What difference or outcome are we making?
(March 2013)

Voluntary and community organisations exist to make a difference. They do not exist to only make money or keep people in jobs or do the state's job for it. These differences can also be called outcomes or impacts.

What do you mean by outcomes?
Outcomes and impacts are different to inputs and outputs:
* **Inputs**-these are the resources (e.g. staff, time, money, premises) that you use in your work
* **Outputs**-these are the services you deliver (e.g. 100 clients seen, 2 booklets produced, 1000 hours open, 8 volunteers recruited)
* **Outcomes**-all the changes and difference brought about by the work done, negative as well as positive
* **Impact**-sometimes used interchangeably with outcomes but sometimes used to describe longer term changes, not always directly as a result of your work, as opposed to outcomes which may be the more directly linked changes

Outcomes can be changes in individuals, families, groups of people, communities, organisations, the environment, etc. These changes may be the long term eventual one you want, or could be the changes you will see before the final outcome. For example the final outcome may be more young people in jobs for more than 6 months but the outcomes on the way might be:
* Improved motivation and aspirations
* Improved job-search skills
* Improved qualifications

Although we have said that outcomes are changes, some outcomes might actually maintain the status quo by preventing a situation getting worse, e.g. maintain frail older people in their own homes. So although there might not be a change from the current position there is evidence that without your activity there would have been a change for the worse.

Why is knowing your outcomes important?
* Helps you explain what your organisation is trying to achieve
* Helps give your organisation a clear goal and focus
* Gives a more complete picture of what your organisation is achieving, perhaps more than what you are funded to do i.e. your social value
* Makes it easier to 'sell' your organisation to increase support from individuals and organisations (i.e. gain more volunteers and funding)
* Gives you a measure to tell if you are achieving your aims
* Helps you to set achievable goals
* Helps you improve the work you do by concentrating on how to create more impact

Deciding on your outcomes.

Involve as many people as you can to help identify your outcomes. By doing this you will hopefully ground your outcomes in reality if those who will have to create these changes (your staff and volunteers) have a say. By involving people they will increase their understanding of outcomes and be more committed to collecting information about them. Ideally you should choose your own outcomes but funders might want to influence these. If possible you should adapt or interpret the funder's requirements to be closer to your own. If there is a big difference between a funder's outcomes and your own you should be asking yourself why you are taking this funding when it might be leading you down a path you don't really want to go!

There are a number of useful tools around to help you think thorough defining your outcomes, how your activities contribute to these changes and possible ways of measuring them. The most common are:

- Theory of change (see **NPC** on the last page)
- Planning triangle (see **CES** on the last page)
- Logic model (see **NCVO** on the last page)

With all planning there will always be unplanned outcomes. So always look at your work and try to identify **all** the changes that have happened, not just the planned ones. This may help you to improve your work and even develop new areas of work. Also you might find some negative changes e.g. providing a new community centre increases parking problems and local resident complaints. By identifying them you can either try to solve these or make sure that the positive changes outweigh the negative.

Proving that you are making a difference

Most organisations feel it is obvious that they do make a difference, however when asked for proof have little to show. Most voluntary organisations achieve a lot with very little. However without proof of this they may well be short changing their organisation, workers, volunteers and those they work with. Recent research showed that 52% of organisations had only started measuring their impact because funders wanted them to. However most organisations, for whatever reason that motivated them, say that by measuring impact it has improved their services.

For each outcome you need to decide on how to measure how much change has taken place. Outcome indicators can be:

- Quantitative (sometimes called 'hard' data) – where you count number of things, e.g. number of people in jobs, and
- Qualitative (sometimes called 'soft' data) – where you measure people's views and experience e.g. how safe people feel in an area

Collecting hard data is easier than soft and can often be given more credence. However much of the work in the voluntary sector involves 'soft' changes. A good quote to keep in mind is "Many of the things you can count, don't count. Many of the things you can't count, really count." Another practice to keep in mind is no numbers without names and no names without numbers, which emphasises that you need to have stories of change to go with any figures and vice-a-versa to give a full picture of the changes you bring about. So make sure you measure both hard and soft, even if measuring soft is difficult.

