

# Measuring the impact of peer volunteering



# 1. Introduction

How do peer volunteers make a difference? Anyone running a peer volunteering programme in the current policy and funding climate will know that they can expect to have to answer that question and be held to account for the impact of their work. Across all sectors and areas of public services, recent years have seen a shift away from simply measuring what interventions or activities are delivered, towards showing how they help to bring about change. For service providers, doing so is critical for securing their financial sustainability. This means needing to develop knowledge and skills for impact measurement, but it can appear daunting. The challenge to use rigorous methods and generate robust data can create the impression that impact measurement is a somewhat arcane practice, and act as a block to moving forward. That need not be the case. With some planning and commitment, you can develop effective approaches that yield powerful results. It is important to do something. Investing in impact measurement pays off.



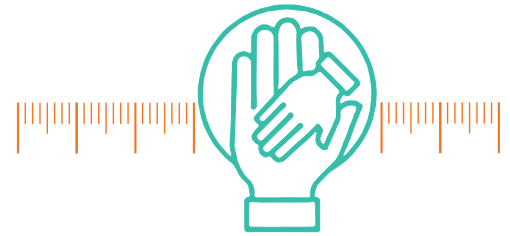
## 1.1 About this publication

This short publication has been produced with the aim of supporting organisations running peer volunteering programmes to strengthen their impact measurement. It is not a "how to" guide. Many of those are available, setting out a range of approaches, methods and tools that can be used and adapted to suit the needs and circumstances of individual programmes.<sup>1</sup> Rather, the purpose here is to offer some conceptual frameworks and insights from practice to encourage

organisations working with peer volunteers to rise to the impact measurement challenge. Our starting point is the recognition that peer volunteering makes a distinctive, multi-dimensional contribution to bringing about change in communities, and that peer volunteers themselves are at the heart of this process. Impact measurement should be approached with this in mind, so that you can capture the full scale and scope of the difference that peer volunteering makes.

The publication provides an analysis of impact measurement

<sup>1</sup> For guides to some common approaches see: <http://www.learningandwork.org.uk/community-learning/resources/measuring-impact-and-social-value>



in the context of peer volunteering. It looks at the rationale for measuring impact, what “impact” means and how to approach impact measurement. It draws on the experience and expertise of members of the National Advisory Group on Peer Volunteering and Learning, and is accompanied by a series of case studies of different approaches which have informed the analysis presented here.

## **1.2 Who are peer volunteers?**

Peer volunteers are people who provide information, advice and support to others 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 professional staff to increase the reach and impact of 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.

Their role is important because many people, especially from excluded groups, find services difficult to access and use. This means that they cannot get the support that will enable them to make positive changes in their lives, for example to improve their own and their family’s health, gain skills or break out of cycles of debt, addiction or offending behaviour. Peer volunteers are uniquely placed to act as a bridge between local services and the people who need them most. They make a distinctive contribution which complements the work of paid staff. By working from their own experiences to reach ‘people like me’, they build trust and act as role models to successfully engage others and give them the confidence and self-belief to aim for a better future. In many different contexts, time and again, the approach has been shown not only to work but also to be highly cost-effective. As competition for funding becomes increasingly fierce, it is vital that anyone working with this approach is able to demonstrate its value.

## **1.3 The National Advisory Group**

This publication has been produced by the National Advisory Group on Peer Volunteers and Learning. Established in 2012 by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) and co-ordinated by Learning and Work Institute (L&W), the group brings together government departments and organisations from across sectors to strengthen policy and practice in community learning and peer volunteering.

## 2. Why measure impact?

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

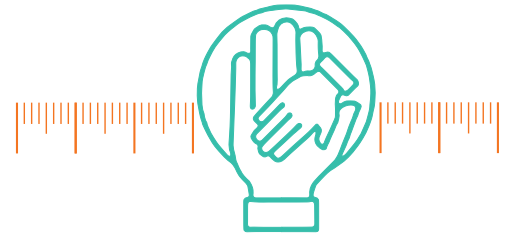


### Understanding what works

As a simple matter of good practice, it is important to establish the extent to which an intervention is actually working. By shining a light on the work of peer volunteers, the impact measurement process is able to reveal in detail whether the service, project or activity you are delivering is proving to be effective. This helps you to understand whether you are achieving what you set out to do, to identify any unanticipated changes that are taking place, and to determine how effectively resources are being used. 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. This knowledge and understanding is an essential pre-requisite for making informed decisions about resource allocation and which activities to continue, cease or develop.

### Improving quality

Embedding this evaluative dimension within impact measurement is important not only for determining whether something is fundamentally worth doing, but also for showing how it can be done most effectively. Focusing attention on the critical question of how impact is achieved, as well as what changes, helps to shed light on those processes and approaches that are most effective for securing positive outcomes. You can use information gained in this way to inform service design and development and quality improvement. Having a clearer understanding about what needs to be in place to enable your volunteers to perform their role effectively means that you can make better decisions on matters such as appropriate types and levels of training, development and support, and the resources that are required to provide it.



