Foundations

What Works Centre for Children & Families

OPEN CALL FOR QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN EVALUATIONS

Application guidance

Application deadline: 12pm (noon), Tuesday 1 July, 2025

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What Works Centre for Children & Families

foundations.org.uk

OPEN CALL OUT FOR QEDꜱ: APPLICATION GUIDANCE

Foundations, the national What Works Centre for Children & Families is excited to be launching an open call for impact evaluations using a quasi-experimental design (QED). Proposals must be aligned with Foundations' strategic priority areas and focused on understanding outcomes related to safety, stability, and supportive relationships for children and young people.

If you are interested in submitting a proposal, please complete the application form and submit any supporting documentation by **12pm (noon), Tuesday 1ˢᵗ July 2025** via our application portal.

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Background

At Foundations, our mission is to generate and champion actionable evidence that improves services to support family relationships in order for vulnerable children to have the foundational relationships they need to thrive in life. We know that QEDs are an underutilised tool in our sector and are keen to work with partners to enact change.

The Research Community Catalyst we are funding with ADR-UK has identified gaps in how administrative data is used, highlighting that very few evaluations use administrative data. Areas

such as domestic abuse and relationships for care experienced young people are often neglected. In addition, there is insufficient evidence generation on the experiences and outcomes of minoritised ethnic children and young people.

Scope

Applications must be related to Foundations' priority areas and match at least one of the following criteria:

- Must be related to current government missions or a local practice need
- Must have a focus on equality, diversity, inclusion and equity (EDIE).

More information on each of these criteria can be found below.

Foundations' priority areas

A link to Foundations' strategy and priority areas can be found here.

We are seeking applications that would map onto one of the following of our priority areas:

- Domestic abuse
- Supporting parenting
- Strengthening family networks
- Relationships for care-experienced children.

Government missions or local practice needs

Relevant government missions include the Opportunity and Safer Streets missions. The Opportunity Mission's priority areas include setting children up for the best start in life by strengthening and joining up family services to improve support through pregnancy to early childhood and building family security by ensuring every child has a safe loving home; and tackling the barriers that mean too many families struggle to afford the essentials. It is also focused on helping every child to achieve and thrive at school, with a particular focus on disadvantaged children and those with special educational needs and disabilities and building skills for opportunity and growth. The Government's key milestone for this mission is for 75% of 5-year-olds to reach a 'good level of development' in the Early Years Foundation Stage assessment by 2028. This assessment looks at children's development across areas like language, personal, social and emotional development, and maths and literacy. The Safer Streets Mission's aims include halving knife crime and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) within a decade.

Local practice needs may include responding to the Government's children's social care reform programme and new statutory duties outlined in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. For example, developing a local offer for kinship carers, forming multi-agency child protection teams or work to ensure care experienced children and young people have loving relationships.

Equality, diversity, inclusion and equity (EDIE) focus

At Foundations, our vision is that all vulnerable children, regardless of their background or characteristics, have the foundational relationships they need to thrive in life. We know that better outcomes for children and families are reliant on the policymakers, practitioners, and commissioners who use our research to make decisions.

We are aware of the substantial racial disparities that exist in early intervention and children's social care that cannot be explained by deprivation alone. Differences in representation of minoritised ethnic groups are present across the children's social care system. These differences indicate that some groups don't receive the support they need, resulting in poorer outcomes, while others are more likely to have a higher level of intervention. As such, we want to consider what can be learnt about racial disparity in all studies that we carry out and fund.

Racial inequality is the primary focus within our EDIE strategy. However, we also welcome evaluations that explore other protected characteristics and dimensions of inequality where these are relevant to the intervention or context. Proposals may focus on these dimensions individually or consider how they intersect with racial inequality.

Any funded project must seek to explore outcomes for children, young people and/or families from minoritised ethnic backgrounds. We also strongly encourage proposals that, where appropriate, involve children, young people and/or families from minoritised ethnic backgrounds in shaping the evaluation — for example, through consultation, advisory input, or co-design of tools or methods and/or to ensure their voices are captured within the IPE. This is particularly important where data on these groups is limited or inconsistent.