When collecting data keep the following in mind
- Concentrate on the measures that tell you about the main outcomes
- Separate out the 'need to know' from the 'nice to know'
- Better to measure a few things really well than measure a lot not very well
- Find ways of counting that will be acceptable to those you work with and won't negatively affect your relationships with them (sometimes involving your users in deciding what and how to measure can help overcome this)
- Try to **COUNT** (Count Once Use Numerous Times)
- Be pragmatic in how and what you count so you don't take too much time from doing
- Decide when to collect the data (is it all the time, once a year, samples, sometime after your work ends)
- Do you need a 'baseline' i.e. collected at the start of your work so you can measure the degree of change at the end?
- If you are collecting data but then don't use it to change your work or report on it, it's a waste of everyone's time!
- There is a law of diminishing returns. Research shows that there are peaks in benefits in spending on measuring outcomes (4-6% (of income) for improved services and 1-3% for increased funding)

There are many ways of collecting information such as:
- Focus groups
- Graffiti walls
- Observations
- Case studies
- Stories and time lines
- Diaries
- Photographs/videos
- Diagrams/pictures drawn by users
- Visual records (e.g. Outcome Stars, Jelly Bears)
- Interviews
- Questionnaires
- Social media

Whatever methods are used:
- Keep them short, simple and easy to use and understand
- Use a wide range of tools to encourage completion by a range of people
- Always be clear what answer each tool will give you
- Allow people to give a negative response
- Allow for other comments
- Avoid leading questions
- Get both hard and soft data
- Try out your tools
- Report back to those who gave you the data
- Ensure you respect privacy and other ethical issues

Do not confuse measures of quality and satisfaction with outcomes. It is perfectly good practice to ask those you work with for comments on how satisfied they are with your work, for suggestions for improvement, etc. However this does not tell you about what difference your work has made.

Communicating the difference you have made

It is important that everyone in your organisation knows what difference you have made and can see how they are contributing to it. It will help make sure you focus on the difference your organisation is set up to achieve. For those outside your organisation it helps them to understand what and why you are doing what you do and will ensure they continue to support you and even increase that support. For charities this is a legal requirement as they must report on what public benefit they have achieved each year. So regular reporting is important. Use your data in annual reports, promotional material, newsletters, reports to funders, press releases, etc. The more people who know that you are an organisation that makes a positive difference the more support you will receive.

A consortium of national voluntary organisations has produced a simple document that sets out the principles of good impact reporting. There are six principles of **how** to communicate:

- Clarity
- Accessibility
- Transparency
- Accountability
- Verifiability
- Proportionality

And six principles about **what** to communicate:

- Clear purpose
- Defined aims
- Coherent activities
- Demonstrated results
- Evidence
- Lessons learned

Principles of Good Impact Reporting – for charities and social enterprises, March 2012
www.cfg.org.uk/resources/~/media/Files/Resources/CFDG%20Publications/SME330%20CFDG%20Impact%20Report_v6.ashx

Sometimes you might be challenged to prove your work has created these changes. For much of the work we carry out there can never be a 100% link between our work and changes so don't try to find a perfect system! Rely on feedback from those you work with to identify how much of the changes they have experienced they attribute to you. For instance once they have identified the changes at the end of a project ask them how much of this change is due to your work, using a points or percentage score which you can then average across the project.

Are you committed to making changes happen?

Putting outcomes at the centre of all your planning and evaluation will mean that each organisation should be clear about

- what difference it wants to make
- who will benefit
- how the activities the organisation does will make the difference happen
- how to maximise the difference it makes with the resources it has
- how it will prove to itself and others that it is making a difference
- how it will communicate the difference it has made

The Code of Good Impact Practice (http://inspiringimpact.org) gives examples of what an organisation will be doing if it is committed to this way of working.

Where can I find out more?

BCVS can give individual support and advice on defining your outcomes, implementing a monitoring and evaluation system, reporting on your outcomes and how to become an outcome focused organisation.

Charities Evaluation Services (CES) is one of the best known specialist organisations providing advice, training and consultancy in this area for the sector. Their website www.ces-vol.org.uk is full of useful stuff but have a look in particular at their:

- Planning Triangle
- First Steps in Monitoring and Evaluation
- Monitoring and Evaluation on a Shoestring
- Outcome and Outcome Indicator Banks
- Assessing Change (looks at readymade and bespoke monitoring tools)

New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) www.thinknpc.org has useful resources on the importance of defining and measuring impact, in particular:

- A Journey to greater impact (6 detailed case studies and a suggested way to implement)
- Theory of Change

NCVO have some useful pages on impact at www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/strategy-impact/impact including a Planning Pyramid (an example of a logic model).

This information sheet was produced by:
Bournemouth Council for Voluntary Service
Boscombe Link, 3-5 Palmerston Road, Bournemouth BH1 4HN
01202 466130   contactus@bournemouthcvs.org.uk   www.bournemouthcvs.org.uk
Registered charity No. 1081381