Small organisations, big difference: Top tips to inspire your impact practice

Introduction

People working and volunteering for small organisations up and down the country have talked to Inspiring Impact about their Covid-19 challenges. They have also shared their solutions and wise words. We have drawn these together into this ‘top tips’ guide to inspire charities and voluntary organisations, of all types and sizes, to review their own impact practice.

To start with, it’s worth reminding ourselves what impact practice is. Impact practice is what an organisation does to plan, understand, communicate, and improve its impact. The four-step **cycle of good impact practice**, which enables impact practice that:

- Plans carefully from the start to help clarify what is important. This could be through agreeing to a well-consulted-on theory of change and framework, or through spending an hour or two brainstorming what the needs of your users are; what the intended outcomes for them are; and what activities, services or products you plan to deliver to them
- Collects only the data needed for the intended purpose – usually data on performance against key goals
- Focusses on drawing out meaning from the data the organisation collects
- Is useful for learning and improving what we do and communicates the results of our work

Done well, this can be a virtuous cycle. Consider the timing of each element of the cycle. When are key decisions to be made? When is the right time to collect information? Avoid mapping out a ‘perfect’ evaluation process which may be disproportionate and burdensome. Remember to ask what internal capacity and capability you have for monitoring and evaluation.

We have grouped our top tips into four areas, linking to the four-step cycle and including references to our free resources and impact stories. These groups are:

(1) Plan to inspire your impact practice
(2) Find inspiring ways to gather information
(3) Be inspired by your analysis and findings
(4) Use information to inspire decisions and development

Plan to inspire your impact practice

Understand what information you need. Before starting out on the process of collecting data, it’s important to be clear about who you are trying to reach, what you are trying to achieve and why you need to collect it. Remember that information may serve more than one purpose. Consider how you are going to analyse and then make the best use of every piece of data you collect. Think about what time and skills you have to analyse, report on and share your data internally and externally. Ask yourselves what your immediate and future needs are, for example, whether the information is for immediate decision-making or future fundraising, or for both. Even if we are clear when we plan, we often collect more information than we intend to. Be prepared for some wasted data – that's normal. There will be lessons to take forward for future data collection. It can be useful to structure your data collection around the five types of data.

Be proportionate. This is something we always advise, but even more so during this crisis. Stakeholders should make sure that requests for information are proportionate to the size of the organisation and to the scale and nature of the work; collecting data should assist and develop your responses, rather than get in the way. We often ask ourselves, 'what will we be kicking ourselves about not knowing in six months' time, and therefore, what do we need to collect now?' If you are struggling to meet monitoring or reporting requirements and to respond adequately to demand, we recommend flagging this up to your funders and trustees. You might also ask funders how they intend to use the information they request so that you can focus together on collecting what is most useful.

Find inspiring ways to gather information

It is important to find creative, organic ways to engage people you work with when collecting information. You may or may not do this online.

Going digital. Many of us have had to very quickly get used to working more and more online. We are likely to have to continue to gain greater expertise of using appropriate technology, so we can continue to serve our beneficiaries. This means gathering opinions and seeking feedback through surveys, interviews, focus groups and through a range of creative ways, all carried out online. Examples from organisations we spoke to include: Zoom polls; Mentimeter 'word clouds' and questions; Google forms or other online satisfaction surveys; WhatsApp groups; and Facebook comments and threads for unsolicited feedback. It's important to take the time to set up these tools well. Practice using them before 'going live' and 'peel' off key data, so it comes to you in a way that is useful. Read more tips here and see how Inclusive Skating has done it here.

Organic methods. Creative methods of collecting data do not all have to be online. Examples include 'journaling' or capturing 'free talk' at the end of a session. Such methods can mean that you get a lot of qualitative information – this is often richer than quantitative information, but it can take longer to process. It's advisable to find a balance between the two, making sure you have both the skills and time to properly look at the qualitative information you collect. See how Middle Eastern Women and Society organisation and Voluntary Sector Support Horsham did it.

Keep your ears to the ground is a tip that we hear often in our conversations. This can be done both proactively and reactively, through a variety of informal and formal methods. For example, in either general conversations or in 'check ins', users may share quite clearly what is on their mind, what they are struggling with and what they have achieved. On the other hand, you might have to listen more deeply to hear their emerging needs, fears and concerns. Also think about connecting with communities, by collecting and sharing information within neighbourhoods, for example through WhatsApp groups. By staying connected and collecting information proactively, you will be ready to adjust and develop your services in response to new situations. Find out how Merton Mutual Aid have used social media as a data source here.

Find time to collect information as part of your routine. While listening to organisations' stories, we heard about the merits of building data collection into everyday activities. If you collect relevant data that can serve multiple purposes, and collect it in ways that blend seamlessly with your day to day activities, this can be rewarding and motivating for staff (when they receive positive data about user satisfaction). It can also be worthwhile for learning, improvement and accountability. Read about Barking and Dagenham Youth Dance's creative ways to engage young people in data collection.

