ILR) data, and the school workforce census, as well as exam data and the National Pupil Database.

The DfE has bedded out analysts providing analytical support to policy areas, as well as central teams such as a central evaluation team which provides support to analysts scoping new evaluations, a dedicated Behavioural Insights Unit which applies insights from psychological, economic, and social sciences to build an understanding of how choices are made and empirically test interventions to positively influence choices, and a dedicated science team.

We work closely with our associated What Works Centres, such as the Education Endowment Foundation and Foundations (What Works Centre for Children and Families), and arm's length bodies, such as Ofsted and the Office for Students. Within the department we also run longitudinal panel studies and omnibus surveys which provide rich information. We also take part in international analysis projects, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). With these tools, and the skills and experience held within the department, there already exist enablers to enhance our evidence-base to drive opportunity and social justice.

Achievements of the 2022-2025 DfE Evaluation strategy

DfE has made excellent progress delivering its evaluation objectives. Amongst the first to publish an Evaluation Strategy for delivery of the 2021 Spending Review requirements, DfE has trained over 270 civil servants in the fundamentals of evaluation as part of its commitment to the Cabinet Office Evaluation Academy. The department continues to lead the way in contributing to the Cabinet Office Evaluation Registry. Over 200 of the 2,000 published reports pre-uploaded onto the Evaluation Registry were DfE reports.

The details of DfE's performance against our 2022-2025 strategy aims are set out in Annex A.

Objectives for the new strategy

The next sections set out our strategy for future work to utilise our enablers and overcome our barriers to support evidence building within the department, particularly in support of mission-based government. It will continue our progress against the objectives set out in our 2022-2025 strategy, taking into account the needs of our new government. It will also incorporate lessons learnt from delivery of the 2022-25 strategy including the importance of Theory of Change in setting the foundations for a robust and proportionate evaluation plan, the importance of including value for money in evaluation conclusions and the importance of considering the possibility of piloting prior to full roll out.

The key objectives of the 2025-2029 evaluation strategy are divided into four areas:

Table 1: 2025-2029 Objectives

| 2025 – 2029 aim | Current status | Success measure |
|---|---|---|
| Building a high-quality evidence-base to support delivery of our missions | We are consistently evaluating and publishing our results to build our evidence-base and this work must be maintained. To support mission delivery, evaluation needs to support innovative policy development and embed test and learn approaches. | DfE continues to have evaluation plans for all major projects, register evaluation plans on the Cabinet Office database, and publish all evaluation reports. Widening of the evaluation methods offer, such as including value for money evaluation. |
| Considering evaluation needs consistently and comprehensively at the policy planning stage. | Changes are being made to business case assessment, so evaluation is considered earlier, and a Theory of Change is increasingly required at the business case stage. However, policies are rarely piloted within the department. | All policies have considered evaluation needs and have a Theory of Change at the business case stage. |
| Testing policy and delivery assumptions and building in tight feedback loops to iterate prior to full roll-out. | We are piloting our policies, though this could become more common. We are also building in decision points based on when evaluation data is due. | Where piloting is appropriate, policies are developed using test and learn practices. Policies are piloted in a robust way with evaluation plans for full roll out. |
| Continuing our work to improve the research ecosystem | The department is continuing to work to increase the opportunities to securely, and lawfully, link sources of data together to provide more comprehensive data to support research and evaluation commissioned by government, and to enable better access and use by external researchers. We are working collaboratively on a number of evaluations. | We are continuing to work collaboratively to build our evidence-base. External research is supported through easy access to DfE data. Research that adds to our areas of research interest is enabled and supported through clear articulation of priorities. |

In delivering on these four areas, we are ensuring that evaluation is central to delivery of the Opportunity Mission by considering the evidence we already have on how to deliver better life chances for all – breaking the link between background and success. We are also building the evidence base on protecting children and ensuring the delivery of higher standards of education, training and care. In doing so, we are prioritising work which contributes to mission delivery.

Building a high-quality evidence-base to support delivery of our missions.

DfE has a new role as the government's department for opportunity, as well as a key role to play in driving growth. We have a vital part to play to ensure we create evidence-based opportunities for children and learners to achieve and thrive. We have high quality, experienced, analysts supporting policy teams. We will continue developing and delivering guidance and training on evaluation planning and delivery to maintain staff capability and confidence. We are also consistently scrutinising our evaluation plans, registering them centrally, and publishing the results of our evaluations.

