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# Assessing your impact

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Everyone knows when an event really ‘makes an impact’, whether it’s a sporting triumph, a political scandal or a natural disaster. People talk about it – at work, on the street, on the TV. Community organisations don’t tend to make that kind of national impact. But it’s often clear within the local community which community organisations and centres make an impact. People talk about them, they use their services, they go to their meetings – they feel part of them. An effective community organisation has a real impact on people’s ‘wellbeing’ and their quality of life.

This handbook is designed to show you how you can assess and map the impacts your organisation is having – on local people, on community groups and on the surrounding neighbourhood. It is based on a new method tried and tested in summer of 2006 through a pilot project with five community centres across England.

Understanding your impact can be important in several ways. It can help you:

- be sure that you are delivering on your original goals and objectives
- check that the services you offer are what local people need and want
- consider whether there are gaps in the impact you are having that you could address
- demonstrate to key groups such as funders how you make a difference.

## **Are we making a difference?**

It’s easy to feel and to say that your work is making a difference. But it’s not so easy to assess that impact or to demonstrate it to funding agencies or indeed to people who use the centre every week.

Community organisations matter. An effective one can bring lasting change in many ways to both the local area and the people who live there. But often those changes are not obvious and difficult to measure. The organisation itself may not realise just how much has happened as result of its hard work. Understanding your impacts will help you see the changes you’ve made.

An effective community organisation can act:

- directly with people – providing and encouraging them to use services and training that will help build their skills and confidence
- indirectly with people – working with other organisations to make sure services are improved and available to local people
- on the local economy – helping create jobs and businesses that benefit the economy
- on the local environment – tackling problems and engaging people in planning the improvements they’d like
- as an advocate – getting organised and campaigning to create a better community.

## Box 1: Impacts, Outcomes and Outputs – what do we mean?

This guide helps you look at the impacts of your organisation. In doing this you may also want to look at your 'outputs' and 'outcomes' as well as your impacts, and to be clear what these three terms mean and how they differ. *ChangeCheck* focuses on Impact rather than on outputs or outcomes.

There are a number of different definitions developed by different organisations, but broadly speaking we can define these terms in this way:

**Outputs** are the activities, services and products provided by the projects, work programmes and other processes run by an organisation. They are matters which organisations themselves can deliver and have control over, but they are not usually ends in themselves. They can usually be measured fairly easily.

**Outcomes** are the effects or changes brought about by the activities provided by an organisation (which may be the outputs). Measurements of outcomes show the degree of its effectiveness, rather than its size or productivity. They may be harder to measure, and they are likely to be affected by a range of factors which may not be in the direct control of the organisation delivering the outputs. Outcomes are often about changes in individuals and organisations.

**Impacts** are the changes, effects or benefits that results from the services or activities of an organisation on the wider community. They can often be seen as being 'what happens as a result of the outcomes'. They result from the combination of those services or activities, rather than any one individual project or initiative. Impacts are often long term, broad and sustainable and can include affecting policy decisions at government level. Impacts often relate to the longer-term mission of an organisation and can best be seen in terms of what happens to a wider community rather than just those involved in a project. Any impact your organisation is making is likely to be on local social conditions, the local economy and the local environment.

It helps to consider these in the context of an example. Thus a project to encourage more people to apply for benefits (e.g. for income or child support) might have a number of outputs.

These **outputs** might include:

- the number of leaflets and posters produced
- the number of workshops or 'surgeries' run
- the number of people asking for advice.

The **outcomes** might be:

- more people receiving the benefits to which they are entitled
- more money being spent in local shops
- healthier children.

The **impacts** might then include:

- fewer people living below the 'poverty line'
- more people feeling confident to engage in local action
- a stronger local economy.

## Impact and evaluation

*'An effective charity considers the impact that it wants to have and actually has on the people who benefit from it, is clear about its objects, vision, mission and values and how it will achieve them.'*  
The Charity Commission, Hallmarks of an Effective Charity, 2004

Carrying out an assessment of your impact is rather different from evaluating what you do but can build on any evaluation work you have done. Many groups are used to measuring their outputs and outcomes: see Box 1 and the website for more information on this. Outcomes are often seen as the actions that result from delivering the outputs. One way of looking at this is to see the impacts of your work as *'what happens and changes (in the community or in peoples' lives) as a result of delivering those outcomes'*.

To understand these impacts it's also important to look at the organisation and the issues it works on from the outside, to see things as local people see them. For example, the local community is generally less interested to know that an organisation works closely with the probation service or has three outreach workers or runs four sessions a week for ex-offenders – people just want to feel safe when walking the streets. People may want local training courses but they are probably not interested in how much funding the community centre receives from the Learning and Skills Council. Real life results are what matter to most people.

Evaluation also usually looks at the 'intended outcomes' – things that you planned to happen. In assessing impact you also look at what was not planned or intended but still happened and how it changed people's lives. Another difference is that an evaluation is carried out on a specific piece of work or project. There's usually a clear starting point and a finish and some objectives were set in the initial plan. This makes a project relatively easy to evaluate, assuming that a system to support that evaluation was set up at the start.

Assessing the overall impact of your work involves taking a broader look. A key question it involves asking is: in what ways and to what extent is what you are doing helping you achieve your objectives?

## How can a community organisation assess its' impacts?

Impact assessment is a tool that is routinely used for assessing new projects: Health Impact Assessments and Environmental Impact Assessments have well-developed methodologies and Social Impact Assessments are increasingly common. This handbook offers a much simpler approach: a review programme that any community centre or organisation can carry out in your own time to assess and understand the impacts you make.

It would be hard for many centres and community organisations to 'measure' their overall impact in quantifiable terms by collecting data on social and economic changes, such as the level of employment or crime in a neighbourhood. This is due partly to the sheer number of ways a community organisation can affect people's lives. It can also be hard to prove that changes that take place are due to your work when other initiatives are at work in the area as well. Some projects have worked to develop such data based measures and more advice is available in Resource 2.

This guide does not go down that route. ChangeCheck is a method based on the perceptions of people and organisations that use and are affected by the centre. It offers a practical way to assess your impact that will help you and the organisations you work with understand more about what you do, where you are really making a difference and how you might develop in the future.

## Who is this handbook for?

Any community organisation could use this guide, but it is designed especially for larger organisations based in or running a community centre offering a range of services and activities.

Some of these may be described as 'community anchor' organisations, local organisations rooted in the communities where they work which give a solid foundation to a wide variety of self-help action (see Box 2).

Many organisations have been acting as community anchors for years but have probably never described themselves in this way. However, the government and the voluntary and community sectors now recognise the value of this work and are looking to see more organisations to develop into the role of 'community anchor'. But in order to strengthen this support and the support from local authorities and other funding organisations, community organisations need to show they are making a positive difference: that is one reason for doing this kind of impact assessment.

### Box 2:

#### What is a community anchor organisation?

There are five roles that describe the main roles 'anchor' organisations carry out in their neighbourhood. These five roles are:

**Service provision:** providing services and helping people get access to the services they need

**Resourcing:** helping bring money and opportunities into a neighbourhood

**Advocacy:** calling for changes in policy and practice

**Supporting community organisations:** helping groups develop their skills, organisation, representation and involvement.

**Strengthening community participation:** such as helping people getting involved in groups and having a say about local issues and services

A handout about these roles can be downloaded at [www.bassac.org/changecheck](http://www.bassac.org/changecheck)