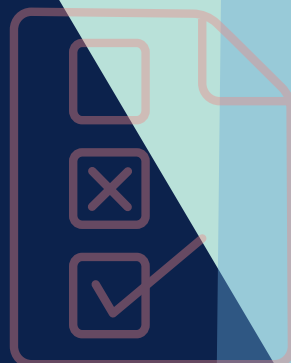


2023 reforms to regulating equality of opportunity

Process and emerging
impact evaluation



Reference **OfS 2025.70**

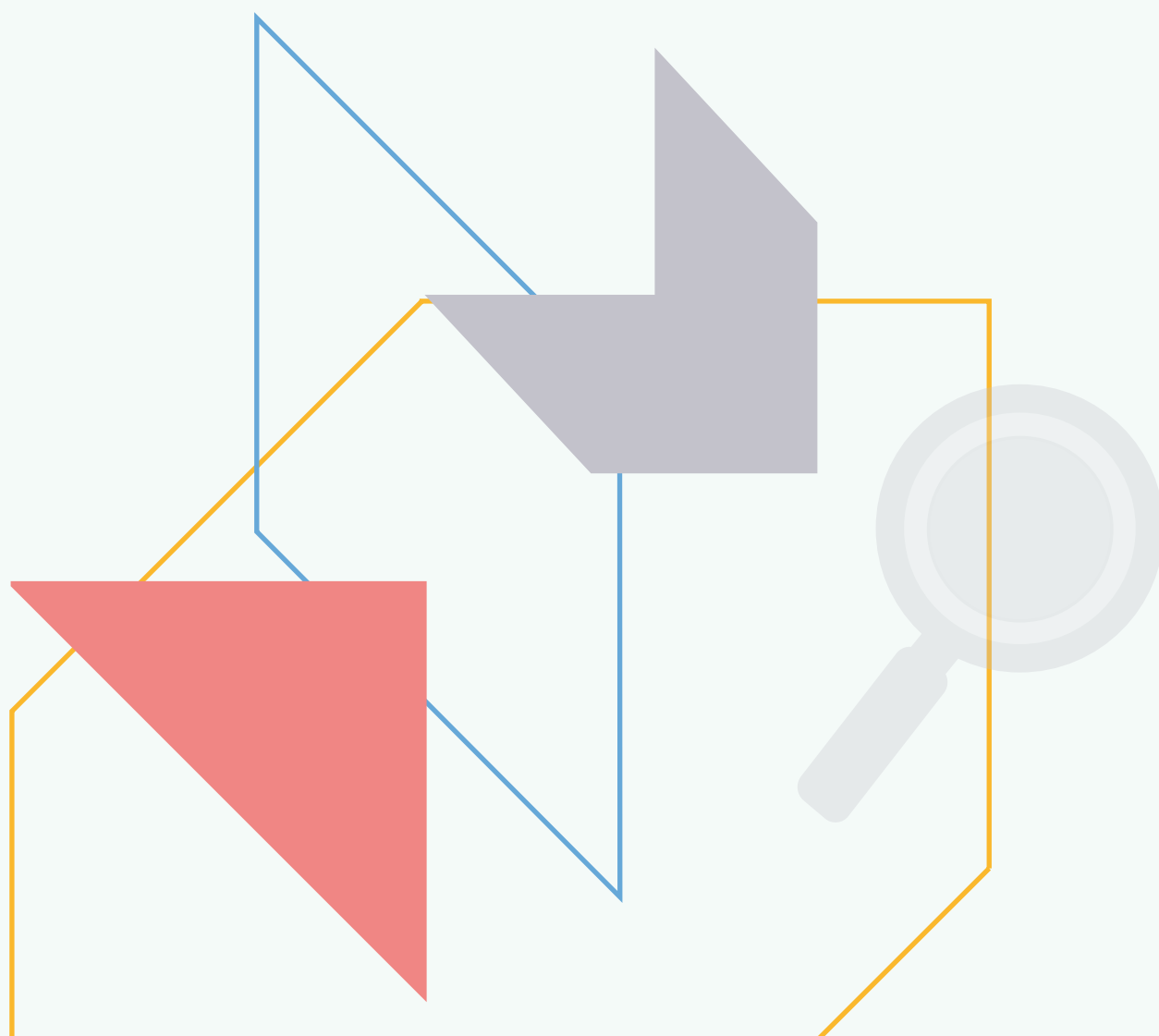
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Executive summary

This short report draws together the key findings from the process and emerging impact evaluation of the Office for Students' (OfS's) 2023 reforms to regulating equality of opportunity in higher education in England.

It summarises data from two sets of provider and key informant (sector stakeholder) interviews, interviews with collaborative partners, student submissions, data from an assessor review of a sample of plans pre- and post-2023 reforms and data from access and participation plans (APPs).

The **core evaluation questions** are:

Process:

How well has the OfS implemented the new approach to APPs?

Impact:

How has the OfS's new approach changed provider behaviour?

Key limitations of the evaluation include high potential for desirability bias from the interviewees, student submitters and assessors and that the findings may not be representative of wider populations.

Process evaluation findings

- The new approach is viewed as more strategic, specific and context-relevant.
- Providers and key informants praised the increased focus on evaluation.
- The Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) has generally been seen as a valuable tool, supporting risk identification, data interrogation, organisational buy-in, targeted activity development and collaboration. However, there were some concerns about its complexity and practical usability.
- While the overall approach is widely regarded as important and worthwhile, providers have raised concerns about certain aspects including the high workload and expressed a preference for longer timelines to develop the APPs, more consistent communication and shorter guidance.

Impact evaluation findings

- Figure 1 below summarises the evidence on the contribution of the reforms to change in provider behaviour.
- Financing and resourcing were highlighted by many providers as a limiting factor in responding to the reforms.
- The evidence gathered also suggests that the mechanism of stakeholders holding providers to account on the delivery of their plans seems unlikely.

