



**QUEEN'S
UNIVERSITY
BELFAST**

SOCIAL IMPACT FRAMEWORK FOR RESEARCHERS



A short guide to planning and measuring the social impact of community-based collaborations

Understanding the social impact of a community-based collaboration can be difficult. However, it can also help you to improve what you do and how you do it, better understand your participants, show the difference you make, and inform and influence others. This short guide will help you to think about how best to utilise your research, and use your time, to achieve impact.

What is impact?

The ESRC defines research impact as ‘*the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy.*’ According to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) impact is an effect on, change or benefit – beyond academia – to:

- the economy
- society
- culture
- public policy or services
- health
- the environment
- quality of life

Impact includes, but is not limited to, a positive effect on attitudes, awareness, behaviour, policy or practice among the community, service beneficiaries or organisations, locally, regionally, nationally or internationally. Impact also includes the reduction or prevention of harm, risk, cost or other negative effects.

How to use the framework

This framework is intended as a guide to help you, and your community partners, capture, analyse and share the impact of your social research on wider society. You may want to use the following sections as a template to create your own tool to support the evaluation of your project.

For further support on research impact, please contact the [Research Policy Office](#), or read the University’s policies on [data management and open access](#).

This framework was developed by the [Centre for Evidence and Social Innovation](#) and supported by the [ESRC Impact Acceleration Account at Queen’s University Belfast](#). The aim of the ESRC IAA is to facilitate Queen’s University’s ambition to develop a fully-engaged research culture across the institution through the embedding of knowledge exchange and impact activities in social sciences. This will create an environment where people are able to reach their full potential and contribute fully to an open, inclusive, culturally-enriched, creative and connected society. For more information, please contact esrciaa@qub.ac.uk.



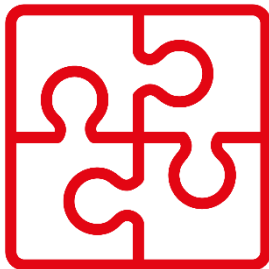
About the project

- Project name
- Project lead
- Community partner organisation
- What change did your project seek to bring about?
- Give a short description of the research that the initiative draws on
- How does the project lead to sustainable impact and/or longer-term partnership?
- How does the project contribute to the culture of engaged research at Queen's?



The outputs and outcomes

- What were the main planned outputs and outcomes?
- What difference do you think the activities carried out made? What evidence do you have for this?
- Did you achieve your original objectives?
- Where there unplanned or unintended outcomes? If so, describe them, and indicate if they were positive or negative.



The activities

- What were the main activities planned?
- What did you actually do? (activities and outputs)
- Did the activities carried out differ from the plan? If so how and why?
- How many people did the project involve/engage with?
- Did you engage with:
 - ✓ Policymakers?
 - ✓ Practitioners?
 - ✓ Service users?
 - ✓ General Public?



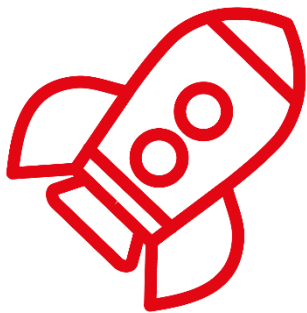
Measures

- What measures did you use to capture progress towards the outcomes and outputs?
- Where these things that already existed or did you need to develop them?
- Did you collect the data directly? Or was it done by your partner organisation?
- Was there a need for training or capacity building for the community partner?
- What consideration did you give to issues of consent and confidentiality in relation to data collected?



Reflection

- How would you describe your method of working with your community partner?
- What was particularly effective?
- What might you change or do differently in future?
- What were the challenges you faced, and how did you deal with them?
- What barriers or unexpected difficulties has the project faced?
- Were there opportunities for learning/professional development? For Queen's staff? For the partner?
- Did your approach to working with partners change as a result of this project?



The future

- Did you disseminate or promote the project? If so, how?
- Do you think there may be longer-term evidence of impact from your project that cannot be captured at this stage? If so, please indicate what that may be.

- What are the next steps for this initiative?
- Please describe any future activities you intend to carry out with your community partner.
- What plans do you have to share and disseminate the work and its impact?



For community partners

- Name and organisation
- Who did you partner with?
- Had you worked with anyone at Queen's before?
- How did the connection between your organisation and Queen's start?
- Describe your experience of working with Queen's on this project
- What has changed in your organisation and/or for the people you work with?
- Did you achieve your original objectives?
- Were there unplanned outcomes for your organisation?
- What do you see as the main advantages to working with Queen's? Where there any disadvantages or downsides?
- Do you plan to continue your relationship with Queen's?

