

Measuring the impact of volunteering

This guide provides information and advice on measuring the impact of volunteers working with communities and for community groups or organisations.

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. Collect this information throughout the life-cycle of the programme, and watch it closely. This might include the number of volunteers or the numbers of workshops, hours contributed, or tasks completed.

Monitoring helps you check that 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 how many tasks were completed 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 agree with stakeholders

on what level of impact is acceptable, poor, or excellent.

This can be particularly helpful as a process as it provides information on 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 not worked well.

Ensure that stakeholders and participants are able use the findings of the evaluation. 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.

Summative evaluation ‘sums 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 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 further 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 or 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.

The second 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 how you expect particular activities to lead to impacts.

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 such as questionnaires, surveys or delivering focus groups.

How far you go depends on: how many impacts you want to find out about; how many people might have experienced impacts or 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.

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, needing objective and reliable evidence of impact, and are unlikely to have a

large reduction 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 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 or 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.

Retrospective pre and post-test

Unless we're very good at planning for measuring impact, we often 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 or 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) and make sure you do not assume that all impacts are positive. Always ask whether there were any negative impacts experienced, or if they didn't experience any change whatsoever.

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, will help you identify who will experience impacts, and what impacts are likely to happen immediately and after a period of time.

What type of information do I need?

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', or you want to ask them about the extent of a change on scale of 1-5. or 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) or you want to get an understanding of the way people think about a topic, or respond to a question to help design a survey, or the changes experienced are too complex to be captured by a survey question, or set of questions. This is referred to as qualitative data.

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 and 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 the capacity to analyse what comes back.

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, be that 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.

Top tips

- Consider measuring impact as a collaborative process.
- Think through who needs to be involved from the beginning.
- Try to reach a consensus about why the information is needed and what it will be used for.
- Understand 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
- 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 for example.
- Work to reach a consensus about what changes you expect to see as a result of volunteering, when, and for whom.
- Think through how much time you have to measure impact, what capacity your organisation has for taking part in the process, and how you can analyse the information.
- Choose appropriate methods for measuring impact, taking into account the purpose of the work. Consider why are you measuring impact in the first place and how these impacts can be used.