Figure 1: Summary of the evidence of the contribution of the 2023 APP reforms to changes in provider behaviour

Substantial contribution	Identifying and exploring risks to equality of opportunity Planning new activities	Strength of evidence Strong Medium Weak  * It was hoped that the overall ambition of the sector would remain similar, rather than drop, despite the focus on achievable targets.
Small contribution	Evaluation culture Quality of APPs Credibility of APPs	
No universal reduction*	Ambition of the sector	

Abbreviations used in this report

APP	Access and participation plans
EORR	Equality of Opportunity Risk Register
OfS	Office for Students
TEF	Teaching Excellent Framework
RN1	Regulatory notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance
RA6	Regulatory advice 6: How to prepare your access and participation plan – effective practice advice

Introduction

This report summarises learning and evidence from the Office for Students' (OfS's) process and emerging impact evaluation of its 2023 reforms to regulating equality of opportunity in higher education in England.¹ Further information on the reforms and the background to the policy area can be found in Annex A.

The evaluation sought to understand how well the reforms, primarily through access and participation plans (APPs), have been implemented by the OfS. It also explored whether the 2023 reforms are driving any changes in higher education provider thinking and behaviour.

A more in-depth process evaluation was completed in 2023 and used to refine the policy guidance and support delivered.²

- The evaluation took a mixed methods, theory-based approach, building from a theory of change developed internally by the OfS (see Annex B).
- The evaluation questions are listed in Annex C.
- The data sources used can be seen in Annex D.
- Limitations of the evaluation are discussed in Annex E.
- The emerging impact evaluation used a contribution analysis framework (see Annex F) for which we developed a strength of evidence rubric and an extent of contribution rubric (see Annex G).

A future impact evaluation will explore how providers are delivering plans and the contribution of the reforms to improving equality of opportunity in higher education.



1. See [Our approach to equality of opportunity - Office for Students](#).

2. See [Evaluation of the OfS 2023 reforms to regulating equality of opportunity in higher education - Office for Students](#).

Process evaluation findings

How well has the OfS implemented the new approach to APPs?



What do providers and wider stakeholders think works well in terms of the overall OfS approach to APPs?

- Providers and key informants largely **welcomed the increased focus on evaluation**.
- Many providers felt that having a more detailed, structured template encouraged them to be **more specific about their activity**.
- Many providers praised the more **strategic and context-focused approach** to determining the focus of their activities and setting their objectives and targets.

What do providers and wider stakeholders think could be improved about the overall OfS approach to APPs?

- Many providers from both waves thought **longer lead-in and overall longer timelines** for APP development would be helpful. This finding was particularly emphasised for wave 1 providers. Several suggested changes such as faster publishing of guidance and updates from the OfS and quicker responses to questions and requests.
- Several wave 1 providers and key informants raised the focus on **‘working with schools to raise attainment’ as an area of concern** – due to uncertainty regarding providers’ ability to deliver impact in this space and financial and resource constraints. However, this concern was not raised during the wave 2 research and many Uni Connect partnerships (which involve providers) have reported successes with their attainment-raising activity in monitoring and conversations with the OfS.
- Several providers from both waves thought the OfS could more **consistently communicate priorities and details** of what to include in APPs.
- Many wave 2 providers were concerned that the expectation for their activities to be very specific and descriptive might limit their ability to respond to changing contexts.

Changes implemented by the OfS in response to the wave 1 findings

Timing: earlier publication of updated policy guidance to give providers a longer timeframe to produce high quality plans.

Improvements to guidance and communications: clearer expectations and greater clarity on certain areas, such as identifying risks to equality of opportunity, mental health, recording planned investment, and financial support for students.

Strategic communications: to ensure clarity about overall strategic aims and to encourage certain activity and allay certain concerns.

What do providers and wider stakeholders think works well about the EORR?

- Many providers spoke about the usefulness of the EORR for **establishing key** risks, for **focusing on national priorities**, for **further interrogating their data** and for **generating more targeted activities**.
- Many providers noted that the EORR supported with securing **buy-in** for the APP across the organisation.
- Many providers and a few collaborative partners mentioned that it was useful to have a **consistent framework and shared terminology** which allows them to communicate clearly with each another.
- Many providers felt the EORR was specifically valuable in **drawing attention to intersections** between groups.

What do providers and wider stakeholders think could be improved about the EORR?

- Several wave 1 providers were **concerned about the practical usability**, complexity and navigability, noting the desire for a downloadable version.
- A few providers from waves 1 and 2 were concerned about how to apply the EORR to their context. Their responses indicated that there was some **confusion over the intended extent and scope** of the EORR.
- Many wave 2 providers felt the EORR was too generalist. A few felt that the risks in the EORR were quite **vague** and may apply to almost the entirety of their student population, which would be **challenging and time-consuming** to unpack.
- A couple of collaborative partners were worried the EORR **skewed providers' work towards smaller, more focused, provider-level activities** that 'fit neatly' into specific risks in the EORR, which might lead to regional risks being less of a focus.

Changes implemented by the OfS in response to the wave 1 findings

- Created a downloadable format of the EORR.
- Published additional guidance and support on identifying risks to equality of opportunity.

What is the provider perspective on the burden associated with the new approach to APPs?

- Many providers and several key informants thought the **workload of responding to the policy was very high**, particularly as the additional requirements (e.g. evaluation) meant involving a wide set of stakeholders.
- However, several providers highlighted that the nature of the APPs meant the workload associated with the reforms was **worthwhile and an important part of their role**.
- The workload was seen as **particularly difficult for smaller/specialist providers** as often there was only one person involved in preparing and writing their APP submission.
- Several providers and key informants were particularly concerned about the **workload associated with evaluating intervention** strategies.
- Many providers thought the burden of compiling and submitting an APP could be better **managed with longer timelines**.

Emerging impact evaluation findings

How has the OfS's new approach changed provider behaviour?



What is 'contribution analysis'?

Contribution analysis helps answer the question 'Did the 2023 reforms make a difference?'

It looks at whether what the OfS hoped would change has changed, and whether those changes were in some part due to the 2023 reforms.

