



Near Neighbours' Toolkit Finding Out

Research & Monitoring for Project Fundraising

This Toolkit is based on the experiences of a wide range of communities, projects and faith groups that have successfully used research and monitoring to advance their work with neighbourhoods. You won't always find research and monitoring requirements listed in the guidelines given to you by a funder, but they will in fact be keen to see the evidence of these aspects of your work as indicators of a well-run project.

What is meant by the term 'Research'?

In general the more complex and costly your activity, the greater the need for research to support applications for funding. In our everyday lives we are all 'researchers as we find out about the world around us'. The term 'research' should not be off-putting, as most project and community development research is low tech and easily achievable. At its very simplest, it might be looking at a map or talking to people in the street. Only at its most demanding might it need the engagement of professional researchers. For most activity a combination of 'do it yourself' and desk based research, explained overleaf, will suffice.

What is meant by the term 'Monitoring'?

Monitoring can be done in a number of ways but in summary it is a periodic stepping back from the everyday activity of your faith based project and checking that what you are doing still fits your faith values, is good value for money and is valuable to the people who use and benefit from your activity. This toolkit will help you to reflect on what the best methods for you to use are and how best to involve the people that make up your activity. The eventual aim is to achieve evidence that can be used to enhance the work of your project and at the same time encourage an external funder that you are worth supporting.

Why do you need to consider Research & Monitoring?

- Confirm what you already know
- Highlight & reveal what you don't know
- Allow judgments on the ethics politics and viability of activity
- Target work effectively
- To inform your funders
- Involve interested parties and stakeholders
- Find out if someone is already doing what you are planning to do
- Inform management decisions
- Enable third parties to understand the worth of your work



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External researchers should only be engaged for projects that have a high cost or need a very particular expertise. Where the average project might profitably consider outside help is in training project beneficiaries to undertake more sophisticated research techniques themselves.



Remember that if you undertake research you may be raising people's expectations. Some communities have had so much research done on them that they have 'research fatigue' and resent further intrusion in their lives. Sound out local people and project beneficiaries before embarking on new research.



For Faith-based Projects & Community Development there are three main types of Research:-

1. Do It Yourself

Advantage

It's usually cheap, builds your skills/knowledge and will get you known in the community. May impress funders with your commitment.

Disadvantage

Time consuming and may not reveal everything you need to know.

2. Engage an External Researcher

Advantage

Provides you with expertise and may save you personal effort.

Disadvantage

Can be costly, and unless you recruit the right person/organisation it does not always come up with something original. May need a lot of management from you.

3. Collation of Existing Material

Advantage

Usually cheap and can save you time. Provides information from other agencies that you might not be able to generate yourself.

Disadvantage

Unless you know what, where and who to ask it can be time consuming. May not always fit your exact requirements and could be too impersonal for some funders.

Techniques for Community Research

The best techniques are usually the simplest do-it-yourself ones. If you do need external assistance the best usually comes from folk that have a successful track record of working with the type of people who are your beneficiaries. Many projects will use a combination of techniques to give them the information they need. All of this activity depends on the good will of those whose views you are seeking. You will also need to bear in mind the safety of those who are undertaking the research for you and the confidentiality of the response people give. For example, in street research always go about in pairs and make sure a responsible adult always accompanies younger people.

The following are some of the key methods you might use:-

a) Vox Pops

This is the simplest technique going and all it requires is making an effort to talk to individuals in the project, street, worship building or community centre to seek their views. Ask a few simple questions and with the individuals permission either write, video or audio tape the replies.

b) Community Questionnaire

Questionnaires can be distributed in a newsletter, by post or personal interview. If you receive 10% of the questionnaires back you will be doing well. Some groups offer an incentive like a prize-winning draw for the returned forms. Good questionnaires will have an introduction and then a limited number of questions that are simple to answer. You can always provide additional space on the questionnaire for folk to write anything else that they may wish to add.

c) Individual Recording

Provide a number of project beneficiaries or other local people with a diary or voice recorder for them to record issues as they arise, for instance, as they travel to school or work, visit the park or go to the shop. In a similar way you might provide individuals with disposable cameras to take photographs of community life and issues. As long as you provide an adequate brief and safe operating guideline these can be very good ways to find out about factors that affect the lives of local folk.

