

Inspiring Impact Case Study

Evaluating the Festival City Volunteers project

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About the project

Volunteer Edinburgh & Festivals Edinburgh came together in 2017 to deliver an innovative project – Festival City Volunteers. The project recruited 40 local volunteers to engage with visitors during the peak festival period in August. The volunteers were on the streets, giving a welcome to tourists and sharing their local knowledge by giving directions and guidance on tourist attractions, festival venues, places to eat and so on.

The project aimed to engage a wide and diverse range of people in festival activities and in volunteering, in particular those who had never engaged in either before. The focus was on inclusion – on “being part of something” - and on providing opportunities for volunteers to develop confidence & personal skills, enhance their employability and promote their health & sense of wellbeing.

Ongoing evaluation

Evaluation of the project was based on funders’ requirements to focus on the health and wellbeing of volunteers. An evaluation template was designed, based on the [5 Ways to Wellbeing framework](#). The process started at the recruitment stage when applicants made a self-assessment of their health & wellbeing then at initial interview they were asked to identify their personal aspirations for engaging in the project. Throughout the four-week project individuals’ feedback of their experience was monitored and recorded. In addition, three focus groups with volunteers were conducted when the project ended, with each looking at a different strand of the 5 Ways to Wellbeing framework.

How we gathered in-the-moment evidence

A form was collated by volunteer team leaders at the end of each shift (three shifts per day) that recorded basic details about the day's activity. This included numbers and types of people engaged with, what kind of information and guidance was given, and any challenging situations encountered by volunteers.

The form also recorded the personal impact on volunteers (asking "what were your stand-out moments of the shift?"). This often included anecdotes of people going out of their comfort zone in talking with strangers, and the boost this gave to their confidence as well as feelings of improved wellbeing and self-esteem by doing something which was helpful and appreciated by others. It also recorded other personal impacts like feeling exhausted by pushing their stamina or tolerance of standing for periods of time too far.

What we learned from the evidence

Using this daily form was important so we could report on the impact of service on the general public as well as share experiences and learning amongst the wider volunteer team. It helped us to identify the personal benefits people experienced as a result of their volunteering and the challenges they encountered. Factors which had enabled them to thrive were also highlighted, and these predominantly focussed on the availability of support, flexibility of rotas and the camaraderie of working with other volunteers. Suggestions for improvements to the service were also made by volunteers.



Festival City Volunteers

Evaluation challenges

Our project funders requested strong evidence of the impact on health and wellbeing as a result of people volunteering. There were two significant challenges:

- The project only lasted for a couple of months with only one month of actual volunteering. This was too short a time to evidence concrete health gains so we looked at the connections people made, social capital and sense of belonging.
- Delivering a project focused on health & wellbeing improvement meant we had to establish a baseline of where people were at the start but to establish that baseline we had to ask questions which could be perceived as personally intrusive. We therefore had to phrase our questions in a sensitive manner, and keep these proportionate in the eyes of the volunteer applicant. There was also a lot of skill required from the volunteer manager to “read between the lines”. For example a volunteer might describe their only support issue as having a stammer, but we could recognise that this was because of crippling anxiety or of being on the autistic spectrum.

What we've learned about embedding evaluation

The detailed evaluation required by project funders proved to be a two-edged sword. There were massive implications for staff's resources and capacity and this was very challenging at times. However the necessity to pause for thought and reflect on all aspects of the project design and delivery resulted in better awareness of the diversity of the volunteers, the range of aspirations they hold and the opportunities/challenges in meeting these. As a result this evaluation has shaped the development of project plans for subsequent (successful) funding applications.

The complexity of the evaluation also involved detailed discussion with our funders. As a result, simpler but just as comprehensive evaluation processes were negotiated and agreed. This has been an excellent way of consolidating the relationship with our funders and giving them a better understanding of the project.

Take-away message

Don't be afraid to start a conversation with your funders to clarify expectations. Make sure that your evaluation is proportionate to the scale of your project and your team's capacity.