It builds a credible story using evidenced reasoning.

A '**summary contribution claim**' is the judgement we concluded based on the evidence.

How are the contributions judged?

Strength of evidence

This tells us how reliable and convincing the evidence is (strong/medium/weak strength).*

Extent of contribution

This tells us how much of the change the evidence suggests can be linked to the reforms (no/ small/ substantial/ essential contribution).*

* See Annex G for the strength of evidence and extent of contribution rubrics

To what extent do providers explore and identify their risks to equality of opportunity? How does this reflect a change from their previous approaches?

- The majority of providers reported that the reforms had **impacted their approach to exploring and identifying risks** and that the EORR was a useful tool in starting to explore and reflect on risks. The majority of partners substantiated this.
- The majority of providers felt that the EORR **encouraged looking across the whole lifecycle**. However, a small number indicated that they had already embedded this in their process.
- The majority of providers felt the EORR encouraged them to consider a broader range of student groups, and a few partners also noted this. However, several partners stated that it had not.
- Many providers indicated that the EORR had encouraged them to look at a **broader range of evidence** and several collaborative partners also mentioned this. However, a few providers stated that alternative factors had encouraged them, such as previous iterations of the APP policy.
- **99 per cent of the student submitters** (n=108) thought **their provider had identified the greatest risks** to equality of opportunity (although many still thought their institution could go further).

Summary contribution claim

There is **strong evidence** that the APP reforms are making a **substantial contribution** to providers undertaking a **more in-depth exploration and identification of risks to equality of opportunity**.³

3. **Please note:** the evaluation did not collect evidence or form any judgement on whether providers were identifying the most appropriate risks to equality of opportunity.

To what extent have providers chosen to plan different activities? What has influenced their decisions?

- The majority of providers reported that the reforms had led them to **make changes or extensions to existing programmes and to introduce new activities**. Many providers, key informants and several collaborative partners noted a shift in providers' planned activities towards more targeted, evidence-based, measurable activities.
- **88 per cent (n=86) of student submitters felt there had been a change** in their provider's approach.
- Analysis of targets set pre- and post-2023 reforms revealed that **81 per cent of targets set by providers were for newly targeted areas**.
- **Other drivers to changes in activities** were also mentioned, including: work that was being done as part of internal action plans; the OfS's B3 metrics; the need for new avenues for funding (e.g. apprenticeships and the lifelong loan entitlement); and concerns around the financial and reputational implications of not retaining students.

Summary contribution claim

There is **medium-strength evidence** that the reforms have made a **substantial contribution** to **providers planning new activities**.

To what extent are plans high quality? To what extent does this reflect a change compared to previous plans?

- The **majority of providers reported that their plans had improved in quality**, as they were more focused or more evidence-driven, with some also mentioning better evaluation plans. Many partners substantiated this. The reforms' focus on evidence was often mentioned as a driver in improved quality of the plans. Other drivers included the availability of more evidence and additional resources or staff input.
- **A few providers felt quality remained largely the same** as before and **a few felt quality had declined**. Of the latter group, reasons given for this included: not including activities it would be difficult to evaluate and the challenge of meeting regulatory requirements while making the plan accessible for stakeholders.
- OfS assessors rated a sample of 36 plans pre-and post-reforms. Of those:
 - 56 per cent of the post-2023 plans were deemed to be higher quality than their previous plan
 - 36 per cent demonstrated no change
 - 8 per cent were deemed to be lower quality.

Plans were deemed higher quality if they included sufficient information to meet RA6 expectations, and contained timebound, focused objectives.

Summary contribution claim

There is **weak evidence** that the reforms have made a **small contribution** to providers **improving the quality of their plans**.

To what extent are plans credible? To what extent does this reflect a change compared to previous plans?

- The **majority of providers said they had changed their approach to using evidence** for their new plan, with many reporting using more evidence. Several also mentioned that plans felt more realistic and achievable. Several collaborative partners substantiated this and thought it had improved the credibility of providers' plans.
- **Many of these changes were reported to be driven by the reforms**, due to a perceived call to action around the importance of the APP being informed by evidence. Several providers reported other influential factors including drivers from within their institution, such as needing evidence to inform cost efficiency measures and others mentioned the 2019 reforms.
- **OfS assessors rated 61 per cent of post-2023 plans as more credible**, 33 per cent as no change and 5 per cent as being less credible. Reasons given for plans being more credible were:
 - the inclusion of more information detailing how they would deliver their plan
 - objectives linked to the risks to equality of opportunity identified
 - use of the OfS evaluation self-assessment tool.
- **94 per cent of student submitters (n=101) thought plans were credible**, or credible with room for improvement. Reasons for this included use of the student voice and use of evidence.

Summary contribution claim

There is **weak evidence** that the reforms have made a **small contribution** to providers **improving the credibility of their plans**.

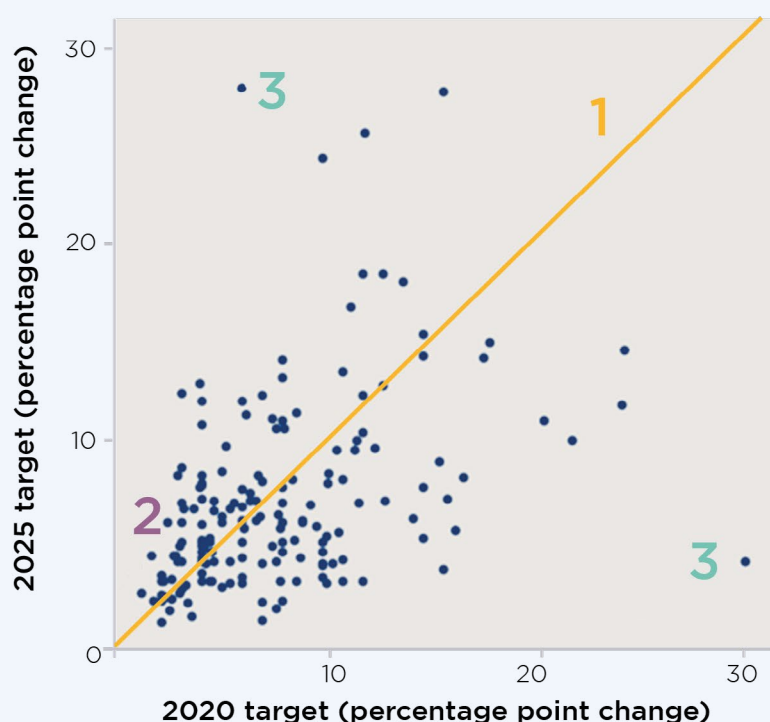
Has the proposed ambition of providers' plans reduced due to the focus on credible, realistic plans?