We would also particularly welcome evaluation projects which exclusively focus on children and young people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds.

Eligibility

Applicant eligibility

The lead applicant must represent a registered charity, company, statutory body, community interest company, or academic institution. We welcome applications from partnerships or consortia, provided one organisation takes on the role of lead applicant. The lead organisation will be responsible for overseeing the project, ensuring good governance, signing the grant agreement, and making sure any subcontracted partners comply with its terms and conditions.

Project eligibility

We are only able to fund evaluations of projects, interventions, policies that are/have been delivered in **England**.

PICOT guidance

To minimise applications that are out of scope, we have developed the following PICOT framework as additional guidance for applicants:

Population

Evaluations should focus on one of the following populations:

- Children at risk of statutory intervention
- Children receiving interventions from children's services (including through Family Help, the care system, leaving care support), or Family Hubs
- Children on permanence orders (SGOs).

Subgroups of interest

We would also expect evaluations to consider outcomes and experiences of children, young people and/or families from minoritised ethnic backgrounds, in line with our EDIE expectations outlined above.

Interventions

Evaluations could cover any interventions, programmes or policies in our priority areas. Interventions may be provided to children, their families or the workforce. These could include for example:

- Parenting interventions, whether for parents or carers
- Interventions supporting carers of children in or on the edge of care, e.g. Mentoring and coaching for carers, Weekender programmes, support programmes for Kinship Carers
- Programmes which keep children safe from domestic abuse
- Interventions that support children in care or care leavers to develop or maintain loving and lasting relationships, e.g. Family Finder programmes, mentoring programmes, foster care
- System level interventions, including Family Safeguarding or multi-agency arrangements
- Workforce interventions, including training like Safe and Together
- Anti-poverty or financial well-being programmes for children and families
- We would also welcome applications for evaluations of policies, e.g. on benefits to families.

Please note that the above list is intended to provide examples of areas of interest. The list is not exhaustive, and we have not determined the feasibility of conducting a QED of the above programmes.

Outcomes

As per our strategy, the long-term outcomes we are aiming to achieve are:

1. Children and young people are supported by their family to thrive
2. Children and young people and families stay together as much as is safely possible
3. Children and young people are safe in their homes
4. Children in care and care leavers have stable, loving relationships.

These outcomes are intentionally high-level and are designed to reflect the broader strategic goals we are working towards. For the purposes of this funding call, evaluators are encouraged to identify **measurable, intermediate outcomes** appropriate for a quasi-experimental design that serve as **proxies** for these long-term outcomes. These may vary depending on the intervention, data source, and timeframe of the evaluation.

Data sources

We welcome the use of any administrative data source. The list below provides examples of commonly used datasets in children's social care, but it is not exhaustive:

- Data on children in care from the SSDA903
- Data on referrals to CSC, children in need and children with a child protection plan from the CiN Census
- The National Pupil Database
- E-Child
- Local authority data
- Data from various sources on domestic abuse
- Crime and policing data
- Other administrative data held by agencies
- Archived evaluation datasets.

We also encourage applicants to consider data held by organisations and agencies that work directly with children and families, as these sources often provide valuable insight into the lived experiences of children and can complement administrative datasets effectively.

We recognise that administrative data will not always provide direct measures of the strategic outcomes listed above. Instead, we encourage evaluators to identify **fit-for-purpose, measurable outcomes** available in these datasets that can act as **meaningful proxies**. Where appropriate, a rationale for the selected outcome measures and their alignment with Foundations' long-term goals should be included in the application.

Approach and methodologies for evidence generation

Regarding approaches to evidence generation, we would welcome:

- Quasi-experimental impact evaluation methods, including Difference in Differences, synthetic controls, regression discontinuity design and instrumental variables design.
  - We are also interested in the use of matching, but normally only in combination with another method

- Designs that have the potential to generate strong causal claims will be favourably scored
- Re-analysis of existing evaluation data. This might be data held in a data archive, for example; or providing additional funding to existing evaluations to analyse outcomes of interest to Foundations. This might include subgroup analyses for children with a social worker, children from minoritised ethnic backgrounds and disabled children.

