Measuring the Impact of Volunteering

Why is measuring the impact of volunteering important?

It is increasingly important for organisations or groups to describe the difference that volunteering makes to, volunteers themselves, project staff, the beneficiaries or community. This guide will help you understand what we mean by 'impact', what to think about before you start, methods you can use and resources that can help you measure impact.

What do we mean by impact?

Impact is the change that happens as a result of an activity or project.

Often we think up projects or activities because we think they will change things for the better and have a positive impact. Often there are lots of different impacts for different groups of people. The impact or change will be different for different groups, depending on their contact with the project.

Measuring impact can tell you whether changes have been positive or negative, and how much change has happened. For example, we might expect to see volunteers experience changes in their knowledge and skills as a result of volunteering. By measuring this change – or impact - we can say by how much they've increased their knowledge and skills.

What is monitoring?

Monitoring is the process of collecting the facts and figures related to your volunteer programme. We collect this information throughout the lifecycle of the programme, and watch it closely. This might include number of volunteers, numbers of workshops, hours contributed, and so on.

Monitoring helps you check the activity is being implemented as expected. Collecting this information helps to see if something isn't working, or working better than expected and whether changes need to be made to the programme. Stating how many people volunteered, how many training sessions were delivered and so on does not describe or measure impact, as it doesn't tell us what changes were experienced by those involved.

What is evaluation?

Impact and monitoring information describe what has happened. Evaluation is one step further – as the name suggests, it means putting a *value* on this descriptive information – is the impact *good enough*? Is it *worth* the resources we put into the programme? *To what extent* is the impact experienced as a result of the programme?

Volunteers may have increased their knowledge and skills but how much of an increase would you rate as 'good enough' or 'worth the resources we put into it'. Your conclusion might be different from your colleague or funder. It's easy to forget that evaluating is quite subjective – not like the measurement of impact or monitoring a project's activities which is based on collected data.

This means we need to get round the table with stakeholders, and agree what level of impact is acceptable, poor, excellent and so on, and gather the evidence to help rate the activity or programme. This can be particularly helpful as a process to get everyone on the same page and be clear about values and expectations. It can also be a challenging process. Be aware that evaluation – particularly if focussing on people's work – can be seen as a form of assessment and can make visible things that have gone wrong. Ensure that stakeholders and participants are able to take on

board and use the findings of the evaluation (i.e. operate within a culture that supports learning).

There are two main types of evaluation.

Formative evaluation 'informs'. It helps guide the ongoing development or implementation of an activity or project. This means it answers questions about the implementation or process, for example 'to what extent is the programme reaching beneficiaries'. This would mean rating the monitoring information about who was participating, against numbers of expected participants.

Summative evaluation '*sum*s up'. This means it reaches an overall conclusion about the value or worth of a programme or project, often after it has finished. Summative evaluations answer questions such as 'in what ways and to what extent did beneficiaries benefit from volunteering?', 'how worthwhile was the volunteering programme (were the benefits worth the resources spent)?'.

The First Step

The first step in evaluating, measuring impact, or monitoring is to ask why you need the information. It is important that you have a clear understanding of how the information will be used. Identifying how the information will be used will guide all steps in the process of measuring impact, monitoring or evaluating. It's also crucial that you have consulted with key stakeholders who may be participating or have a vested interest in the results of this work.

The information could be used to:

- account for funding
- provide evidence to support an application for funding
- showcase achievements
- develop a programme or activity
- identify 'what works'

Your answer to this question will guide: what questions you ask about impact, who is involved, what type of data is collected and how it is communicated. For example, if you are going to use the information to account for funding, you may want to describe changes experienced by those taking part in the activity or project. If you want to use the process to help develop the activity or project, you will need more information about how specific activities or actions led to those impacts.

The Second Step

The next step is to think through what changes you expect people or places to experience as a result of taking part, and when you would expect those changes to be experienced. A 'logic model' can be a useful, straightforward tool to help map out how you expect particular activities to lead to impacts. See the Resources section at the end to find out more information about Logic Models.

How much work is involved in measuring impact?

Measuring impact can be as little work as asking one group a single question, to using a range of different methods (e.g. questionnaires, focus groups and so on) with lots of different groups.

How far you go depends on:

- how many impacts you want to find out about;
- how many people might have experienced impacts;
- how objective, or reliable you need the information to be.

Impact measurement can take the form of one impact measurement study for a project, or it can be a series of continuous cycles to inform the ongoing development of a project or service.

How do I measure impact?

There are a two common ways of measuring impact.

1. *Before and after (sometimes referred to as 'pre and post-test')*

This is a good approach to use if you are:

- Able to plan in advance to measure impact, before the group experiencing impacts have begun the activity – e.g. beneficiaries who have yet to engage with volunteers, volunteers who haven't started.
- Needing objective and reliable evidence of impact
- Are unlikely to have a large 'drop off' rate amongst those experiencing impacts

For example, if you want to find out the impact of volunteering on volunteers' self-esteem, you could ask them a suite of questions before they begin volunteering (before) and again after they've been volunteering for a period of time. We would then look at the difference in their responses to measure what change had happened.

If you're able to take this approach, and you think it's likely that changes you're looking for have been measured elsewhere (for example, confidence, skills, well-being, self-esteem and so on), it's worth looking for measurement tools which are already out there and picking out questions you want to use. See the Resources section at the end for more information.