- There was **a mixed response** in terms of whether providers thought the ambition of their plans had changed. Many thought they were of a similar level of ambition, and many thought they were more ambitious. A few thought they were less ambitious. The mix in changes to ambition of plans was **corroborated by partners' interviews and by OfS assessors**.
- For those that thought their plans were more ambitious, this was not in terms of targets, but in terms of reach to **different groups and across the lifecycle**, working across the provider or gaining **senior leadership involvement**. Those who thought ambition remained the same or had reduced gave reasons such as **budget constraints** or trying to set more **contextually achievable targets**.
- **83 per cent of student submitters (n=84) thought their providers' intervention strategies were ambitious**.

Figure 2 plots the percentage point change providers set out to achieve for a selection of ‘matched’ targets, i.e. where providers set targets for the same area post-reforms as they did pre-reforms (n= 181, from 98 providers). The percentage point change they targeted for 2020 is mapped against the percentage point change they targeted in 2025.

The graph shows a similar number of providers with more ambitious targets and less ambitious targets post-reforms, suggesting that although ambition across the sector has varied, there has been no collective reduction in ambition.

Figure 2: Change in ambition of provider targets: pre- and post-2023 reforms comparison



1 Yellow line

The line represents where 2025 targets are the same as 2020 targets.

- **Dots on the line:**
No change in ambition
- **Dots above the line:**
More ambitious targets post-reforms
- **Dots below the line:**
Less ambitious after the reform.

2 Clustered dots

Most providers made small or no changes, indicating stability across the sector.

3 Outliers

Exceptions to the general trend of stability, with largest ambition and big changes.

Source: OfS analysis of approved APP targets, comparing the ambition of targets that were continued from the pre-reform plans (plans approved from 2020-21 to 2023-24) to post-reform (2024-25 or 2025-26). 98 providers set at least one target in the post-reform plans that had been approved pre-reform. Total of 181 matched targets.

Summary contribution claim

There is **medium-strength evidence** that changes in ambition across the sector vary greatly, with some increases and some decreases, but there is **no universal reduction in ambition** in provider plans at a sector level.

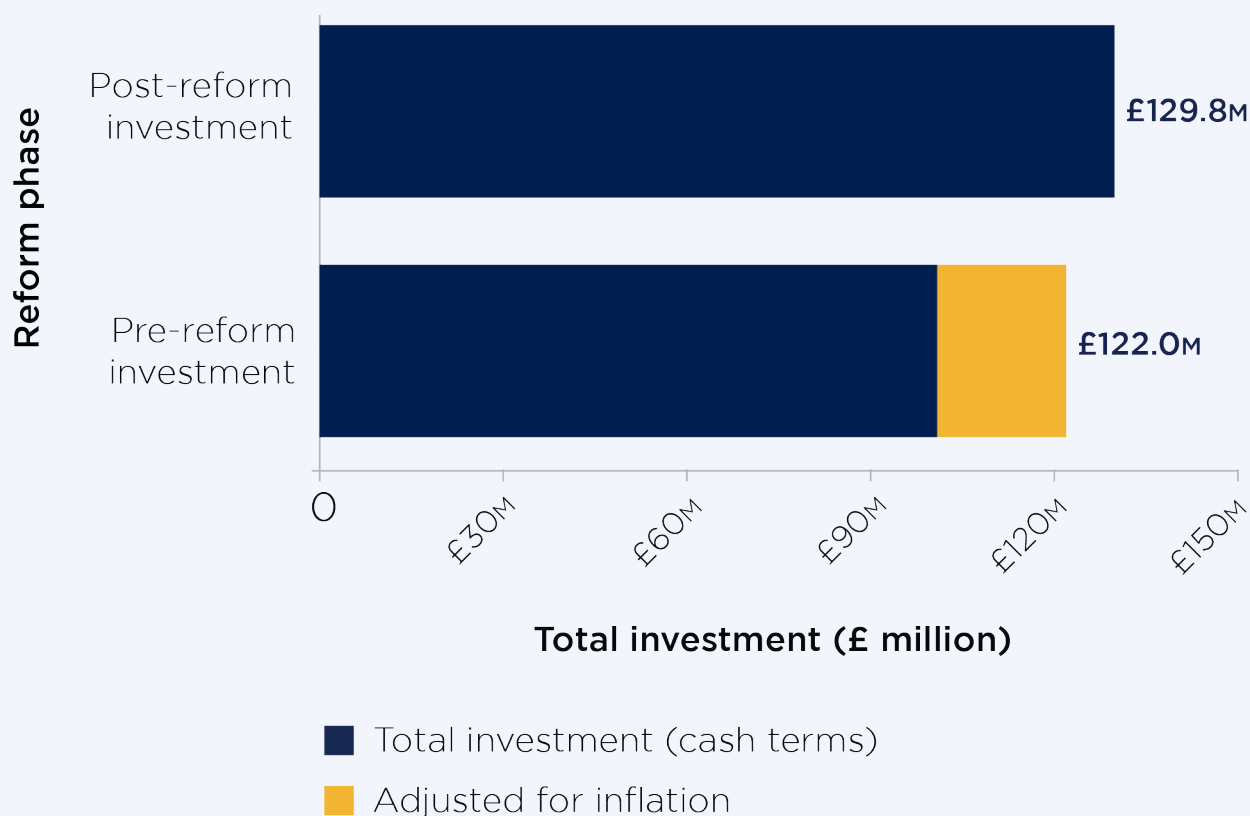
To what extent has there been a change in evaluation culture?