Supporting innovation in mission delivery

Innovation is a core aim in mission delivery, we need new answers to new problems. Robust and pragmatic evaluation practices will be key in enabling that innovation; to provide feedback to drive improvement and provide confidence in conducting innovative practices.

Building and maintaining capability

Evaluation is a key component in understanding our contribution to opportunity and growth. We will take a pragmatic approach to evaluating our impact, utilising whichever evaluation approaches will deliver the best-value evidence for specific projects. Our methods decisions will be driven by our evidence needs and the strength of existing evidence supporting our programme theories. A strong training and guidance offer is therefore essential to ensure we are utilising the right methods to meet our evaluation needs.

We will continue to grow and maintain our evaluation capability so we can meet the challenges of delivering our missions. We have delivered evaluation training to over 270 civil servants within DfE, Ofsted and the Office for Students already as part of the Evaluation Academy. We will continue to offer this training to new starters and also utilise this training to meet the needs of non-analytical colleagues. We videoed our delivery of the 10 modules we delivered as part of the academy so staff can access the training all year round. We have been using excerpts of the videos in e-learning for policy professionals and will continue to build on this work, including delivering bespoke sessions to non-analytical teams from DfE and our arms-length bodies.

Making the best use of existing evidence: Evaluation Registry

The department continues to lead the way in uploading our evaluation plans and resulting publications to the registry, which the Cabinet Office has recently made open to the public. We aim to maintain this performance.

Taking a targeted approach: Government Major Projects Portfolio

As of March 2025, DfE has nine projects on the Government Major Projects Portfolio (GMPP), the list of the government's largest projects. In 2022, Parliament reported that only 8% of £432 billion of spend on major projects had robust impact evaluation plans in place¹. As of March 2025, all our GMPP projects have an evaluation plan in place. We aim to maintain this metric for all live policies.

Improving our understanding of the value we are achieving

Our initial Evaluation Strategy (2022 – 2025) focused on improving our approach to process and impact evaluation. In line with changes within government, teams are also encouraged to consider measurement of value for money. Where costs and benefits can be monetised, cost benefit analysis is encouraged. Where outcomes can be compared, cost-effectiveness analysis is encouraged. As part of this, and where there is an economic focus to delivery (e.g. our policies that involve funding via a Grant or Premium), teams are encouraged to consider the '4 E's' in their evaluations;

- Economy: Are we buying inputs of the appropriate quality for the right price?
- Efficiency: How well are we converting inputs into outputs?
- Effectiveness: How well are the outputs produced by an intervention achieving outcomes?
- Equity: How well have we targeted our delivery?

By increasing our scrutiny of evaluation plans at the business case stage, we enable a greater join up between economic appraisal, where options are appraised based on economic implications and evaluation.

Our approach to piloting to support innovative policy development, through evaluative methods such as test and learn, is set out in the next section.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-evaluation-task-force-strategy-2022-2025/the-evaluation-task-force-strategy-2022-2025-html#:~:text=In%20December%202019%2C%20the%20Prime,had%20no%20evaluation%20at%20all.>

Considering evaluation needs at the policy planning stage

Once a policy is planned, analysts have a key role to play in providing the information the department needs to understand it's progress. Below are three ways we are adding structure and consistency to our policy and evaluation planning.

Theories of Change

Policies are now required to have a Theory of Change set out in a logic model at the business case stage. Having a Theory of Change in a logic model provides a blueprint for an evaluation plan and ensures consistency in our understanding of a policy and its evidence-base from the start. Templates have been produced internally of logic models for internal use and to allow for publication to enhance transparency.

Evidence assessment

When a policy is first proposed, funding for the policy is often sought from HM Treasury through the Spending Review process. When that is the case, DfE has implemented a detailed framework for assessing the evidence that sits behind a policy plan to allow teams to identify from the outset where rigorous evaluation plans will be needed to fill evidence-gaps. This allows that evaluation need to be considered while the policy is still being planned.

Business cases, benefits management, and research prioritisation

We have a three-stage process for evaluation plan approval. Firstly, when a policy is at the business case stage, and approval for spend is being sought by teams through the DfE Investment Committee, high-level evaluation considerations are signed off. This includes considerations of baselines and counterfactuals, alongside economic appraisal and benefits management. The evaluation and benefits team work closely to ensure consistency in our approach to monitoring performance and reporting on impact.