If you are using this method think about the likely timing of the impact. Some impacts might be immediate; others mid or long term. Plan when you would collect data accordingly.

A way to strengthen the 'before and after' approach is to ask the same questions at the same time of a similar group of people who have not taken part in the activity/project, to see whether they experienced the same impacts or not. If they didn't, this helps prove that your activity or project caused an impact. This is called using a 'comparison' or 'control' group.

2. Retrospective pre and post-test

Unless we're very good at planning for measuring impact, often we need to measure it after an activity has started. In this case, we need to ask people whether they feel they've changed as a result of the project after or during the activity. For example, you could ask volunteers whether they feel that their self-esteem has increased as a result of volunteering.

This approach is not considered as robust or reliable as the before and after method, but it is often the only option for measuring impact. To strengthen this approach, it's worth taking the following points into account.

Whichever method you decide to use when measuring impact try to:

• Make sure you are identifying whether change happened as a result of the activity/project, always ask whether the change happened 'as a result of taking part' and whether anything else contributed to the change (the impact might have been caused by something else)
• Make sure you don't assume all impacts are positive: ask whether there were any negative impacts experienced, or if they didn't experience any change.
• Ask about barriers or enablers to experiencing the impact. This can be particularly helpful when trying to account for funding if your project/activity was implemented as you expected, but that there were things outwith your control which lessened its impact. It's also a good way of learning about how to improve activities or when developing new projects.

When should I measure impact?

In an ideal world we should think about measuring impact when we are planning an activity or project. Showing how you expect activities to lead to impacts, for example using a logic model, will help you identify who will experience impacts, and what impacts are likely to happen immediately and after a period of time.

Try to ask about change once a group soon after they are likely to have experienced it – too early and the full impact might not have happened, too late and it might have worn off, or it's too hard to say whether the activity or project caused the change because other activities may have taken place.

What type of information do I need, and how should I collect it?

The type of information you collect depends on what questions you want to answer. Think about using a survey or using questions from an existing survey if:

• the question would result in a closed response such as 'yes' or 'no',
• you want to ask them about the extent of a change (e.g. 'on scale of 1-5')
• you are sure about the set of possible responses to the question

These types of questions will give you quantitative data.

Think about using interviews, focus groups, group interviews, diaries or open response survey questions if:

• You want to understand how or why something changed (you could combine this with evidence of change measured by a survey).
• You want to get an understanding of the way people think about a topic, or respond to a question to help design a survey.
• The changes experienced are too complex to be captured by a survey question, or set of questions.

Although there are practical advantages and disadvantages to different methods, it's important the choice of method is driven primarily by the question you want to ask, but also think about practicalities – plan how the data will be analysed when it comes back. It's not good practice to ask people to give up time and personal information if you're unable to process and use what they've given you, so make sure you have capacity to analyse what comes back.

Communicating, reporting and final steps

To make sure you get the best possible value from all the hard work you, stakeholders and participants have put into the process, think through how the process and results will be communicated amongst those who've taken part, stakeholders, other organisations, groups and funders who could learn from what you have discovered.

You may find that the information you've collected, the results and what you've learned during the process have a range of uses – not just the primary purpose identified at the beginning.

Finally, it is best practice to gather feedback and record what worked well and what you would do differently next time.

Useful Resources

Inspiringimpact.org

This is an initiative to support Charities and other Third Sector Organisations and group to measure impact, led by NCVO. On this site you can download an excel spreadsheet of all existing survey tools to measure changes in levels of, for example, well-being, confidence and resilience.

Volunteering Impact Assessment Toolkit

You can find out more about this toolkit from NCVO. If you are based in Scotland, contact us to purchase a copy.

This toolkit provides a useful framework to think through a variety of impacts from volunteering for different groups, with pre-designed survey tools and tips for conducting interviews, focus groups and templates for volunteer diaries.

Training on how to use the toolkit for your organisation is also available.

- The Logic Model Training Guide is available as a powerpoint presentation, gives a good overview of logic models and how they can be used. .
- See also the Kellog Foundation Logic Model Development Guide
- Evaluation Support Scotland also has resources that can help you:

Final Top Tips

Following this overview of evaluation and measuring impact, we have 10 top tips to summarise and guide your practice.

1. Consider measuring impact as a collaborative process, think through who needs to be involved from the beginning.
2. Try to reach a consensus about why the information is needed, what it will be used for.
3. Consider the risks of carrying out an evaluation or measuring impact, ensure there is support across your group or organisation for finding out what has gone wrong, as well as what has gone right.
4. Consider whether you just want to measure impact, or whether you want to put a value on that information – to rate whether a change should be rated as, 'good' or 'inadequate'.
5. Try to reach a consensus about what changes you expect to see as a result of volunteering, when, and for whom.
6. Think through how much time you have to measure impact, what capacity your organisation has for taking part in the process, analysing the information.
7. Choose appropriate methods for measuring impact, taking into account the purpose of the work – why you are measuring impact and how it will be used – as well as available resources.
8. Find out whether there are existing tools which you can use to measure impact which can save time.
9. Draw on the expertise of others, professionals and other colleagues, groups or organisations who've gone through a similar process.
10. Think through how the process and the results will be communicated both internally and externally – including a plan to celebrate completing the process!

Need some more help?

If you would like more help or advice in relation to this guide please get in touch with us:

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