The majority indicated that they had increased evaluation activity or had embedded evaluation within access and participation work in response to the reforms and many key informants and partners substantiated this.

However other drivers were mentioned, most notably the 2019 reforms, other regulatory guidance, such as Teaching Excellent Framework (TEF), and an internal provider desire for evaluation data.

A comparison (see Figure 3) of predicted investment in research and evaluation between pre- and post-reforms plans (n=212 providers) shows that providers are proposing to invest more than before. The data shows there has been a 6.5 per cent real term increase compared to the pre-2023 reforms plans.

Figure 3: Comparison of pre-2023 and post-2023 reforms APP investment in research and evaluation



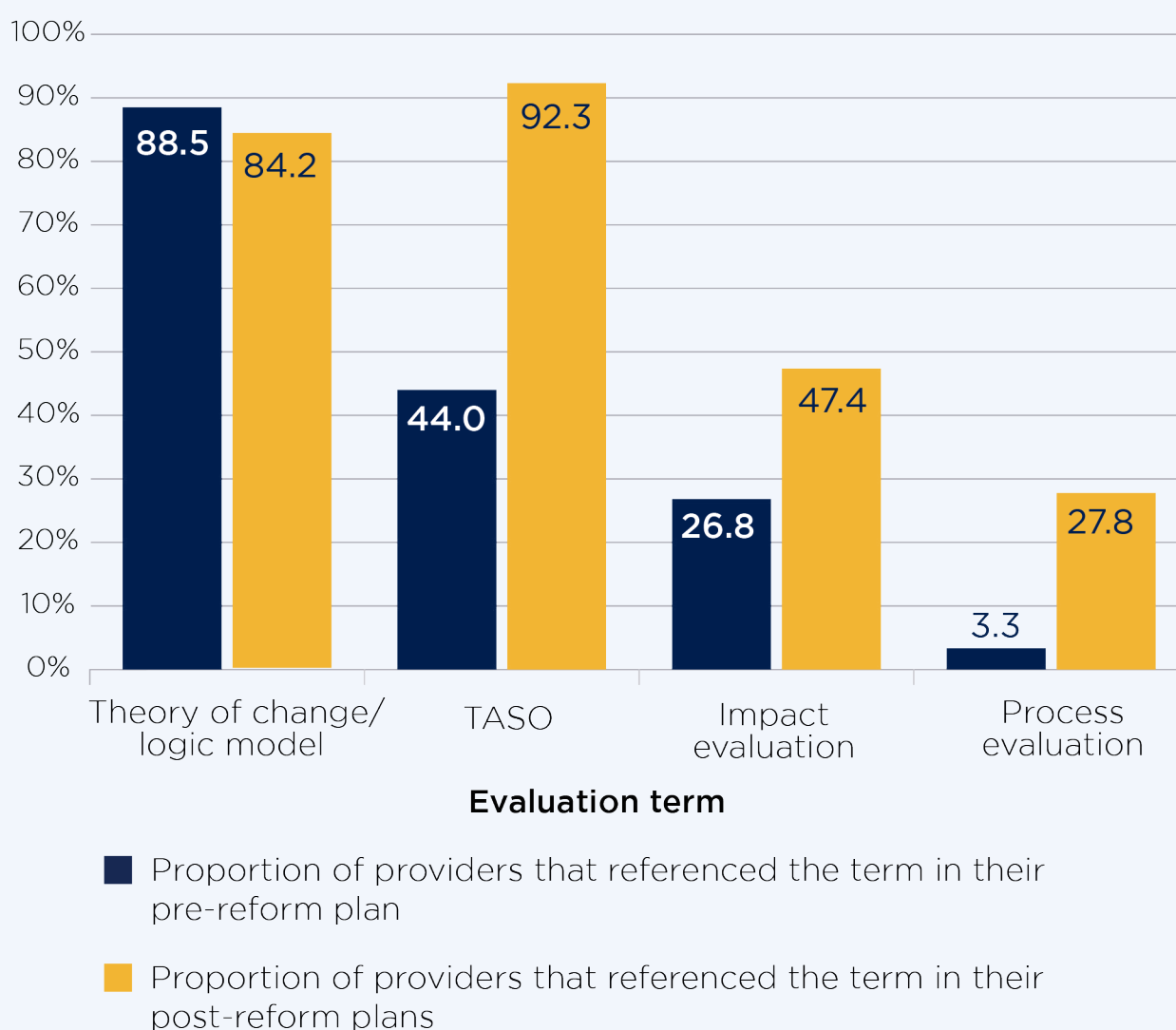
Source: OfS analysis of approved APP targets, comparing 212 providers predicted investment from the most recent pre-reform plan with its post-reform plan.

To what extent has there been a change in evaluation culture?

The majority of providers reported that over the past few years they have been upskilling staff in evaluation and/or hiring evaluation specialists to develop evaluation expertise. A few partners corroborated this.

A comparison of use of key evaluation terms within pre- and post-reforms plans (n=209) shows that providers used the majority of these terms more frequently in the post-reforms plans (see Figure 4). This might indicate an increased focus on evaluation within providers' plans.

Figure 4: A comparison of the proportion of providers that referenced key evaluation terms in their approved plans



Source: OfS basic text analysis for 209 approved provider post-reform plans, compared with the pre-reform plans.

Summary contribution claim

There is **strong evidence** that the reforms have made a **small contribution** to providers **increasing evaluation activity and capacity**.

Are stakeholders engaging with the plans/summaries and holding providers to account?

- The majority of collaborative partners and many key informants had some involvement with the development of plans or were familiar with them.
- The majority of collaborative partners and many key informants stated that they did not plan to hold providers to account on delivering their APP. They did not see this as part of their role or think they had the power to. The OfS had hoped this would be a mechanism in helping ensure plans are delivered, but this evidence suggests that this is unlikely.