## Motivating volunteers

Reciprocity and mutual benefit are at the heart of the relationship between volunteers and the organisations that involve them. Volunteers give their time, experience and skills without expectation of financial benefit, and the reasons why individuals decide to volunteer are personal and varied. They might want to contribute to their community, give something back to society, help a cause they care about, gain new skills and experience, or meet new people. You need to understand what motivates – or could motivate – people to volunteer with your organisation, and to harness and develop that energy in order both to attract new volunteers and to recognise and reward those who are already engaged.

Enabling your 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 demonstrate your organisation’s commitment to reciprocity. It is about telling a compelling story to those who join in. Central to this is showing how what volunteers achieve is distinctive and different from the contribution of paid staff, and this in turn helps to counter any suspicion that using volunteers is simply a cheap solution for financially straitened times.

## Making the case for funding

Volunteering is not a cost-free option. To be effective in their roles, peer volunteers need on-going support and development through your organisation. Securing access to adequate resources for initiatives that involve peer volunteers is therefore essential for the sustainability of the work. Under the on-going public sector reform programme, 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. There has been a move away from a “one size fits all” model of service delivery

to one which seeks to be more responsive to the needs of both individual citizens and local circumstances. Particularly since the economic downturn of 2008, the imperative to secure affordable and efficient services has also come to the fore. Thus cuts in spending have happened at the same time as rising public expectations about the quality of services. This has focused greater attention not only on what is delivered, but also on how. Local commissioning is an important dimension of this new approach to service design, with policymakers and stakeholders interested in how resources within an area can be joined up to secure better social, economic and environmental impact.<sup>2</sup> Public spending is increasingly tied to evidence that money is being used to fund activities and services that add value, deliver the intended outcomes, and achieve social impact.<sup>3</sup> By collecting evidence to show how peer volunteers enhance service delivery, for example by extending its reach and improving outcomes for individuals and communities, you will be able to make a stronger case for the funding of volunteering activities as an integral part of your programmes.

<sup>2</sup> This focus has been supported by the Public Services (Social Value) Act which came into force in 2013. It places a duty on public authorities to consider how the services they commission and procure might improve the economic, social and environmental well-being of the area. <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2012/3/contents/enacted>

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. Local Government Association (2012) *Commissioning for Better Public Services*; New Economics Foundation (2014) *Commissioning for Outcomes and Co-Production: a guide for local authorities*, <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/entry/commissioning-for-outcomes-co-production>.

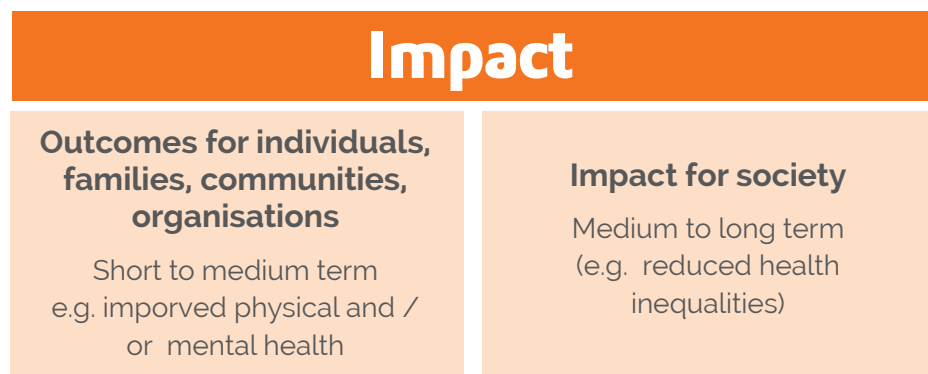
### 3. What does impact mean?

**Broadly speaking, impact means the changes that occur as the result of an intervention. However, there are different levels or layers of impact that need to be taken into account in order for effective impact measurement to take place.**



Impact is often used as an umbrella term for different orders of change that a particular intervention might help to bring about over time. At the same time, a distinction is often drawn between outcomes that are the direct results of the intervention for those who are immediately involved, and the longer term

social impact to which the intervention ultimately aims to contribute. Understanding this distinction is important, because it helps to show how activities provided through “front line” services, even on a modest scale, are intended over time to contribute towards bringing about social change.



**Figure 1: Outcomes and impact**

For organisations that run peer volunteering programmes, impact measurement primarily means collecting evidence of the outcomes experienced by those directly involved in the initiative.

In addition, 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 in Figure

2 below shows the different aspects of impact that you need to consider 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.

