Energy Learning Network
Rhwydwaith Addysg Ynni

Making it count:

A guide to evidencing the impact of community energy

Contents

This guide is an interactive pdf with resources accessed via embedded links in the text.
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The Energy Learning Network

The network is a collaboration between climate solutions charity Ashden, the Centre for Sustainable Energy, and leading community energy bodies in every UK nation: Community Energy England, Community Energy Scotland, Community Energy Wales, and Northern Ireland's Action Renewables.

The Energy Learning Network is made possible by four years of funding totalling £1.5 million, from the National Lottery Community Fund.

This grant comes from the National Lottery Community Fund's Climate Action Fund, a £100 million commitment over 10 years to support communities across the UK to take action on climate change and involve more people in climate action. This commitment is helping the funder fulfil one of four key missions in its 2030 strategy, 'It starts with community' – supporting communities to be environmentally sustainable.

For further information visit:

www.ashden.org/energy-learning-network

Introduction

Community energy organisations play a vital role in shaping a more sustainable, fair, and locally driven energy future. But how can you effectively demonstrate the real difference your work makes?

Measuring impact isn't just about collecting data - it's about telling a compelling story, proving value, and strengthening your organisation's ability to secure funding, engage stakeholders, and influence policy. By tracking progress from the initial steps of a project to its long-term effects, you can showcase the tangible benefits of community-led energy initiatives.

This guide is designed to help. It brings together key resources, tools, and insights to support you in understanding why impact measurement matters and how to approach it effectively. Whether you're looking to improve your projects, gain support, or inspire others, having a clear strategy for evaluating and communicating your impact can set your organisation up for lasting success.

Why measure your impact?

Community energy organisations exist to create positive change, placing social and environmental values at the heart of everything we do. This commitment to purpose is what sets us apart.

Measuring our impact is not just a task to complete - it is an opportunity to demonstrate what makes us truly different. It allows us to highlight the value we create, strengthen our case for support, and showcase why our way of working is so important.

Measuring and evaluating your activities can also help enhance your performance. Whether you are cutting energy costs, reducing carbon emissions, or bringing people together, strong evidence of your impact can make a difference. It can help you secure funding, improve your projects, and build trust within your community. Strengthening relationships with your members, funders, and the wider community increases your chances of future success. It also gives you the power to influence policy and inspire others.

A Theory of Change

This is a useful tool for planning, implementing, and evaluating your work. It helps map how your activities lead to meaningful outcomes, ensuring focus on what truly matters. By setting clear goals, identifying key steps, and tracking progress, you gain a better understanding of your impact and make more informed decisions.

Think NPC Theory of Change in Ten Steps
A simple guide for those new to Theories of Change.

The Theory of Change Process – Guidance for Outcome Delivery Plans
A more detailed guide and supporting resources published by The Government Analysis function. It was designed to encourage civil servants to adopt a theory of change approach in the planning, implementation and evaluation of their programmes.

Harnessing impact measurement can strengthen your organisation by:

1. Improving your projects and decision-making

- Stay on track: By regularly reviewing progress you can spot issues early and optimise performance.
- Refine your approach: Using data-driven insights to challenge assumptions and enhance future planning.
- Make smarter choices: Basing your decisions on evidence ensures effective use of resources.
- Continuously improve: Learning from your successes and challenges helps keep projects relevant.

2. Building trust and engage your community

- Be transparent: Sharing your results openly demonstrates accountability.
- Strengthen relationships: Keeping your stakeholders informed builds lasting support.
- Encourage participation: Highlighting benefits can drive greater community involvement in your projects.
- Inspire others: Showcasing your impact helps grow the wider community energy movement.

3. Demonstrating your value and secure resources

- Prove impact: Using clear data and stories shows funders the difference their investment makes.
- Build trust: Sharing outcomes can reassure supporters and attract resources.
- Show real benefits: Use impact measurement to prove your project delivers tangible outcomes.
- Enable growth: Demonstrating your success can unlock opportunities for expansion and replication.

4. Meeting funding requirements and increasing access to public contracts

- Meet obligations: Reporting impact may be a contractual requirement of funders and partners
- Secure public sector contracts: Public sector organisations must consider social, economic, and environmental benefits when awarding contracts, following legislation that promotes social value in procurement. If you can demonstrate your added value, you've a greater chance of landing contracts.