What other factors have influenced providers' response to the 2023 reforms?

- **Finances and resourcing** were constraints mentioned by many providers, key informants and collaborative partners and several student submitters.
- The perceived feasibility of being **able to deliver impact** for a particular group was mentioned by several providers as an influencing factor on their response to the reforms.
- Other factors that several providers, key informants and partners mentioned included other areas of regulation, including **prior reforms** to regulating equality of opportunity, **reputational optics** and **institutional changes**.

Are there any anticipated unintended or unexpected consequences of the reforms?

- A few key informants and wave 1 providers suggested that providers might be **less innovative in their choice of activities** due to the requirement to publish evaluations and fear of having to publish evidence of failed activities.
- A few providers mentioned that they would be including **fewer activities in their plan**. In some cases, this was that they were planning to deliver less activity due to needing to dedicate more resources to evaluation. In other cases, they were still delivering the activity but not including it in their plan, due to either the page limit or not wanting to include their 'risky' activities. They thought this exclusion might be detrimental in the current financial climate as **activities not included in the APP were more likely to be cut**.

Change implemented by the OfS in response to the wave 1 findings

Strategic communications: continued emphasis on the importance of learning through evaluation, including failure.

Conclusion

The 2023 reforms seem to have been generally well received by providers and sector stakeholders. They particularly valued the reforms' emphasis on considering context, being more strategic and on driving more evaluation.

However, some areas for improvement were highlighted, including a desire for longer timelines for APP development. The EORR was praised as a useful tool for establishing key risks, interrogating data, achieving buy-in and supporting collaboration. However, there were some concerns about its practical usability. The workload involved in developing and writing APPs was seen as very high, although it was acknowledged as important and worthwhile.

There is a range of evidence to suggest that the reforms are influencing provider behaviour and that the initial steps outlined in the theory of change are occurring to some extent. This includes providers:

- undertaking a more in-depth exploration and identification of risks to equality of opportunity
- planning new activities
- making small improvements to the quality and credibility of plans while largely maintaining the ambition of their plans
- increasing their evaluation capacity and activity.

However, the hoped-for mechanism of stakeholders holding providers to account on the delivery of their plans seems unlikely. Financing and resourcing were mentioned by many providers and other stakeholders as limiting factors in responding to the reforms.

A future impact evaluation will explore how providers are delivering these plans and the contribution of the reforms to improving equality of opportunity in higher education.

Annex A: Policy background

Condition A1 of the OfS regulatory framework requires providers registered in the Approved (fee cap) category of the OfS register and charging fees above the basic fee levels to have an access and participation plan (APP). These providers must publish a document that sets out how it will promote equality of opportunity, meeting certain requirements set out in the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 and associated regulations and guidance.

In April 2022, the OfS proposed reforms to the next cycle of APPs, which would come into effect from 2024-25 onwards. The aim of these reforms was to refocus the approach to APPs to addressing key risks to equality of opportunity for students over a four-year period. The OfS consulted on these reforms in October 2022.⁴

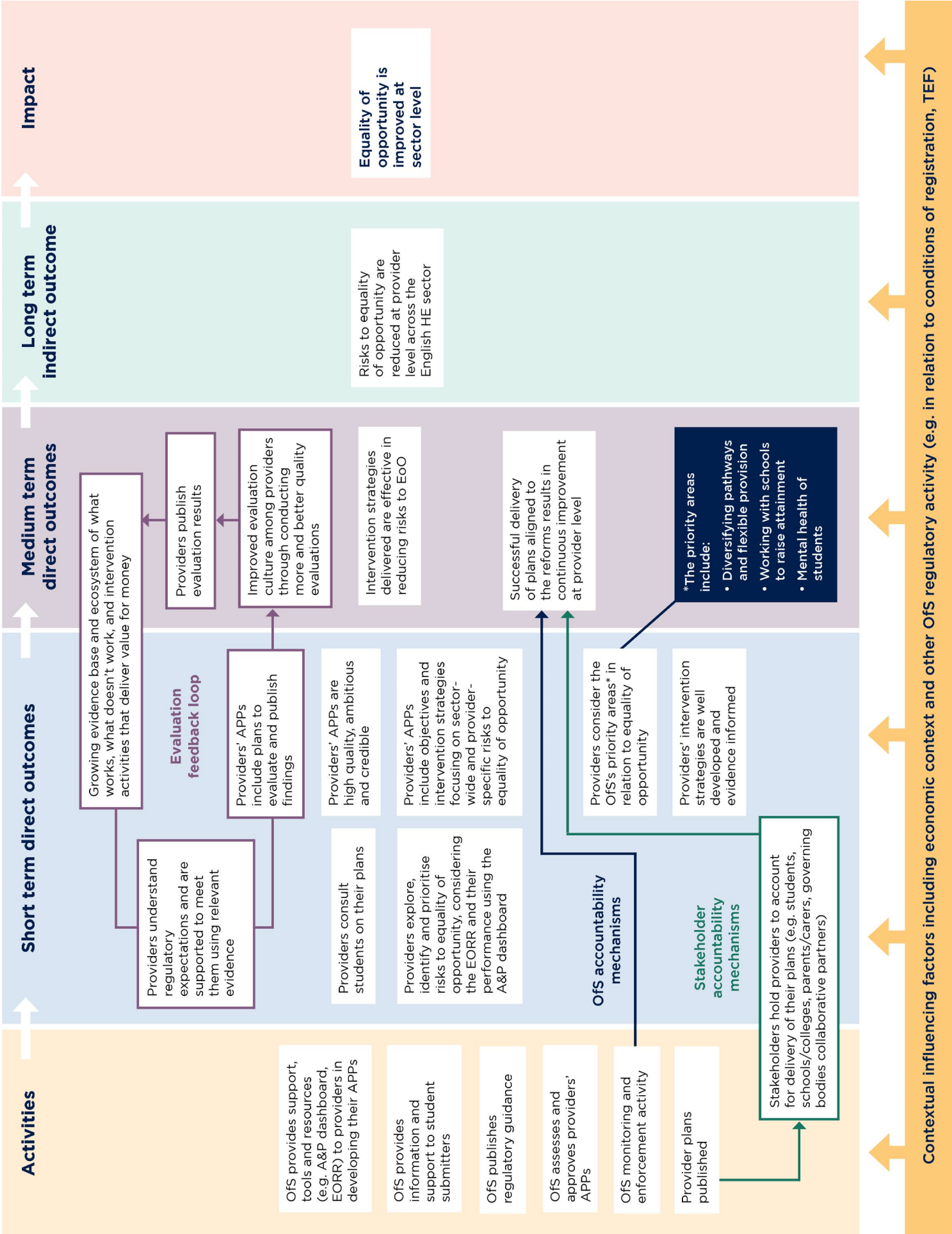
Following this consultation, OfS guidance on access and participation (Regulatory notice 1 and Regulatory advice 6) were refined and re-published in early 2023. Additionally, the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR) was developed, which identifies sector-wide risks that may affect a student's opportunity to access and succeed in higher education, and supports providers in their assessment of these risks in their own context. These resources were published in March 2023.⁵