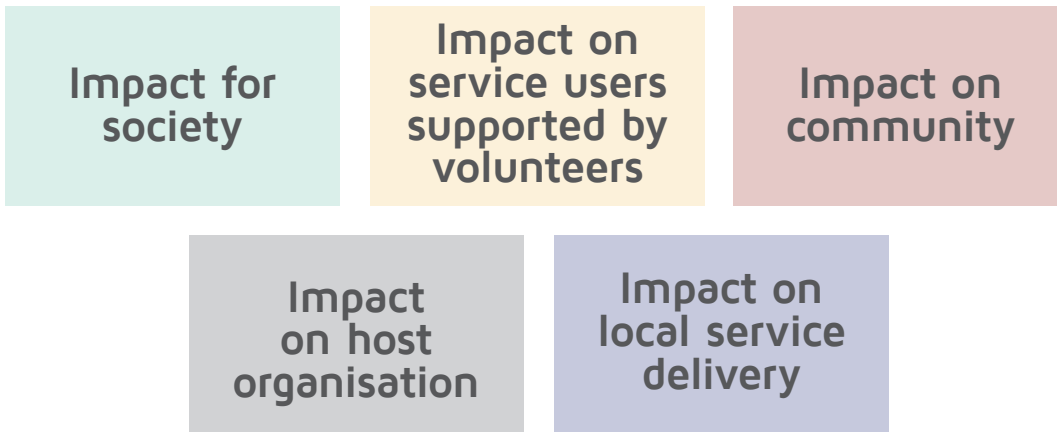
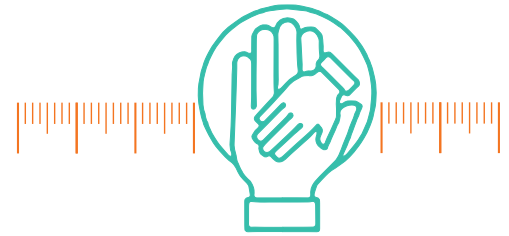


Figure 2: A framework for understanding the impact of peer volunteering

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.

<p><b>Intended impact</b></p> <p>The planned outcomes of an intervention, i.e. the changes that it explicitly set out to achieve. These are likely to be positive.</p>	<p><b>Unintended impact</b></p> <p>These occur as a result of the intervention, but were not planned at the outset. They may be positive or negative.</p>
<p><b>Positive impact</b></p> <p>Beneficial changes produced by the intervention. These may be intended or unintended.</p>	<p><b>Negative impact</b></p> <p>Undesirable changes produced by the intervention. These are likely to be unintended.</p>

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the point of view of making the case for the funding of peer volunteer programmes, for the purposes of planning, quality improvement and service development, identifying the unintended and negative impact is important too.

While capturing intended and positive outcomes is critical from

## 4. 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

In common with other social policy interventions, peer volunteer programmes are underpinned by an expectation that they will drive change and make a difference. Terms such as “logic chain” and “theory of change” are applied to the models that are constructed to anticipate how specific inputs (e.g. investment in the recruitment, training and support of health champions) will lead to certain activities (e.g. champions supporting people in their local community to access health services and implement lifestyle

changes) and thereby generate desired benefits (e.g. greater awareness about health issues, healthier lifestyles, improved health, reduced reliance on primary health services). The logic chain model “shows a causal connection between the need you have identified, what you do and how this makes a difference for individuals and communities.”<sup>4</sup>

Figure 3 below illustrates the logic chain model by applying it to the dilemma faced by Little Red Riding Hood and her vulnerable (and socially excluded) Granny.

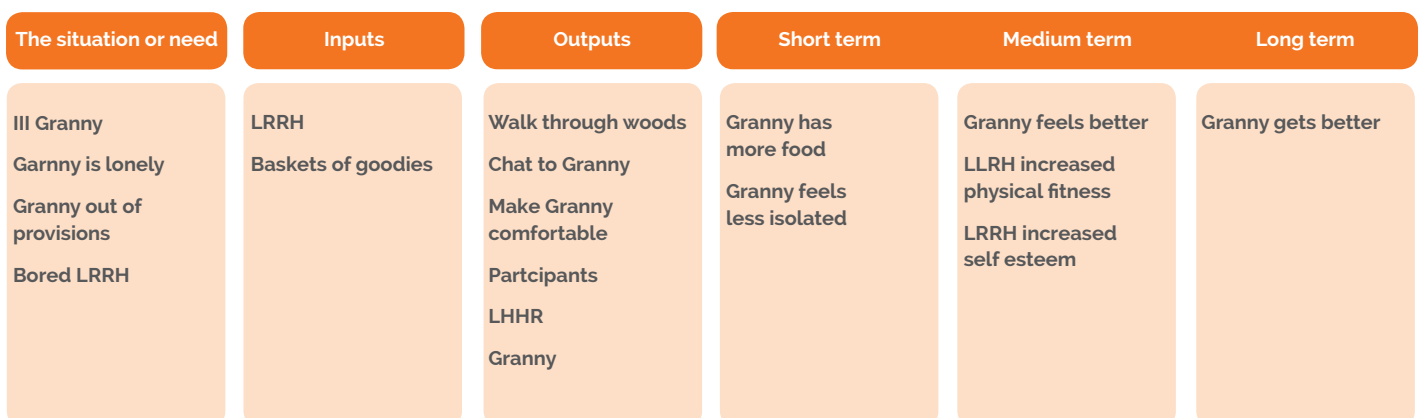
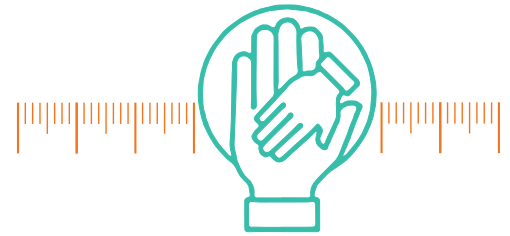