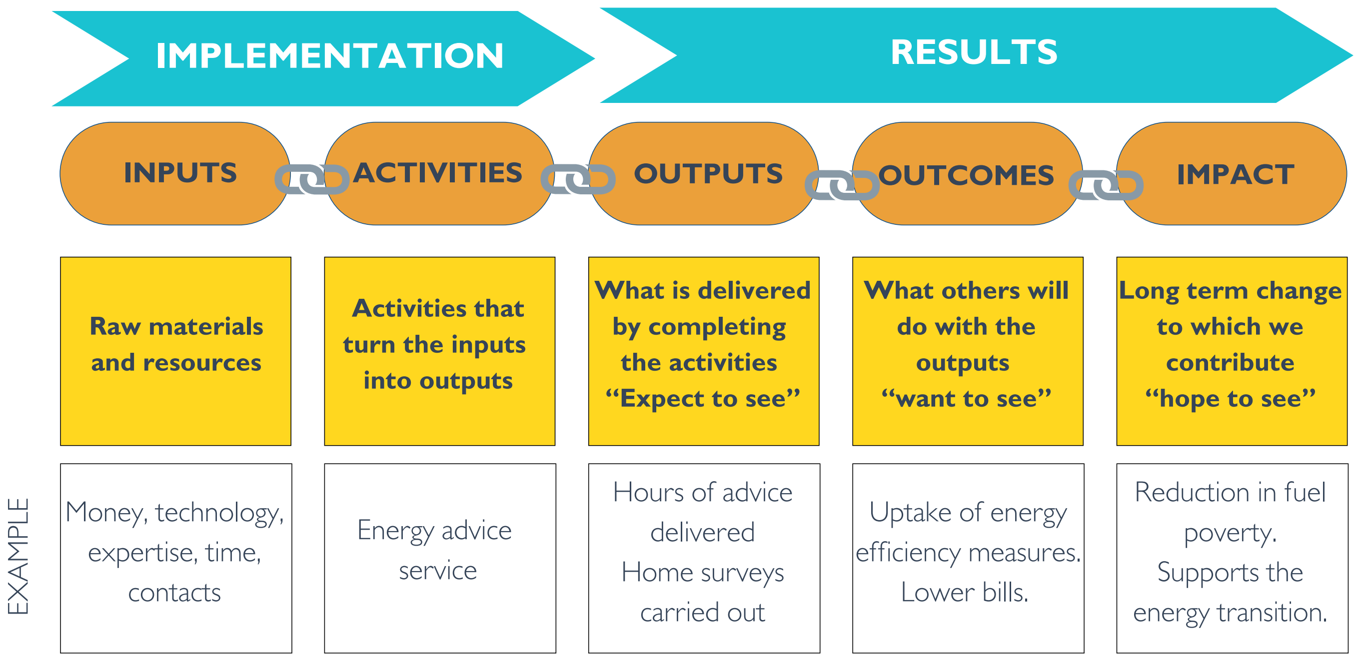
5. Influencing policy and showing leadership

- Support policy change: Use your evidence to advocate for better support for community energy.
- Show the impact of community energy: Provide evidence that local, people-led solutions you deliver are effective and should play a central role in the energy system.
- Lead the energy transition: Measure and share your impact to position your organisation as a key player in building a fairer, greener system.
- Inspire others: Share your success to motivate others to start their own community energy initiatives.

By measuring your impact you're not just proving that your project works. You're making it stronger, building support, and shaping the future of community energy.

From inputs to impact

Measuring value involves tracking the progression from inputs through to impact.



Inputs
The resources we use to make an activity happen such as time, money, or materials. We use these inputs to carry out activities, like installing solar panels or running an energy advice service.

Activities
The actions we take to transform inputs into tangible results. These are the tasks and processes carried out to achieve our goals, such as delivering energy efficiency workshops, installing solar panels, or providing one-on-one energy advice.

Outputs
The outputs are the direct, tangible results of these activities. They are what we "want to see" as a direct result of the activity, such as the number of solar panels installed, hours of advice given or energy assessments carried out.

Outcomes
These represent the short- to medium-term changes or benefits resulting from the outputs. Outcomes are what we "expect to see", such as more people installing energy efficiency measures and bill savings.

Impact
Finally, impact captures the broader, long-term effects on individuals, communities, or systems, reflecting the ultimate value we "hope to see" result from our activities. This could mean lifting more people out of fuel poverty or making progress towards a successful energy transition.

Tips for demonstrating your impact

Showing the value of community energy projects is important, but it can take time and effort. It's essential to choose carefully what to measure, how to measure it, and the best way to share the results. Things to keep in mind include:

1. Understanding what your stakeholders need

To build trust, show stakeholders that your organisation is well-managed and that their support makes a difference. When your evidence matches their goals and interests, they are more likely to stay engaged and committed. Community energy projects create many benefits, but different stakeholders focus on different aspects. Funders, policymakers, community members, and investors each have their own priorities. Identifying what matters most to them ensures you measure and report on what is most relevant and meaningful.

2. Figuring out what you need to prove

Before gathering data, clarify whether you need to show that activities were delivered (outputs) or demonstrate their longer-term differences they made (outcomes and impact). A combination of both is often necessary for a full picture.

