Knowledge Gateway

Practice Guidance and Information

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. The impact or change can be different for different groups, depending on their contact with the project. Your organisation can benefit from reflecting on and exploring these changes.

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 the number of volunteers, numbers of workshops, hours contributed, and so on. It helps you see what is working, or not working, in your activity.

What is evaluation?

Impact and monitoring information describe what has happened. Evaluation is one step further – as the name suggests, it means using the information (impact) you have gathered (monitoring) to analyse what this means for your organisation and how you might change your approach in the future. This works best when you involve your stakeholders and gather their views as part of the process.

There are two main types of evaluation.

Formative evaluation ‘informs.’ It helps guide the ongoing development or implementation of an activity or project.

Summative evaluation ‘*sum*s up.’ This means it reaches an overall conclusion about the value or worth of a programme or project, usually after it has finished.

The First Step

The first step in evaluating, measuring impact, or monitoring is to ask why you need the information.

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.

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.

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 do I measure impact?

There are 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

2. *Retrospective pre and post-test*

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. It means asking people for their views after the project has started, or after it has concluded.

When should I measure impact?

Ideally you should design activity with a way of measuring its impact built in from the beginning. Ask your stakeholders about change as soon as possible after they have experienced it, so their recollections are fresh and accurate.

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

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 your organisation, your stakeholders and participants have put into the process, think through how the process and results will be communicated, and who needs to be included in these communications.

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!

What next?

If you'd like more guidance or training on how to measure the impact of volunteering, contact the Knowledge Gateway via the information below.

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Knowledge Gateway

The Knowledge Gateway is created and led by **Volunteer Scotland**

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This is a regularly reviewed resource. If you have any suggested updates, please email Volunteer Scotland at **hello@volunteerscotland.org.uk**