Evaluating impact, activities/outputs and outcomes

Activities or outputs

Activities or outputs are the things you do on a day to day basis. For your customers in relation to food this could be about preparing and serving healthy meals, running a lunch club for the elderly or holding a community meal. You may also be doing activities like training your volunteers, buying stock and signposting customers to other services or community activities. It is important you have a clear idea of how you expect all your activities to work so you can plan and manage your café operationally, for example you may set targets like:

- Open the café 5 days a week from 10 am to 2.30pm
- Recruit, train and maintain a team of 10 volunteers to help in the kitchen and serve customers
- Prepare fresh healthy soup each day = 25 servings

Monitoring your activities/outputs often becomes an immediate and very natural part of your work. For example, an indicator that your activities are not going well could be that you don't recruit or keep enough volunteers, which in turn may make it hard to open 5 days a week, if you do not have many customers you could be spending precious funding on resources that are under-utilised, waste food or end up giving it away to people who may not need it the most.

Output indicators, are often easily quantified and could be things like:

- Number of trained volunteers on the rota, number of potential volunteers awaiting training
- Number of customers, number of new or repeat customers
- Number of different menu options sold
- Rate of stock turnover or level of wastage
- Amount of income and amount of expenditure
- Number of complaints or amount of food sent back by customers uneaten
- Number of free food parcels (items) distributed
- Number of retweets about a special event
- Number of meals served at a community evening

Outcomes

You do your activities to achieve your outcomes, which are the longer term changes or differences that you want to see come about because of your community café. There should be a clear and logical connection between the activities you are doing and the outcomes you are want to achieve. These outcomes could be changes for your customers such as reducing social isolation, improving their feelings of wellbeing, increasing their sense of belonging in the community or more immediate

wins for them in terms of improving their access to healthy food. You may also be investing a lot of time in training and supporting your volunteers so changes or differences for them will be important too. For example, improving volunteers social skills or employability.

In monitoring outcomes for customers or volunteers, you need to understand the nature and extent of the change or difference, if any, that is happening for them. This means understanding where they were when they first engaged with you (before) and where they are later, either when they end or stop their connection with you or at a fixed point in time (after). Indeed best practice is to follow up customers or volunteers some time after they have ceased to connect with you at all. This means you can work out if and how? contact with your café has contributed to any change or difference.

For example, if your outcome is to improve someone's employability then if they get a job as a chef this may indicate you have successfully helped them. However, if they were already a qualified and experienced chef who had just returned from working on cruise ships, the fact that they volunteered with you two days a week for six weeks may not have made a significant contribution to them getting a new job. On the other hand if they had gained their qualifications some years ago and been out of the job market because of caring responsibilities, their time volunteering with you may have given them relevant work experience and an opportunity to develop their skills in leading others. Outcomes can therefore often be a bit more nuanced than outputs, so outcome indicators can often be more qualitative, ie more descriptive, in their nature.

So why all this emphasis on outcome indicators anyway? We just need to ask people, survey them, test them or watch them to see if a change is happening. Well yes, these are the methods you can use to pick up on changes… if you have a really clear idea what this would feel like, look like and mean to the person. The problem is practitioners may assume they know. This can mean they ask customers or volunteers leading or biased questions, or use jargon or language that may not be that clear to, or comfortable for, the people concerned.

Considering your outcome indicators is a small but significant step in developing your evaluation plan, and a useful reality check. It means considering what might people be doing or saying differently.

For example, if your outcome is to improve volunteers' employability, do you expect them all to get jobs quickly? Probably not, so as you work with them you will want to know if they are making progress and becoming more employment ready. The sorts of things that might indicate this to you are:

- Do they turn up when they are supposed to? Ie Level of reliability
- How polite and courteous are they with customers?   Ie Level of customer care skills
- Can they give the right change? Ie Numeracy and ability to use of point of sale equipment

Some practitioners express their indicators as things the person may say, eg: I know how to use all the equipment, including the barista style coffee maker; I can keep on top of cleaning up and resetting the tables when it's busy. This can be useful, though if there is too long a list of things that relate to the same type of skill set it may be hard to monitor, so you may want to think of how people may progress through levels of skill, knowledge or feelings.

Often indicators are expressed reflecting the positive direction of travel café practitioners expect to see, for example: better customer care skills; more punctual and presentable.   Be careful though, this can make them sound like outcomes, good indicators are actually more neutral, as they can help you consider and identify changes which can be either positive or negative.

Sources of evidence

The evidence about indicators for some outcomes (eg skills, knowledge and behaviours) may be easy to assess and capture though staff's observation of the volunteer, possibly using a checklist, and from the volunteers own feedback on how comfortable they are with these aspects (self-reported) either in a survey or face to face discussion. The indicators for outcomes about how someone is feeling may be less obvious, for example: does someone's smile mean they are feeling self-confident, satisfied about their life or just shared a joke with their friend?   Until you know someone well it may be hard for an observer to pick up on subtle differences on how people are feeling based on their behaviour, this means that practitioners may rely on participants self-reporting on how they feel, or getting feedback from a third party who know the participant really well.