Consideration is then given within local teams to the design of the evaluation, in the context of available resource and research need. Finally, the evaluation plan is then signed off at a central panel chaired by the DfE Chief Analyst, who also considers the evaluation plan within the broader research remit.

Testing assumptions prior to full roll-out

Even with a high-quality evidence-base to support policy design, it is still often necessary to make assumptions about delivery and success. Piloting untested policies allows us to tweak our policies to optimise delivery and make informed decisions supported by real time data and feedback before a policy is rolled out fully.

Establishing principles for piloting

From 2025 we are aiming to increase our piloting within DfE. However, piloting is only impactful when it is done well. We have set out the following principles for piloting and initiated a three-stage process for assessing if a pilot is viable at the policy planning stage.

Stage 1 checks that we have a clear problem statement, an understanding of why we have chosen the specific intervention/policy to test, we understand the basic theory of change, and there is a clear decision that the pilot is informing – and this work is an agreed priority.

Stage 2 assesses whether the pilot is possible/feasible. Teams are asked to consider if it will be possible to get the required size and deployment to generate actionable findings. In particular, they are asked to assess:

- **Feasibility:** There is a clear understanding of the current delivery system / market, including relationships with delivery partners, and piloting logistics.
- **Plausibility:** There is a high likelihood of measuring the outcomes required robustly. There is time to influence outcome measures, and an understanding of how required data will be collected.
- **Expertise:** Analysts involved have the expertise to manage and deliver a robust trial.
- **Testability:** Sample sizes will be large enough to draw conclusions.

Stage 3 gets into the more detailed planning of the specific methodological approach, timings, ethics, and data needs. Teams are encouraged to consider governance arrangements and how they will seek expert input. Pilots are split into three categories:

- **Test and learn:** a gradual iterative pilot, to refine and amend aspects of implementation and delivery, often in the run up to full roll out (e.g. through a stepped wedge, ‘winner stays on’ or agile approach). Doesn’t provide impact evidence, so an effectiveness trial may still be required for full roll-out.

- **Efficacy pilot:** trialling roll-out in a subset of the population. This can involve testing under 'ideal' conditions, or a scaled down representative sample. This is ideal for new interventions to generate early insight.
- **Effectiveness pilot:** trialling full roll-out for a limited time (e.g. policy changes). Testing whether under normal (rollout) circumstances the extent to which the intervention works. This is ideal when sampling isn't possible and may require quasi-experimental methods.

Piloting a new policy or decision is preferable to obtain robust information on performance which we can act on quickly. Where a pilot would be sub-optimal, alternative evaluation options will then be considered following our strategy. The aim of these principles is that what is possible is considered early in the policy planning process so the policy design can allow for the most optimal assessment method to enable evidence-based decision-making.

Continuing our work to improve the research ecosystem

As an evidence-based department, we rely on a wide range of data, analysis and research to inform strategy, policy and delivery. The department is committed to ensuring we, and the sectors we are responsible for, have all the data we need and are able to use it effectively for the benefit of children and learners. This includes our ambitions to maximise the use of the data it holds to support research and evaluation both within, and beyond, the department.

Supporting people to use data for excellent research

The department are working to ensure improved availability of data for use in research and evaluations that addresses the impact of policies and interventions for students and young people. Below of some examples of work we are doing to deliver on this objective.

Internal data access

The Analytical Data Access (ADA) service aims to create a “single front door” for analysis in DfE. ADA ensures data is fully governed, secure and discoverable using the latest cloud technology tools. This is significantly improving the speed and reliability of our data to deliver research and analysis needed to better inform wholistic policy and funding considerations.

External data access

DfE are at the forefront of data sharing across government with many of our processes promoted as models of good practice in the cross-government [Data Sharing Governance Framework](#). At the forefront of this work is a focus to improve, and build on, how DfE support cross-government and external research/analysis whilst continuing to safeguard children’s privacy and maintain public confidence in our processes.

