Rapid Evaluation Advice and Learning (REAL) Service: Further information.

# Background and purpose of the service

Members of Camden Council with need of support in monitoring, evaluation and learning (MEL) can request expertise from UCL via UCL’s new Rapid Evaluation Advice and Learning Service (REAL Service) which matches them to UCL volunteers with relevant skills.

The REAL service has been set up to provide short-term, light-touch MEL advice for key Covid19-affected council services and interventions. It forms part of Listen and Respond, one of UCL’s responses to the pandemic.

The REAL service is in its second pilot phase throughout late August / September 2020. The learning and reflections from both pilot phases will contribute to a proposal for resource to establish a more permanent service.

# Why now? :

At the onset of the Covid-19 lockdown, Camden Council were required to re-engineer almost all their key services, from child support to business growth, within a matter of days.

Before the pandemic, re-configuring Camden’s public policy and community services would have taken many months and would be accompanied by a variety of assessments, including cost-benefit, equality of access, sustainability and environmental impact.

During the pandemic, few assessments were conducted prior to rolling out the change in service, such was the speed of redesign. Now, the local authority has an urgent opportunity to monitor, evaluate and learn from their performance, and would benefit from outside advice and expertise.

The MEL guidance which UCL volunteers provide could help Camden Council decisions on whether to revert to original models or switch to a redesigned model.

Camden Council and UCL have signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) which covers the pilot of the REAL Service until September 30th 2020.

# What support will UCL Staff be able to provide?

The REAL Service has been specifically designed to be purely short-term, light touch and responsive. The type of MEL information, advice and guidance that UCL academics/PS Staff provide could be, for example:

* Support to develop evaluation frameworks and plans
* Support to identify appropriate evaluation methods
* Advice on prioritising evaluation questions
* Guidance on analysing data
* Advice on implementing evaluation methods
* Reviewing evaluation materials
* Guidance on embedding learning practices
* Signposting to useful resources or existing work

# What do we mean by evaluation?

It’s important to distinguish what we mean by ‘evaluation’ in relation to the REAL Service. The support and advice available covers both ‘monitoring’ and ‘evaluation’:

Monitoring: The collection of data or information, in a systematic and organised way, to capture and assess what is being done (sometimes known as service evaluation)

Evaluation:Using monitoring or other information to reflect upon and make judgement about what is being done and make changes/improvements (sometimes known as ‘responsive research’).

**Evaluation can be:**

Formative: Normally carried out at the beginning or during an activity/intervention, formative evaluation is an ongoing process of reflection which shapes and informs while changes can be still made.

Summative:Normally carried out at the end of a project, seeks to assess the changes the activity/interaction has made against the intended objectives and identify learning that could inform future projects.

Evaluation from a University’s perspective, is different to research:

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| **Evaluation** | **Research** |
| Generates information for decision making | Generates new knowledge |
| Generally stakeholder focussed | Generally researcher focussed |
| Uses evaluation questions (So what? How well does it work? Was it valuable?) | Uses theories, hypotheses and research questions (What is going on? How does it work?) |
| Makes recommendations | Makes research recommendations |
| Reports to stakeholders | Publishes findings in peer-reviewed outputs |
| Designed to improve something | Designed to understand something |
| Provides the basis for decision-making | Provides the basis for drawing conclusions |

For further information on evaluation you can watch the short (8 minute) video prepared by UCL Culture here: [Introduction to Evaluation](https://youtu.be/Gnx3DAFlR90)

There is also a free online course hosted on the UCL eXtend platform: [Evaluating the Impact of Engagement](https://extend.ucl.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=676) (please note you will need to sign up to a free eXtend account and the course is aimed at researchers carrying out Public Engagement)