Guidance

Outputs

Outputs are the products and services that the project will deliver. Describe them as precisely as possible. Examples might include training, one-to-one support, reports and other written materials.

Output indicators

These allow the project to keep track and report on work completed, and will include what outputs were delivered, who the recipients were, and any information on quality and satisfaction (or lack of it) from the participants. Examples include: number of sessions delivered, number of participants, demographics of the participants (age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, disability, etc.), and levels of participant satisfaction.

Outcomes

Outcomes are the changes that come about as a result of the work. Define the outcomes as clearly as possible and when creating them think about how they might be measured. Outcomes describe the changes that are sought, not the work itself (the outputs describe the work). So, for example 'increasing access to training' is not usually a good outcome as it doesn't really describe any change – what the participants go on to do differently than before, as a result of the increased access, is the outcome. The exception to this might be for groups of people who traditionally did not participate at all. In this case, increasing access could be an outcome.

The project might produce many outcomes and if so, it is important to prioritise them. It might not be feasible to measure and record everything, but it is important to capture the most important things for the project providers and the funders. Think about what things are absolutely pivotal to the project.

If outcomes are sequential, with one thing leading to another, be sure to describe this chain of smaller changes and the larger outcome they build towards.

Outcome measures or indicators

Outcome indicators are specific, measurable pieces of information that can be collected. They are used to record and document the change that the project is having. If the right ones are chosen, they should indicate whether or not the project is achieving what it set out to do. Think about:

- ✓ What are the signs of success?
- ✓ What does the change the project seeks look like?
- ✓ How could an outsider to the project know that progress has been made?

Often, outcome indicators use language like 'level of', 'number of', 'type of' or 'how often'. It is good to try to have a variety of different sorts of indicators, and sometimes having more than one for each outcome can be helpful. Projects might consider combining quantitative data alongside descriptions or narrative reports to give a rounded picture of what, if anything, has changed. The views of different people might be sought – participants, staff, or the general public, for example, depending on the issue.

Once chosen, think about what information needs to be collected to provide evidence of change.

It is also useful to establish a *baseline*. This relates to the value of a performance indicator before the intervention has taken place. This can help to identify the extent to which change has happened as a result of the activities. If no existing data exists, ideally baseline data should be collected before the beginning of the project.

Soft outcomes

Sometimes outcomes can be hard to see, for example, internal changes to how people think or feel about an issue. In these cases, as well as drawing on what participants say has changed, the projects could think about what behaviors they might expect to see if the desired changes in attitudes have occurred. Things like self-esteem, confidence, happiness or job satisfaction can be difficult to see, but changes in behaviour might indicate that these things have changed.

Measuring these things, often called proxy measures, can help to make visible the change – changes in the way people act and talk, their willingness to meet and engage with others, their ability to speak in groups or in public, their contribution to group projects and presentations can all be ways of obliquely measuring these soft outcomes.

Review and prioritise

At first there may be a lot of indicators and a long list of things to be measured and collected. It is worth deciding what is most important and most revealing. It is these outcomes that the project should focus on. Less important outcomes can be measured less frequently, less intensively or not at all.

Evidence of impact

Impact is the broader or longer-term effects of the project, and it can be difficult to evidence. It often happens on a different timescale to the other outcomes and may even stretch beyond the lifetime of the project.

It also requires factoring in the other things, apart from the project, that are happening at the same time. Some of the changes observed might be due to these other things, not the project. So, it is important to be able to track the specific impact of the project by demonstrating the role and contribution that it played in bringing about the

observed changes. This involves understanding and documenting the roles of other organisations and the wider environmental factors. It can be helpful to demonstrate how much of the change might have happened anyway, without the project, because the difference can then be assigned to it.

Generally, evidencing longer-term impact will require more time, skill and resources than evidencing immediate outcomes.

Process evaluation

To understand why and how change is brought about, the project needs to identify the critical success factors in the process. These are things that really matter in the way you do things – for example, the way outputs are delivered, the location of the work, relationships with other agencies, or staff attitudes.

Measurement

Once the outputs, outcomes, indicators and impacts have been agreed upon, you will need to decide how best to gather and record the information required. These methods need to be appropriate to the work, relevant to the indicator, and within the competency of those doing the collecting. Methods can include:

- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Questionnaires
- Participatory methods
- Secondary data