There is established, and increasing, demand for access to DfE data with five datasets involving DfE data being classed by Administrative Data Research (ADR) UK as a [flagship dataset](#). DfE welcomes lawful, and public interest driven, demand for our data, and works closely with the ONS to safely, and securely, widen access to the data we are responsible for via their Secure Research Service (SRS) and on the transition of DfE data into the Integrated Data Service (IDS).

Creation of new linked assets

The department is also continuing to work to increase the opportunities to securely, and lawfully, link sources of data together to provide more comprehensive data to support research and evaluation. Available data includes:

- i. **Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO):** Links benefits, employment, and earnings data from DWP and HMRC together with education data from the DfE and devolved administrations to chart the progression and outcomes of learners and the educational routes that they follow into the labour market.
- ii. **Pupil Parent Matched Dataset (PPMD):** Linked DfE, DWP and HMRC data for the purpose of understanding how educational attainment varies with household (parental) income.
- iii. **DfE-MoJ linked Data:** linked education and justice data for the purpose of increasing understanding of the links between childhood characteristics, education outcomes and (re)-offending.
- iv. **Growing up in England (GUIE):** Links education data to the ONS population census to address gaps in evidence around the lives of vulnerable children.
- v. **Education and Child Health Insights from Linked Data (ECHILD):** Links education and health data to improve understanding of how education affects children's health and how health affects children's education.

DfE Data Access and Engagement Programme

The department are part way through a programme of work in partnership with Administrative Data Research (ADR) UK which is delivering on the dual goals of:

- i. supporting the streamlining of access to the department's administrative data for accredited researchers
- ii. sharing the department's key research interests through a programme of roundtables (see also the 'Areas of Research Interest', in the next section).

Creating a collaborative research environment

As a department, we are considering how we can make best use of external expertise, as well as continuing to be ambitious in our thinking for research and development. We aim to support high quality research through articulating our research priorities and building a supportive research ecosystem by working with evaluation delivery partners, learning from best practice, supporting research organisations and collaborating with other government departments.

The DfE evaluation speaker series

We have set up a programme of talks within the department to connect our analysts with external experts. Since the series started in 2021, we have held over 20 talks from academics, what works centres, other government departments and research agencies.

The subject of the talks has included how to evaluate whether policies are contributing to social justice, when to use randomised controlled trials and quasi-experimental methods in schools, and sharing lessons learnt from previous evaluations, such as analysis of the impact of school funding on crime. We will continue this series to build our collective knowledge of robust and innovative evaluation techniques and how to best evaluate our contribution to mission delivery.

Working collaboratively on evaluation

We have a strong history of working collaboratively to build our evidence base. Examples include [Supporting Families](#), a cross-government initiative to help families with complex needs get the support they need, and [Multiply](#), a cross-government adult numeracy programme. We are working with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the Cabinet Office to robustly evaluate Multiply, to understand how best to increase the levels of functional numeracy in the adult population across the UK. We will continue to work with experts in and around government to ensure that work is not duplicated, and evidence is shared.

Areas of Research Interest

We also seek to stimulate and shape educational research happening without our direct funding or involvement. We have undertaken a programme of research engagement, including running evidence roundtables, and publish the Department's [Areas of Research Interest](#) (ARI) to systematically set out the areas of departmental policy and delivery objectives that we want to understand better. We have recommenced our roundtable programme post-election, working with stakeholder experts to help support the missions goal of working in partnership.

Annex A: Evaluation Strategy 2022-2025

All departments were required to demonstrate a stronger and more consistent approach to evaluation as part of the 2021 Spending Review. Our strategic plan set out the detail of how we intended to deliver our 2022 DfE Evaluation Strategy over a three-year period.

We also had four areas of initial focus, set out below.