Figure 3: Logic chain model applied to Little Red Riding Hood<sup>5</sup>

4 Learning Link Scotland, Explaining the Difference: [http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/media/uploads/etd\\_pack.pdf](http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/media/uploads/etd_pack.pdf).

5 Ibid.





The logic model reflects organisations' particular contexts, purposes, circumstances and focuses of interest. Therefore different organisations' logic models will vary in focus and might look dissimilar, but they are all based on a "chain reaction":

- Need / or current situation
- Aims / objectives / or planned inputs
- Outcomes
- Impacts

Thinking about impact is therefore integral to the process of planning a programme, and impact measurement seeks to establish the extent to which planned changes have occurred in practice. 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 not planned, but rather have to be identified as they emerge. The former approach is desirable because actively pursuing impact from the very start of a programme should increase the likelihood of its making a difference.

However, as was noted above, it is also the case that an approach which focuses only on planned impact risks missing potentially significant changes that have been achieved through a programme, including ones

that are important for and valued by volunteers and those they support. For that reason, it is important that impact measurement methods are sufficiently flexible and open to capture these wider outcomes. Creating space for volunteers and others to express the breadth of changes they have experienced helps to bring them to light. 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**

As the point above makes clear, you should involve volunteers not only as subjects for evidence collection, but also in the design of impact measurement activities. This could mean, for example that they help to frame research questions, provide guidance on appropriate methods of data collection, inform understanding of wider outcomes, contribute to data analysis, and review and confirm findings. Involving volunteers in this way helps to ensure both that data collection can be successfully carried out, and that the research findings reflect volunteers' experience and are shared with them. 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. Co-production is gaining traction with policy-makers and providers for its potential to increase the public's sense of ownership and agency in relation to public services, and is presented as a transformative corrective to established "top down" models.

### **Be systematic**

A fundamental message for anyone undertaking impact measurement is to be systematic. This means planning and implementing a logical process that clearly defines the questions you will ask, what evidence you will collect and from whom, how it will be analysed and how and where it will be reported. It demands care and consistency to produce findings and conclusions that can be trusted.

Working with nationally validated approaches helps to provide a robust framework for doing this, because it applies 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, it is also clear that 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. For example, you could use highly bespoke methods for collecting data from volunteers and others, then analyse the data to generate results using a nationally approved approach. Or you could use a verified data collection method, but with questions adapted to reflect your organisational needs and concerns.

### **Monetise it**

Applying a financial value to the contribution that volunteers make can be seen as problematic because it often consists of such apparently intangible elements as altruism and human kindness. Yet it is evident that, by working with nationally approved methods of measurement, organisations have been able 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 has helped organisations to feel better equipped to make the case for the value of their work with a range of audiences including national and local policymakers, stakeholders and potential funders. Evidence has been used to argue for the importance of investing in volunteering, because the returns that it generates far outweigh the costs associated with running volunteer programmes. And critically, this is another way of demonstrating how volunteers add value beyond what can be achieved with paid staff alone.

### **Reflect, learn, improve**

For host organisations, treating the development and implementation of your approach to impact measurement as an on-going, learning 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, trends data or longitudinal data can be collected which enables a richer picture to be assembled of the impact achieved, including the charting of trends over time and the identification of outcomes that did not manifest immediately as a result of the intervention, but required longer gestation.

## 5. Conclusion



Peer volunteers add enormous value to services. They help to extend reach, improve outcomes and secure greater return on investment. But it is not enough for those working with peer volunteers to know this from their own experience. Being able to produce good evidence to show what changes volunteers help to achieve, and how, is critical. To do this, 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.

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The Impact of WEA Education:  
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