The OfS tested its reformed approach with an initial group of 34 providers (wave 1), who volunteered to write and submit new APPs in summer 2023, with guidance from the OfS. The majority of the sector then submitted their APPs across 2024 as part of wave 2. Around 40-60 providers will submit by the end of 2025 as part of wave 3.

4. The original consultation is at: [Consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education - Office for Students](#); the analysis of responses is at: [Analysis of consultation responses and decisions: Consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education - Office for Students](#).

5. See:
[Regulatory notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance - Office for Students](#)
[Regulatory advice 6: How to prepare your access and participation plan - effective practice advice - Office for Students](#)
[Equality of Opportunity Risk Register - EORR - Office for Students](#)

Annex B: OfS theory of change



Annex C: Evaluation questions

Process evaluation

Subquestions

1. What do providers and wider stakeholders think works well and what could be improved about the overall OfS approach to APPs?
2. What do providers and wider stakeholders think works well and what could be improved about the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR)?
3. What is the provider perspective on the burden associated with the new approach to APPs?

Emerging impact evaluation

Subquestions

1. To what extent do providers explore and identify their risks to equality of opportunity? How does this reflect a change from their previous approaches?
2. To what extent have providers chosen to plan different activities? What has influenced their decisions?
3. To what extent are plans high quality and credible? How does this reflect a change compared to previous plans?
4. Has the proposed ambition of providers' plans reduced due to the focus on credible, realistic plans?
5. To what extent has there been a change in evaluation culture? What part do the reforms have to play in this?
6. Are stakeholders engaging with the plans/summaries and holding providers to account?
7. What other factors have influenced providers' response to APPs?
8. Are there any anticipated unintended/unexpected consequences?

Annex D: Data sources

This synthesis has aggregated and summarised findings from the following data sources:

Externally-commissioned data sources

- Evaluation of the OfS 2023 reforms to regulating equality of opportunity in higher education - Wave 1 interviews⁶
- Evaluation of OfS 2023 reforms to regulating equality of opportunity - Wave 2 interviews⁷
- Evaluation of OfS 2023 reforms to regulating equality of opportunity - Wave 1 collaborative partner interviews⁸

Internal data sources

- Student submission⁹ analysis – waves 1 and 2 (108 student submitters)¹⁰
- Assessor perspectives on quality, credibility and ambition (sample of 36 providers)
- Analysis of targets set by providers in their APPs (203 providers)
- Providers' proposed research and evaluation spend (212 providers)
- Text analysis of APPs (209 providers).

6. See [Evaluation of the OfS 2023 reforms to regulating equality of opportunity in higher education - Office for Students](#).

7. See [URL](#).

8. See [URL](#).

9. Students' unions and representatives can submit an independent student submission to comment on how they have been consulted with and involved in their provider's access and participation work. Guidance on student submissions and student consultation is available in Regulatory advice 6.

10. Student submission analysis – waves 1 and 2 (108 student submitters).

Annex E: Limitations of the evaluation

There is potential for **bias** from all interviewees, student submitters and assessors. Triangulating multiple data sources aims to reduce the influence of bias on the findings. In addition, to try to mitigate bias for the interviews, these were externally commissioned. However, this may mean that some nuance in the data has been lost.

All findings from interviews and the student submission are based on samples which **may not be representative** of wider populations.

For the interview data, the externally-commissioned supplier used terms to represent the frequency of responses. Due to the semi-structured nature, not all interviewees were asked the same questions, so this gives an **indication of the strength of the opinions shared**, rather than quantifying responses.