We may consider providing a budget to facilitate novel data linkages, provided this can be carried out within the time frame of this funding call.

We will also provide a budget for the team to undertake an implementation and process evaluation (IPE), which we expect to be smaller in scale than those we typically commission. As a guide, this might include qualitative fieldwork such as interviews or focus groups with up to 40 participants, or a combination of a smaller number of interviews alongside a short survey. We particularly encourage approaches that include the voice and experiences of children and young people, where appropriate, to help deepen understanding of how interventions are delivered and experienced in practice.

Partnerships

We recognise that this funding call will require expertise in several areas, including:

- QED designs
- Data access and understanding of relevant datasets
- The sector and practice context that these projects and policies are delivered within.

We expect strong multi-disciplinary proposals that can demonstrate expertise across all relevant areas. Consortium or partnership proposals are highly encouraged.

We expect that the funding call timeline will give applicants sufficient time to work with their networks and build meaningful partnerships ahead of submission. Partnerships that are thoughtfully designed and demonstrate clear, complementary expertise will be viewed favourably in our assessment process.

If you have questions about what expertise may be needed for your proposal or would like suggestions on where to begin looking for suitable partners, you are welcome to get in touch with us at **evaluation@foundations.org.uk**.

Assessment criteria

We are committed to supporting evaluations that are rigorous, relevant, and feasible. While we are open to a range of proposals, applications will be assessed against the following broad criteria to guide our decision-making:

1. Strategic alignment

Proposals must be aligned with Foundations' priority areas and outcomes of interest. In addition, proposals should also include a focus on:

- Relevant government missions or pressing local practice needs
- Children and young people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds.

We are particularly interested in evaluations that demonstrate relevance across more than one of these areas, and that clearly articulate the rationale for their focus.

2. Strength and suitability of the evaluation design

We will assess whether the proposed QED is clearly explained and appropriate to the context. This includes the strength of the counterfactual, consideration of bias and confounding, and the robustness of the overall approach.

3. Data access, feasibility, and ethical considerations

We will consider how clearly applicants have identified the data they will use, the feasibility of accessing that data within the project timelines, and how well the data fits the proposed evaluation questions. Proposals that use administrative data and have clear access routes will be viewed favourably.

We will also assess how the project will ensure data security and meet ethical standards, including safeguarding participant confidentiality, ensuring informed consent where applicable, and complying with relevant data protection requirements.

4. EDIE considerations

We will assess how well the project embeds an EDIE lens throughout the evaluation. This includes attention to sample representation, analysis of differential impacts, and stakeholder engagement. Projects that foreground the experiences and outcomes of children and young people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds are particularly welcome.

5. Deliverability

We will consider the strength and experience of the core project team, the suitability of any partnership, the clarity of roles and responsibilities, and the realism of the proposed timeline.

6. Impact and contribution to the wider evidence base

Finally, we will look at how the evaluation would add value to the existing evidence base — whether by focusing on an under-evaluated intervention or group, addressing a clear knowledge gap, or

reanalysing existing data in a new way. We are especially interested in projects that have the potential to influence practice or policy.

Timelines

Project timelines

We would like to fund a range of projects and will prioritise proposals that are able to access and analyse data in time to deliver findings within a shorter timeframe. However, we understand that access to administrative data can be delayed.

As such, all projects must:

- Complete all evaluation activities and have submitted a final report by March 2027 at the latest
- Provide a comprehensive interim update by March 2026, either in the form of preliminary findings or, where data access is delayed, a detailed progress report outlining progress on project setup, ethical approvals, data access, early lessons from the IPE if applicable, and risks.

We ask applicants to set out a clear, realistic timeline for their project in their application, including plans for any interim updates and when they expect to deliver a draft final report.

