

Scoping Conversation Guide

How to conduct a project scoping conversation



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Context

Scoping conversations should help you **identify 1) an evaluation opportunity that is meaningful, novel, and actionable and 2) departmental collaborators to join the evaluation project team.** After conducting scoping conversations, your evaluation team should have a few promising potential evaluation project ideas that should then be presented to departments to dive into feasibility considerations. These conversations should also help build excitement about evaluation and interest in working with the evaluation team.

Below we include a suggested agenda with sample questions for each of the four objectives in the conversation:

- Build excitement and interest in evaluation for current or potential evaluation projects
- Identify potential evaluation opportunities
- Confirm department interest and capacity to participate in an evaluation project
- Begin discussing feasibility considerations

Think through which of the questions might be most important to learn from each conversation. You likely will not get to ask all of these questions in one meeting, so adapt the questions as you see fit.

Build Excitement and Interest in Evaluation

Before diving into scoping these conversations with departments, you will likely want to prepare an evaluation pitch. The pitch should spur excitement, interest, and buy-in from departments:

- Share a short evaluation pitch that shows how evaluation can be **meaningful** for cities and how the findings can be used to achieve or further department goals.
- Integrate an example or two from your city if possible to show **actionable** evaluations.
- Brainstorm **novel** evaluation opportunities that could help departments achieve their goals

For additional ideas, we recommend referring to Module 3.1 "Identifying an Evaluation Opportunity" in BIT's online evaluation course ["Knowing What Works: Adding Evaluation to Your City's Toolkit."](#)

Identify Potential Evaluation Opportunities

Step 1: Brainstorm meaningful program/policies/initiatives

Note: If you know very little about the on-going programming that a department is responsible for you may want to start even more broadly. For example, "Can you tell me more about the resident-facing services that your department provides?"

- What are some of the most pressing challenges your department is currently facing to serve residents?
 - What do you believe are some of the drivers of the problem?
 - Who is most affected by the challenge(s)?
 - What is the scope of the program (how many people, what are the consequences)?
- Do you have any new policies, programs, or initiatives you are implementing in the near future? Alternatively, do you have any substantive changes that

you are considering making to existing programs that would impact residents?

- What is the impetus for creating (starting) this program?
- Who will be the primary audience for the program? How many people will participate in the program?
- Do you have any current programs you want to better understand? For example, what impact they are having on residents, facilitators or inhibitors of their success, etc.
 - Can you describe how this program is functioning now?
 - What information would you like to have about the program? What has held you back from collecting that information?

Step 2: Consider how the results from an evaluation would be actionable for the department

- For each of the “meaningful” opportunities mentioned:
 - What would success look like an evaluation of the program/policy/initiative? (e.g. more residents pay outstanding parking tickets, the department understands where residents with past due water payments drop off in the application process for income-based repayment plans and can provide new targeted supports, etc.)
 - Is there information you wish you had that could change the way the department operates in the future?
 - Are there upcoming decisions the department needs to make about the program?
 - Who might benefit from addressing this challenge, both in your department or elsewhere in the city?
 - Who are the stakeholders who would control or approve taking action on this opportunity? Are those stakeholders willing to do this - and on what time horizon?

- Are there relevant political or budget cycles related to this opportunity that could either accelerate or prevent action from being taken?

Step 3: Ensure results from an evaluation would be novel for both the department and the city.

- Would an evaluation give you new information that you wouldn't have had otherwise?
- Does performance management or quality assurance checks provide sufficient, reliable information?
- Is there other existing evidence (including from other cities or academic sources) to understand the problem, identify the best solution, or validate assumptions?

Confirm Interest, Capacity and Resources

- Is there a group or team within the department that is interested in evaluations or would want to work on the potential evaluation project(s)? Do they have context for the program/policy/initiative we are considering for the evaluation?
- Are there relevant staff members who have the capacity to work with us? The project team will participate in regular meetings with the evaluation team and work with us to design and implement the evaluation.
- Is leadership excited about evaluating and ready to support the potential evaluation project(s)?
- Are there any staff members with existing evaluation experience?
- Would there be a monetary cost to implement any of the evaluations you're considering? If so, how might that be covered?

Consider Technical Feasibility

Note: We intentionally do not list feasibility as one of the criteria for identifying evaluation opportunities to avoid narrowing your evaluation options too soon. This

information is helpful to collect in early discussions and make a note of, but should not be a priority to interrogate in this meeting.

- What data does the department collect about the potential program/policy/initiative?
 - Who (or what) is included in the data? How and when is the data collected?
 - Who collects the data? Who manages the data? Can you reach those staff to learn more about the data collection process?
 - Are there any data sharing requirements or limitations?
- What are the important dates and deadlines associated with the potential evaluation opportunities?
- If the department has raised evaluation opportunities that would benefit from an intervention that reaches recipients of a particular service or general resident outreach:
 - What touchpoints do you have with the target population for the program/policy/initiative? (e.g. bi-annual appointments, email newsletter, etc.)
 - If the department is interested in reaching a population they don't have regular touchpoints with, are there other departments or services that reach their population of interest?

Facilitation note: Consider whether the conversation has uncovered whether the department is more interested in understanding how or why a program/policy/initiative is working or could work (process evaluation) or what a program/policy/initiative is achieving or could achieve.

- **For a process evaluation:** What scope of the program would the department want to evaluate? (e.g., part of a program vs. a program with multiple services)
- **For an impact evaluation:** Would we have the ability to randomize, enabling a RCT? How much control do we have over the participant experience to enable this? How large is the sample size?

Red Flags

Below is a list of potential red flags, or things to watch out for when scoping evaluation opportunities. These can be indicators that a project is not a great fit for an evaluation right now, although it may be in the future.

You perceive a lack of buy-in

- It's difficult to identify a clear point of contact within the department to manage the project.
- Leadership is not interested in the project or actively opposed to evaluation.
- It would be very difficult to get the necessary approvals for the project.

The timing doesn't feel right

- The department is about to face a higher than normal workload. This could be due to different factors like seasonality, high turnover, budget cuts, etc.
- Staff do not have the capacity to take on more responsibility.
- The evaluation needs to take place immediately (within the next month) or far in the future (starting next year).
- It is not possible to secure additional funding needed for the potential evaluation (e.g. it is off-budget cycle).

The topic isn't well suited for evaluation

- You cannot articulate the "so what" for how the findings from the evaluation would change their work at scale, impact staff and residents, etc.
- The problem or area for improvement affects a small amount number of residents
 - For impact evaluations, there may not be a large enough sample size to detect the impact of the program.
 - For process evaluations, you would want to weigh the potential impact of the findings on such a small population. What is the scale of the

problem for the affected residents? Can the findings be applied elsewhere?

- There are no processes in place for collecting data about the potential opportunity or no system to track outcomes of interest. For projects where you are interested in quantitative data, this would mean setting up a new process that could require significant time and investment. Alternatively, this could mean manual data collection which could be time consuming for staff to undertake or provide data that requires more cleaning for analysis.
- There isn't a clear way to reach the target population. The department may not have contact information for their target population or have a process to identify who falls into the group of interest.
- The new initiative or changes to an initiative have low risk of negative outcomes. There is sufficient evidence that the initiative will be successful without a risk of harm or unintended effects. It may not be worth the time and resources to run a rigorous evaluation.