Collect data securely and confidentially. Collecting information confidentially and securely is always important. It is especially important in sensitive situations, for example when working with people who are vulnerable, and it's necessary to collect and share evidence about their needs and about what works to support them. You may need to revisit GDPR and safeguarding regulations. In order to build trust and to enable people of all backgrounds to share their views, it is vital to make sure that individuals understand that their data will be collected, stored and used confidentially.

Give multiple ways to respond. Consider alternative ways you can engage and involve people, so that they have different options and opportunities for giving information. Remember that some may already be fatigued by the amount of time they now spend online. You may wish to prepare a few ways to ask the same set of questions, so that users can choose the method that suits them. For example, at one organisation we spoke to, an online questionnaire, a telephone interview, and a Zoom poll were all used to ask similar questions, with varying degrees of success and uptake. Read more about how Incredible Edible and Southampton Hub decide what data to collect.

Be mindful of relationships when collecting data. We heard many stories about the importance of relationships when collecting information. Users will feel at ease and ready to participate in your evaluation if you have good and sustained relationships with them. You can then get data that is regular and likely to be more honest and rich. This can be motivating and reassuring to your staff and volunteers who are delivering services. It is vital to build a rapport with new users. This may be more challenging when communicating online, but it's not impossible. Many small organisations are also embedded in their communities, making a data collection approach based on relationships more organic. This can provide opportunities not available to larger, less well-connected organisations. However, it may also bring with it a potential loss of impartiality and the introduction of bias to the evidence. It's important to watch out for this. Read more about how Sikh Women's Action Network. have done this in practice.

Make data collection empowering. The process of collecting data can be even more powerful and rewarding when it involves local community members carrying out the data collection themselves. As insiders, they may more readily pick up on cultural nuances and they may themselves gain new transferable skills. When working this way, a good support process will be essential – it will not be a cheap option. There will be a balance to consider: sometimes you may want to prioritise the process of involvement and participation, accepting 'good enough' data as a trade-off for empowering individuals and building skills. Find out how Azuko and Southampton Hub empower their communities to get involved in data collection.

Be inspired by your analysis and findings

Discover new needs, new projects, new users. When you're collecting data, you may discover that existing users have new needs. Your outreach work or existing users may lead you to new users beyond your region or other usual areas of focus. It may be that you collect enough information to create a new project, for which you can seek funding for. Read how Harrow Association of Somali Voluntary Organisations and Community Language Support Services adapted to meet new user needs.

Use existing research findings to demonstrate the link between your work and the likely positive changes in people's lives. You may not need to or be able to gather the data yourselves to provide evidence of long-term impact. It's not necessary to reinvent the wheel. If the research already exists, focus instead on collecting data on your work to show how it connects to existing evidence on effectiveness. You do this by focusing on two questions: 'what is the evidence that exists for the thing we do?' and 'do we deliver the thing effectively?' This process of 'triangulation' can strengthen your case. It may be helpful to find research done by academic institutions or to look in What Works Centres. Find out how the Sikh Women's Action Network uses existing data.

Use information to inspire decisions and development

Analyse data quickly and put it to use quickly. The need to get information to use immediately is often a key driver for many small charities and voluntary organisations. Particularly in the current climate, what is often most important is good-enough data for rapid decision-making, so as to make real-time adjustments to meet needs. Ask relevant questions of the data you currently collect, to help you to make quick decisions when necessary, such as during this crisis. However, it's also worthwhile occasionally setting aside some time to do a deep dive into your data. This allows you to do more in depth analysis, to check for new patterns or trends, and to consider new findings which may influence your future plans.

Change perceptions by showing how you make a positive difference. It's important to use community, user voices and other findings to correct misconceptions and stereotypes that can hold back an appropriate response and support. For example, we were told how model citizen behaviour in a socially-distanced local park, corrected a public misperception of all young people being involved in anti-social behaviour.

Build the evidence base with your findings. Having the time to do this may feel like a luxury for some organisations. However, small charities are often sitting on a 'goldmine' of community-based research, with the potential to inform local decision-makers and policymakers. Bodies such as clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) and local councils are often looking for strong, well-rooted evidence on which to base support for communities in need. Clearing a path to share your findings and getting data to the right people can be a wise investment, leading to more informed decisions for your client group in the longer term.

Use your data to make the case for support. In a crisis there is often a focus on short-term funding. However, it's also important for small organisations to collect evidence about how they met emerging and critical needs, to secure funding for that work in the future.

Use visual methods of presenting. It's often important to present your data to different stakeholders in ways that are visually appealing, so that results are easier to digest and can have a greater impact. Particularly for those who might not want to read a text-heavy report, you can present project timelines, information about your user group and outcomes in ways that are more interesting to them, such as using infographics and other data visualisation techniques.

Thank you

We have drawn together these tips from the stories we gathered during the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as from our years of working with charities and voluntary organisations of all types and sizes. Our thanks to all those who shared their stories with us. To read the stories from which these tips have been drawn, please visit our impact stories page.