d) Websites & Social Media

Although some are still not able to access the Web, an increasing number of people will view a website. Ask for the information you need from people in your community who visit your website and at the same time keep them updated with developments. With the rise of social media it is possible to gain people's view with this format, but be careful in how you use such publicly accessible platforms as you may find them hijacked by those with a less than charitable aim. You will also need to be extra careful to ensure that children, young people and vulnerable adults are safeguarded on sites associated with your faith group and activity.

e) Street Theatre/Art/Music

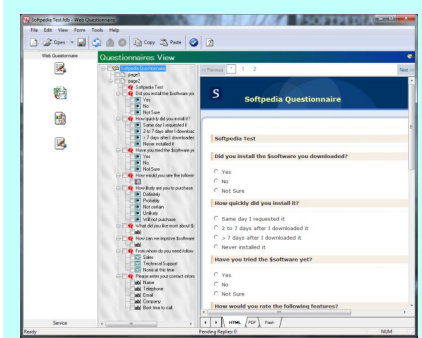
Use a range of arts in public places to engage people's attention and interact with them to gain their views. This is best done with skilled artists/dramatists and of course would need the permission of the local authority or other landowner. Not everyone will respond to this method, but it is a great way of involving people of all ages, for instance, in a shopping centre or leisure complex. It is important to be clear about what you want to achieve in this activity and you may wish to accompany the drama/art with another technique for obtaining people's views i.e. interviewing or 'Planning for Real (See Interactive planning).

f) Interactive Planning

This is basically asking people to pinpoint issues on a big map. As long as the map is clear and you have given appropriate instructions, this can be one of the most effective methods of doing community research. One of the best known techniques is



Postal questionnaires are usually filled in by the householder and may not be seen by children and young people. Ensure that you are inclusive in your research, for instance using the questionnaire in school and youth groups, to ensure you have a good sample of responses from all the categories of people you wish to consult.



'Planning for Real' involves drawing or building a large street map of a community and then inviting the public to place pre-written issue cards on the map to show their particular concern.



People who are not used to speaking in public can be overridden by more voluble folk. A skilled facilitator will ensure that everyone is enabled to have his or her say.



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A Community Conference or Public Meeting usually needs a lot of planning to ensure that people both attend and have a chance to make their contribution.

'Planning for Real' by the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation. This involves local people drawing or building a large street map of a community and then taking it into community buildings or a sheltered place on the street. You invite the public to place pre-written issue cards on the map to show their particular concern. Cards could say, for example, 'dangerous roadcrossing', 'litter in the street', 'nuisance graffiti', 'stray dogs' etc.

g) Development Forum

Gather together a group of people who are stakeholders these might be members of the local community, your project beneficiaries, or people from decision-making bodies that affect your community. With a facilitator ask them to come up with ideas about your plans and community needs simply noting the ideas down on a flip chart. It is important to make everyone feel comfortable and value everything that is offered in a non judgmental way. The benefit of doing this is to get people talking together and understanding where they are coming from.

h) Focus Groups

An often-maligned activity but a 'Focus Group' is a way of getting a small number of people with similar backgrounds together to seek their views on a particular issue. Some people feel less intimidated in a small group and with good facilitation will open up. It is simple to organise needing a reasonably comfortable room and seating for 6 to 12 people plus a facilitator and a pad of paper to take notes on. Although Focus Groups are useful they are usually done in conjunction with other research methods to compile a fuller picture.

i) Community Conference/Public Meetings

Essentially this is a development activity from earlier research and usually needs a lot of planning to ensure that people both attend and have a chance to make their contribution. The term 'Community Conference' suggests that it is open to everybody but it is perhaps a more inclusive title than 'Public Meeting', which can have the negative connotation of an argumentative free for all. However, one village community regularly holds successful but quite formal 'Public Meetings' to consult its community and this has become part of their culture. While not wishing to limit peoples inputs, just holding a 'Public Meeting' can be a high risk strategy as you never know who is going to say what about who and it is normally attended by older adults with little representation from other age groups. The 'Community Conference' can be structured in a way that allows you to have a more defined and hopefully productive event.