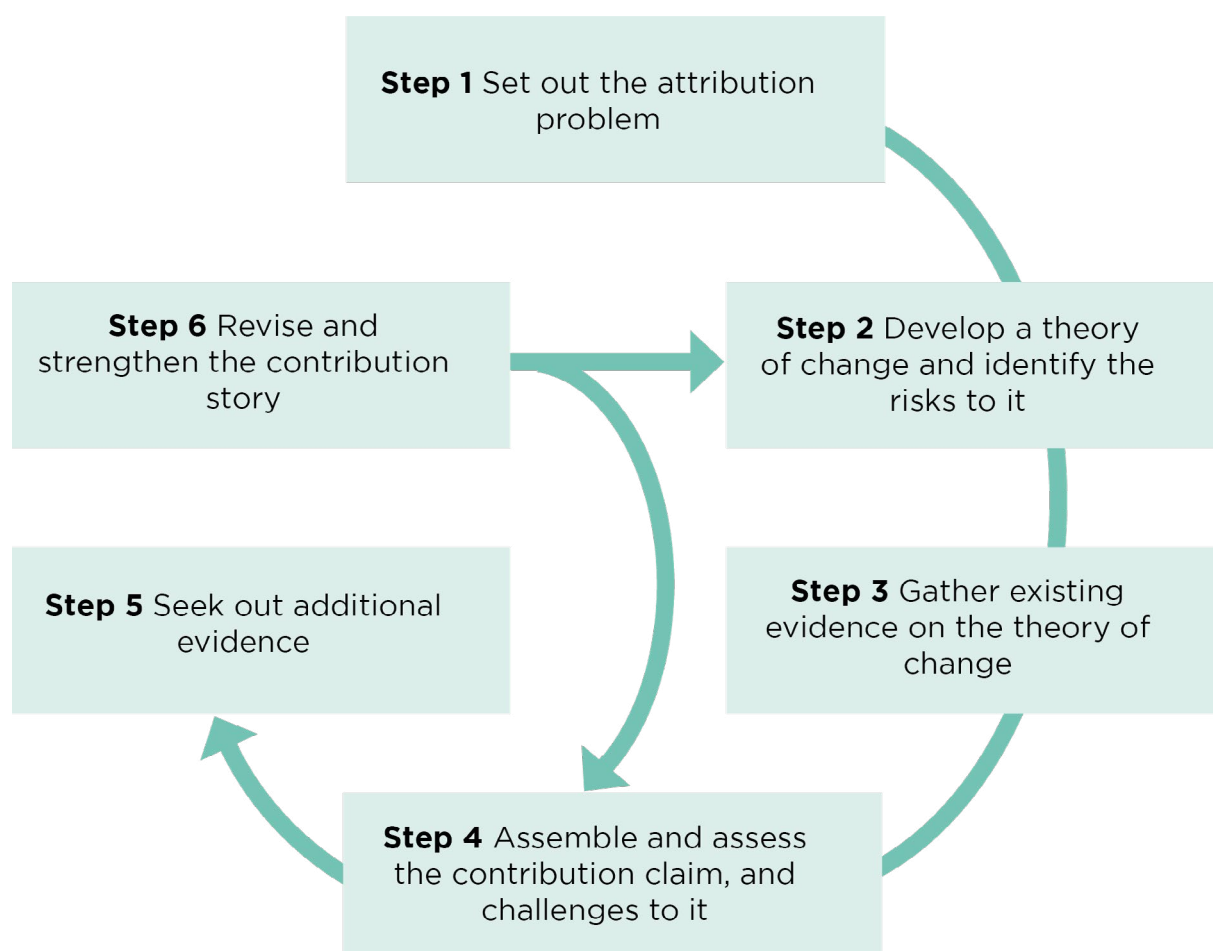
These findings are based on research that has taken place relatively soon after the reforms, so there is **a limit as to how much change will have occurred and therefore can be captured**.

Annex F: Contribution analysis framework

The policy sits within a complex environment where numerous interconnected elements may influence the outcomes of policy changes and regulatory activity. Contribution analysis is a useful framework for carrying out an impact evaluation in this type of complex policy environment. It follows six main steps (see Figure 4) and provides a structured approach for determining the significance of the contribution that individual factors make towards outcomes. Taking an iterative approach to the six main steps of contribution analysis helps to revise and strengthen the contribution story.

Key facets of our approach involved: examining the outcome pathways and identifying ‘causal hotspots’ (critical points along the causal pathway that have a particularly strong influence on the achievement of outcomes), ensuring an in-depth exploration of alternative explanations and external factors, and assessing the strength of our evidence and the extent of contribution of the policy to any emerging outcomes (for which we developed our own rubrics, see Annex G) and testing and validating our results.

Figure 5: Steps of contribution analysis



Source: https://cdn.odi.org/media/documents/glam_contribution_analysis_final.pdf

Apgar, M., Hernandez, K., and Ton. G (2020) 'Contribution Analysis for Adaptive Management', ODI

Annex G: Rubrics used for contribution analysis

Developing our strength of evidence rubric

Before conducting research, we set up a framework for assessing the strength of evidence and extent of contribution of the reforms to any change that was observed.

We reviewed literature on existing rubrics and ranking criteria to support with this. A particularly pertinent paper in the development of our strength of evidence rubric was Aston and Apgar (2023).¹¹ In this paper the authors highlighted the following aspects which felt most relevant for us in terms of ranking the strength of evidence for each of our hypotheses:

- Plausibility** – the association between the intervention and the outcome following a clear and logical thread.
- Representation** – whether and how the perspectives and experiences of priority groups are represented.
- Triangulation** – the application and combination of multiple research methods measuring/studying the same outcome/phenomenon.

These aspects were considered, alongside the context of our research, to develop the rubrics (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Strength of evidence rubric

Strength of evidence	Explanation (supporting evidence)
Strong	The evidence provides a unique and convincing account which contains specific details. It is mentioned or related to a sizable proportion of the stakeholder group(s) and other evidence sources and there is a low risk of bias. This means that: sources have little risk of bias or there are multiple independent sources; there is consistency across sources; data is transparent using rigorous methods.

11. See: <https://evaluation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Quality-of-Evidence-Rubrics-2.0-Final.pdf>.

Strength of evidence	Explanation (supporting evidence)
Medium	The evidence provides specific details and a convincing account. However, only a small number of stakeholders mention this, therefore decreasing the strength of the evidence. There might be some risk of bias. The evidence provides a logical account. This association is mentioned by a sizable proportion of one stakeholder group or a medium proportion of multiple stakeholder groups. There might be some risk of bias.
Weak	There is some evidence, but it is weak. There is a high risk of bias. This means that: sources have high risk of bias or data is from single or a low number of sources; there is no or little triangulation; data is self-reported or from informal or less rigorous methods. This possible connection is mentioned by a small proportion of the stakeholder group(s).

Table 2: Extent of contribution rubric

Extent of contribution	Explanation
None	The outcome would have happened without the intervention because of other actors and factors, or the outcome has not occurred.
Small	The outcome would have likely happened anyway, but the intervention played a minor role in influencing it, among other factors.
Substantial	The outcome may have happened anyway, but the intervention played a significant role in causing it to occur.
Essential	The outcome would not have happened without the intervention.



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