

Introduction

How do peer volunteers make a difference? It is a question that anyone running a peer volunteering programme in the current policy and funding climate can expect to have to answer, and organisations need to become more skilled and confident at showing what impact they achieve. Evidence from a wide range of initiatives suggests that peer volunteering makes a distinctive, multi-dimensional contribution to bringing about change in communities, with peer volunteers themselves at the heart of this process. Approaches to impact measurement should be implemented with this in mind, so that it captures the full extent of the difference that they make.

Why measure impact?

Measuring impact makes visible the difference that peer volunteering makes. Being able to construct compelling narratives about its value and importance, based on robust evidence, will benefit your organisations in a number of ways.

● Understanding what works

The process of measuring impact reveals in detail whether a service, project or activity is proving to be effective. It illuminates the links between inputs, activities and outcomes, enabling you to identify what works in different circumstances and with different communities and to define key features of effective practice.

● Improving quality

The evaluative dimension within impact measurement focuses attention not only on the critical question of what changes but also on how change is actually achieved, revealing the processes and approaches that are most effective for securing positive outcomes. Information gained in this way

can be used to inform service development and quality improvement.

● Motivating volunteers

Enabling volunteers to see how they are making a difference through their work is a powerful way of sustaining and boosting motivation. It fosters "job satisfaction" and confirms to volunteers that they are making a positive contribution. Many volunteers are keen to understand how they contribute to the bigger picture of achieving an organisation's aims. Recognising, celebrating and valuing the impact that results from the involvement of volunteers is one of the key ways in which you can both attract new volunteers and reward those who are already engaged.

● Making the case for funding

Volunteering is not a cost-free approach. To be effective in their roles, peer volunteers need on-going support and development through their host organisation. Securing access to adequate resources is therefore essential for the sustainability of the work. Providers' ability to draw down funding is increasingly dependent upon their being able to demonstrate how effectively their work helps to achieve agreed policy outcomes. By collecting evidence to show how peer volunteers enhance service delivery, you can make a stronger case for the funding of volunteering activities as an integral part of their programmes.

What does impact mean?

Broadly speaking, impact means the changes that occur as the result of an intervention.

The unique positioning of peer volunteers within service delivery, and indeed one of the things that makes them particularly effective, is that they can contribute to generating impact in multiple directions. The analytical framework below shows the

different aspects of impact that need to be taken into account when examining how peer volunteering initiatives add value and bring about change. Recognising these various strands of impact helps to ensure an holistic approach to data collection and analysis which captures the breadth of outcomes to which peer volunteer programmes can contribute.



A framework for understanding the impact of peer volunteering

For each of these aspects of impact, there are also different types of impact that need to be captured in order to produce a more complete understanding of the changes that are taking place.

Intended impact

The planned outcomes of an intervention, i.e. the changes that it explicitly set out to achieve. These are likely to be positive.

Unintended impact

These occur as a result of the intervention, but were not planned at the outset. They may be positive or negative.

Positive impact

Beneficial changes produced by the intervention. These may be intended or unintended.

Negative impact

Undesirable changes produced by the intervention. These are likely to be unintended.

What approaches work?

A range of methods and approaches have been adopted by organisations working

with volunteers to capture and demonstrate the social and economic impact of their work. Their experiences suggest that successful impact measurement requires consideration of a number of key factors.

● Plan for impact

Peer volunteer programmes are underpinned by an expectation that they will drive change and make a difference. Thinking about impact and impact measurement should therefore be integral to the process of planning a programme. This has been characterised as an "architect" approach, where impact measurement is "designed in", as opposed to an "archaeologist" approach, in which specific impacts are unplanned and identified as they emerge.

However, it is also important that impact measurement methods are sufficiently flexible and open to capture unanticipated outcomes. Evidence collected in this way can then be used to inform the development both of further impact measurement activities and of wider programme planning.

● Involve volunteers

Volunteers should be involved not only as subjects for evidence collection, but also in the design of impact measurement activities. This helps to ensure both that data collection can be successfully carried out, and that the research findings reflect volunteers' experience. It follows the principles of co-production, an approach to the design and delivery of services which aims to involve volunteers and service users as equal partners alongside paid staff.

● Be systematic

Effective impact measurement requires a planned, logical approach that clearly defines its data collection processes and analytical frameworks and applies them in careful and consistent way.

Working with nationally validated approaches helps to provide a robust framework for doing this, because it uses methods that have been tried and tested. This in turn gives greater credibility to the results with both national and local audiences, and enables comparisons to be made with other programmes. However, you need to be prepared to adapt how you work with generic methods and tools in order to reflect the particular circumstances of your own organisation, local area or volunteer groups and to make the activity and its findings relevant.

● Monetise it

Working with nationally approved methods of measurement, makes it possible to produce credible calculations for the value not only of the time and skills donated by volunteers, but also of the outcomes generated by them. Producing hard figures helps you to make a more compelling case for the value of your work with a range of audiences including national and local policymakers, stakeholders and potential funders. It is also another way of demonstrating how volunteers add value beyond what can be achieved with paid staff alone.

● Reflect, learn improve

Treating impact measurement as an on-going learning and development process has a number of benefits. It enables appropriate staff development and capacity building to take place, to ensure that they have the skills and understanding to collect, analyse and interpret data. It allows for reflection and review, so that the approach can be refined and developed in light of previous experience to become more robust, relevant and effective. It also means that, over time, data can be collected which enables a richer picture to be assembled of the impact achieved, including the charting of trends and the identification of outcomes that did not manifest immediately as a result of the intervention.

Conclusion

Impact measurement needs to be approached as an integral part of your peer volunteering initiative, not viewed as an add-on. Planned in from the outset, and approached in a systematic way that recognises the different strands of impact that need to be explored, it can enhance and strengthen your overall programme in important ways. Effective impact measurement will help you to understand better the value of what you are doing, build stronger bonds with your volunteers, and make your work more financially sustainable.

Further information

For further information on the role and impact of peer volunteers, including case studies and other evidence, please go to <http://www.communitylearningchampions.org.uk/resources/CrossSectorWork>

This is one of a series of short publications on impact measurement developed by the National Advisory Group on Peer Volunteers and Learning in the Community. Established in 2012 by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, the group brings together government departments and cross-sector organisations to strengthen policy and practice in community learning and volunteering.



Please contact Learning and Work Institute for further information at:
www.learningandwork.org.uk or
email: enquiries@learningandwork.org.uk



Measuring the impact of peer volunteering



Peer volunteers are people who provide information, advice and support to people in their community with whom they share similar life experiences. Hosted by a wide range of organisations in the public, voluntary and private sectors, they work alongside paid staff to increase the reach and impact of local public services. Peer volunteers are active across sectors including lifelong learning, health and mental health, active ageing, digital inclusion, financial inclusion, offender management and family support.