Why adopt Monitoring?

Project management continually needs to judge information and how this affects practice. Analysis of research and, at a later stage, assessment of actual project activity is a good habit to adopt to enable you to stay aware of the consequence of progress. Increasingly funders and other decision makers require monitoring reports on your activity. When writing a plan it is good practice to include how you will deliver self-assessment monitoring for your project. Some funders may even pay for an external agency to make an analysis of your work.

Techniques for monitoring

a) Management Monitoring

At the start of your project decide the outcomes you hope for and then plan the timescale when you check on them as your activity progresses. A good tip is always to set targets that you are likely to meet. Psychologically it is better to have achievable aims than ones that you will be unlikely to achieve. It is a regular fault with management bodies of projects that they do not effectively check on their progress, magically expecting that the decisions they make will automatically 'deliver the goods'. If you can show that you have realistic and proportionate management inputs in monitoring your work this may help to convince funders that you will be able to make good use of any investment they make in your project.

b) User Monitoring

Whatever your activity is, you need to be assured that what you are delivering is something that people still want. From time to time it is useful to ask them. This can be done by an immediate feedback when they use your service, for example a few set questions on a feedback form. This can also be done over a longer period of time by selecting a small sample of people and communicating regularly with them. At the very least it will help you to feel good about what you are doing or may reveal improvements needed, it will also wow the funder if you reveal that you are responsive to the people you seek to serve. With children, young and older people you will be concerned to enable them to be active participants in order to put over their views and match their progress to the aims of Near Neighbours best practice, so ensure that you use age-friendly ways of communication with them.

c) Staff Monitoring

The mark of an enlightened faith-based employer will be robust staff systems including appraisal and also Monitoring by Walking About (MBWA is the technique of actually walking around a project and noticing how people operate and how the beneficiaries are served). It makes sense to be a good employer through monitoring as it can lead to motivation of staff that



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provide a better service. Some organisations throw employees in at the deep-end and then leave them to it because management doesn't understand the worth of active monitoring activity. Even the best procedures are only effective if those in management bodies throughout the faith organisation make time to observe the work that is done in their projects. Demonstrating in your plans and funding submissions that this is done in your project will be an encouragement to funders.

d) External Monitoring

If you are not asked to provide monitoring evidence by someone who gives you resources, it is still good practice to ensure that you do record what you have achieved with the monies given. Increasingly funders will want you to report in a specific way to them, either requiring you to send a letter and annual report/ accounts or providing you with a standard form to fill in. The requirements of statutory money from Central Government and Europe can mean that you would need to employ a dedicated member of staff to fulfil the monitoring criteria and such an engagement would not be for a project without administration staff of abundant patience. Too many organisations just accept the monitoring criteria that are imposed on them. A growing number of projects negotiate their own monitoring criteria with a funder. Rather than reinventing the wheel some organisations have useful models of monitoring and are often happy to share this good practice. Once you have begun the project if you think you are going to struggle to meet monitoring criteria always talk to the funder and explain the situation to them. They may be prepared to amend or re-timescale what they expect from you.

Quality Assurance Tools

Another way of describing 'monitoring' is to call it 'quality assurance'. This is a generic term for a range of tools and techniques you can use to demonstrate to external decision makers and your own internal management that you are continually seeking to enhance the quality of work that you do. Information on quality assurance tools can be found on a number of websites including; www.ces-vol.org.uk/tools-and-resources / www.ces-vol.org.uk/PQASSO / www.visiblecommunities.org.uk

Finding Out can be Challenging

When you take research and monitoring seriously they can raise both positive and negative issues about your faith based project. As you use finding out techniques you will raise the expectations of the people involved that you will do something about the information you have unearthed. So before embarking on the sort of activity suggested in this toolkit it is good to take a step back and think about how you will use the results of your research and monitoring and how you will cope with the challenges to your practice that might arise. A healthy project will relish the opportunity to advance its practice and also understand the importance of keeping the people who have been involved informed on what you are doing as a result of their contribution to your research and monitoring.