Alongside observation, self-reporting and feedback from a third party, other sources of **evidence** are tests and assessments (including awards or meeting of standards), day to day internal record keeping (eg attendance), or big data or statistics (eg area wide health or national population data sets - these are more often used to frame the extent of issues in funding applications). The 'Hurrah's' of changes in peoples condition eg getting a job or losing weight, while rarer, are essentially either evidenced via self-reporting, an internal record of a request for a reference/weight records or by feedback from a third party. It is best practice to look for triangulation of your evidence, this means getting it from three of these different sources, the most common source is self-reporting.

There are lots of ways, or tools, to gather and capture the main sources of evidence:

- surveys and questionnaires
- visual and creative tools or games
- tests or exercises, that can be formal and separate from or actually embedded in the activity
- discussions or interviews
- focus groups
- ad hoc, unsolicited feedback or observations (these may be verbal, written in an e-mail, text or social media post)
- structured observation with a checklist

- recognised Awards or Standards (e REHIS or Youth Achievement) that may combine different elements

There are many guides, tools and resources on-line from which you can gain inspiration and guidance on developing suitable methods for your participants. There are also validated surveys and questionnaires on thing like self-esteem, life satisfaction or wellbeing, and you may pick up tools produced by other organisations. The key thing to remember is that some of these may have been designed to gather information about particular outcomes indicators or with specific population groups eg students. These may be very different from the outcome indicators and groups that you work with. Always check how appropriate any ready-made tools you find, or access, are. Do they capture the evidence you need and in a way that is suitable for your participants? Don't waste your participants' time by asking about things that are not relevant and that you will not use. There are links to guides, resources and tools in the appendix, including ones on how to write questionnaires without leading questions.

As you think about the tools to use you need to plan when they will be used, who will introduce them to the participant and what you will do with the information and evidence once collected. Having a clear plan will help you keep on track, and not overwhelm your participants with lots of form filling or interviews all at once.

Putting it all together

There needs to be a logical and clear connection between your activities/outputs and your outcomes. It must be reasonable to make the connection between your activities and your outcomes, because these are the claims, or assumptions, that your evaluation will ultimately test out, prove or disprove. This is what helps you learn and improve things through evaluating your impact.

For example you may want to claim, or have assumed, that:

- We support volunteers with mental health issues to improve their wellbeing,
- We prepare healthy food to increase the amount of healthy food community members have access to.
- Community cohesion is improved because our café is open and welcoming to everyone.

The evidence about your activities and outcomes is what helps you make sense of what is happening. The key questions you are look at are:

- To what extent are we doing or have we done what we said we would?
- What changes have we made and why?
- To what extent are we achieving the outcomes that we set out to (or not)? Are there any unexpected outcomes?
- How well are our activities/outputs leading to the outcomes we want?
- What can we learn from this?
- What could we do to improve our outputs or outcomes?

Appendix - Links to guides and resources

Key websites with lots of resources:

Evaluation Support Scotland   http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/resources/evaluation-methods/

Inspiring Impact has a searchable database of tools including ones which are free and have to be paid for http://inspiringimpact.org/listings/

Validated psychological scales eg well being etc http://www.nominettrust.org.uk/knowledge-centre/evaluating-your-project/evidence-based-measurement-tools

Direct links to specific guides or tools:

Setting outcomes
http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/media/uploads/resources/ess_sg1_-_setting_outcomes_(final).pdf

Indicators

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/media/uploads/resources/supportguide2.1developingindicatorsjul09.pdf

Questionnaires

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/media/uploads/resources/supportguide2.2interviews%26questionnairesjul09.pdf

Visual approaches

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/media/uploads/resources/supportguide2.3visualapproachesjul09.pdf

Focus groups

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/media/uploads/resources/pdf_method_-_focus_group.pdf

Interviews

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/media/uploads/resources/pdf_method_-_interview.pdf

Questionnaires

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/media/uploads/resources/pdf_method_-_questionnaire.pdf

http://iss.leeds.ac.uk/downloads/top2.pdf

Storing information

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/resources/132/

There are lots of blogs and other resources about this topic, including avoiding bias or leading questions online eg https://zapier.com/learn/forms-surveys/writing-effective-survey/#best https://blog.optimalworkshop.com/write-great-questions-research

Evaluation wheel

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/resources/357/

Outcome stars (note can sign up free to preview but not free to use online, it is also usually best used in intensive 1:1 work where there is joint planning and regular reviews, an alternative that can be tailored to organisational outcomes is the evaluation wheel or balanced wheel)

http://www.outcomesstar.org.uk/preview-the-stars/

There are lots of validated scales about re wellbeing, life satisfaction etc use them carefully as they can be off putting, especially if disproportionate to the nature of your contact and engagement with potential beneficiaries. Many eg Warwick-Edinburgh wellbeing scale are only intended to be used after long time intervals.   Examples can be found here http://www.nominettrust.org.uk/knowledge-centre/evaluating-your-project/evidence-based-measurement-tools

Planning template

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/media/uploads/resources/evaluation_planning_template_with_ess_details.pdf

Mapping template

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/resources/254/