Funding call timelines

We will be closing this funding call at **12pm (noon) on Tuesday 1 July, 2025**. Please see below for indicative call timelines:

Activity	Key dates
Call for QEDs open	Monday 31 March
Call for QED proposals close	12pm (noon), Tuesday 1 July
Rebuttal	w/c 21 and 28 July
Applicants notified of outcome	w/c 1 September
Successful projects commence	From w/c 7 September

Successful applicants can expect to hear from us in early September 2025 and begin work on the evaluation shortly thereafter.

Budget

We anticipate awarding up to five evaluations, awarding up to a maximum of **£200,000 per evaluation**. Of the £200,000, we suggest allocating up to £150,000 for the QED and an additional £50,000 could be allocated for an IPE and any stakeholder engagement activities. Applicants are welcome to propose multiple evaluations; in such cases, the budget would be adjusted accordingly.

Detailed budgets should be returned using the [template provided](#).

Please note:

- Foundations will not pay Full Economic Costings (FEC) for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), which means only direct costs for HEIs will be covered (i.e. expenses that are directly related to the running of the project including staff salaries, equipment and materials specifically used for this project, and travel costs for fieldwork etc)
- Foundations will, however, fund some overhead costs for non-HEIs, but we do not expect these to exceed 60% of total staff salaries
- We would be happy to cover direct costs that bolster the evaluation's EDIE ambitions, which might include payments for advisory group members, incentives for participation, translation and interpretation services etc.
- Successful evaluation projects will be awarded as grants, so VAT is not applicable.

Expectations of funded partners

We are committed to working collaboratively with our funded partners to deliver high-quality, transparent, and impactful evaluations. To support this, we ask all successful applicants to meet the following expectations:

Award and onboarding

Successful applicants will:

- Undergo onboarding checks and due diligence before a final grant agreement is issued. These checks may include financial due diligence, organisational governance reviews, and data protection.
- Be required to sign a grant agreement and ensure that the lead applicant and any subcontracted partners abide by these terms. If you would like to review a copy of Foundations' standard terms and conditions in advance, please contact us at evaluation@foundations.org.uk to request this.

Project setup and delivery

Successful applicants will:

- Participate in an initial kick-off meeting with the Foundations team and join monthly progress meetings throughout the project. Please note that more frequent meetings may be required during the evaluation set-up stage.
- Develop appropriate research questions, methodology, and outcome measures in consultation with Foundations.
- Seek appropriate ethical approval and ensure compliance with data protection legislation.
- Draft a detailed evaluation protocol, which will be reviewed and signed off by Foundations and published on our website. Evaluators will also be expected to preregister their protocol on the Open Science Framework.
- Take responsibility for securing all necessary data access and for delivering data collection as outlined in the proposal.
- Conduct all analyses as outlined in the preregistered protocol.
- Ensure the team and any wider partnership are appropriately onboarded, with clear roles and responsibilities across all contributors.
- Submit quarterly financial reports against the final agreed budget, as well as completing a final statement of spend at the end of the project.

Reporting and transparency

Evaluators will be responsible for authoring and submitting an evaluation protocol and a final evaluation report. Final outputs will be reviewed by external peer reviewers as well as by Foundations, and all outputs will be signed off by Foundations. Protocols and final reports will be published by Foundations on our website, and we expect evaluators to preregister their research protocols on the Open Science Framework prior to beginning any work.

We anticipate that reasonable support will be given to the summarising of the findings of the research and their dissemination. Foundations may draft an 'Implications for Policy, Practice and further research' addendum, which would be published alongside the general evaluation report on the Foundations website. Depending on the evaluation design and timeline, an interim report or short progress update may also be required.

We ask that evaluation teams inform us if they plan to publish research findings in academic journals or present them at conferences or events during the grant-funded period. Grantees should seek Foundations approval before proceeding, and refrain from publications until Foundations has published the final report

Additional support

If you have any questions about the call or require support with your application, please do not hesitate to contact us at evaluation@foundations.org.uk.