Table 2: Summary of evaluation strategy 2022-2025

| Aim | Detail |
|--|---|
| Enabling greater oversight | Continue the improvement of our internal evaluation management information, to produce detailed information on our ongoing evaluation projects which will deliver insight into which parts of our work are not currently being evaluated. Providing a full internal picture of the level of evaluation for all projects to get a picture of the coverage and different types and scopes of ongoing evaluations |
| Ensuring evaluations are proportionate and well planned | Be strategic in our overall evaluation activity, ensuring evaluations are only in place when needed, and that adequate support is given where evaluations are complex. A strategic approach to evaluations will allow for early decision making and the collection of baseline data where appropriate. In this way, risks are considered and mitigated, ethical and GDPR requirements are met, and evaluations are aligned to business planning. |
| Enhancing the robustness of our evaluations | Provide leadership and team support on increasing the quality of our evaluations and ensuring skills and advice are in place to produce robust evaluations of our policies and programmes Ensuring all DfE evaluations are performed to a high standard. This allows DfE to make evidence-based decisions when targeting resources and respond robustly to external scrutiny. It also allows for findings to be easily compared in the future and studies to be replicated. |
| Encouraging efficiency in evaluation | Support efficient practice, providing advice and guidance to teams on existing resources so that in house resources (such as previous evaluations or existing data) are utilised where appropriate. This will reduce duplication of effort and allow for easier synthesis of existing evidence. Also encouraging use of internal and external longitudinal data and making data easier to use in evaluation by making it easier to add flags. |

As well as the four key areas set out above, our strategy for increasing robust impact evaluation in DfE was foremost that where a new policy is planned, the appropriateness of that evaluation within the wider DfE picture should be examined. Activities which are a) high cost, b) novel, or not based on a strong evidence-base or c) high risk (e.g. risk if it does not work or risk of not having evidence needed for a decision) are prioritised for impact evaluation.

DfE has been a core contributor to the Cabinet Office Evaluation Academy. In 2023, more than 1,100 civil servants were trained via the Cabinet Office Evaluation Academy across 13 departments and the Scottish Government in the Academy's first year - 200 of those were from DfE. In 2024 DfE ran the training again with around 70 additional civil servants, this time expanding the training to include analysts and policy staff from Ofsted and the Office for Students (OfS).

DfE has also led the way in contributing to the Cabinet Office Evaluation Registry. In the spring of 2024, the Cabinet Office launched an evaluation report registry within government. Over 200 of the 2,000 published reports pre-uploaded onto the Evaluation Registry were DfE reports. Within the first quarter of its launch, the department had uploaded the details of over 40 live evaluations, making it one of the most prolific departments for ongoing evaluation projects.

The details of our performance against our objectives is set out below.

Performance against our 2022 objectives

Overall, we have been successful in meeting our strategy for increasing the level of robust evaluation in DfE. We either met or are on course to meet all of our objectives for 2022-2025.

Two key enablers have been the Cabinet Office Evaluation Registry, an online registry of evaluation plans and reports that all departments are contributing to, and the Cabinet Office Evaluation Academy, a ten module course that departmental evaluation leads have been rolling out within their departments.

The table on the next page sets out our performance.

Table 3: Evaluation strategy success measures

| Strategic aim | Current Status | Current Assessment |
|--|---|--|
| Enabling greater oversight | We have an internal live database with details of all evaluations of policy interventions. | Achieved – this Internal database feeds into the Cabinet Office Evaluation Registry. DfE was a key contributor in the setup of the registry. |
| | Policy professionals are incorporating evaluation early in their delivery plans | On course – training has been designed for policy and changes are being made to business case assessment so evaluation is considered earlier. |
| Ensuring evaluations are proportionate and well planned | Policy business cases are interrogated through DfE governance structures as to whether they have proportionate evaluation plans. Theories of Change and benefits realisation are signed off at business case stage. | On course – training based on the Cabinet Evaluation Academy has been produced internally for DfE policy staff and changes are being made to business case assessment so evaluation is considered earlier. |
| | Updated guidance and resources are available on the evaluation hub | Achieved. |
| Enhancing the robustness of our evaluations | All new evaluations have their robustness reviewed at research proposal stage | Achieved. |
| | Evaluation is recorded in a way that allows for future replicability. (e.g. through trial protocols and publishing technical reports) | On course – trial protocols are used as standard for our experimental evaluations. |
| | Staff evaluation confidence and capability is maintained. Links are maintained with external stakeholders to keep up to date with latest techniques | Achieved. |

| | Current Status | Current Assessment |
|---|---|--|
| Encouraging efficiency in evaluation | We are publishing what works as well as what doesn't work in different contexts. | Achieved. |
| | All new proposals can show to internal review boards that they have worked collaboratively by reviewing and considering relevant past projects and stakeholder work in research proposal submissions. | Achieved. |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We have a searchable directory of previous project evaluations | Achieved – via the Cabinet Office Evaluation Registry. |
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where appropriate, central data collections are used to support evaluations | On course. |



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