- **Leading Indicators** predict future impact (For example, reporting on the number of energy assessments carried out gives an indication of likely energy efficiency improvements in the future).
- **Lagging Indicators** measure past performance (For example, reporting on actual energy savings achieved once those energy efficiency improvements have been carried out).

A word about… value propositions

A value proposition defines the unique benefits an organisation provides to its stakeholders, explaining why its work matters. By prioritising stakeholder needs, it ensures that services, projects, and impact measurement align with what is most important to the people and communities involved. This approach enhances engagement, supports better decision-making, and maximises social and environmental value.

To learn more about value proposition design, visit: Strategyzer.

A word about… principles of social value

These provide a framework for measuring and managing the full impact of activities on people, communities, and the environment. Developed by Social Value UK, these principles guide organisations in making better decisions by valuing what matters, involving stakeholders, and being transparent. By applying these principles, organisations can ensure their work creates meaningful, sustainable change while improving accountability and demonstrating impact effectively.

For more details, visit: Social Value UK – Principles of Social Value

3. Choosing an outcome framework

You might find it helpful to use or adapt an existing outcomes framework for your reporting. Many frameworks incorporate Social Return on Investment (SROI) approaches, which translate social and environmental impact into monetary values to help quantify and compare outcomes. There are several options available, including:

- Community Energy London's Outcomes Framework: Designed specifically for community energy organisations.
- The Social Value TOMs (Themes, Outcomes, and Measures) Framework: A system for measuring and reporting an organisation's social impact, commonly used in public sector procurement to quantify social value.
- Measure Up: A free online social value reporting tool that aligns with the UK Treasury's definition of social value as 'the wellbeing of the population' and helps organisations evidence the difference they make.
- Climate Change Emergency Themes, Outcomes, and Measures: Thirty-nine measures specifically related to climate change, published by the Local Government Association.
- Cooperatives UK's Key Performance Indicators Guide: A framework and guidance specifically for co-operatives, useful for organisations looking to evidence co-operative principles in their impact reporting.

A word about… public sector procurement

Public sector procurement is increasingly influenced by the Social Value Act, which requires organisations bidding for contracts to demonstrate how their work benefits society. For community energy organisations, understanding how to measure and communicate social value is now essential to securing public sector funding.

The Guide to the National TOMs, produced by Thornton & Lowe, provides a clear introduction to this framework. It explains its role in procurement, highlights common commitments across industries, and outlines how organisations can align their work to meet social value expectations.

By engaging with these frameworks, community energy groups can improve their chances of securing public contracts while showcasing the environmental, economic, and social benefits they offer. To learn more about social value frameworks, keep an eye on the Community Energy Pathways website for updates on their latest work in this area

4. Collecting the right evidence

Gathering strong evidence is important but can take time and resources. If possible, include funding for evaluation in grant applications so you can report back to funders and use what you learn to keep improving your work. Using different types of evidence is important as it helps show the full impact of your activities.

- **Quantitative data**, such as kilowatt-hours of energy generated, can highlight the practical benefits generated.
- **Qualitative data**, like customer feedback, can be used to capture the participatory benefits and the wider impact on people.

A word about… surveys

Surveys are a valuable tool for collecting both quantitative and qualitative insights from stakeholders. Using well-designed surveys can also strengthen community engagement and provide robust evidence of the impact of energy projects.

Here are some useful examples:

- Sample Community Consultation Questionnaire: Developed by Plunkett, this questionnaire gathers feedback and assesses community support for a project.
- Sample Co-benefits Questionnaire: Created by the Grantham Institute at Imperial College, this survey is used by researchers to measure the wider benefits of energy initiatives.
- Sample Community Energy Stakeholder View Survey: Developed by the Institute of Energy and Sustainable Development, De Montfort University, this survey was used in research on embedding sustainable technology at the local level.

5. Demonstrating the difference you have made

It's useful to be able to show the change, or difference your activity made, by giving it context. For example:

- **Establishing a Baseline:** Can you clearly define what the situation was before your intervention?
- **Year on year comparisons** can show progress over time
- **Aligning with external targets**: Can you demonstrate progress towards local or national goals, such as a council's heat pump installation target or broader national objectives like wellbeing measures? Aligning your impact with these targets can strengthen your case for funding and support while showing how your work contributes to wider policy goals.
- **Considering the counterfactual:** What would have happened if your activity had not taken place?
- **Isolating your contribution:** When multiple activities or partners are involved, can you determine the specific impact of your work while acknowledging others' contributions?

A word about… carbon savings

If you report on carbon savings, bear in mind that as the carbon intensity of the grid decarbonises, the amount of carbon saved per kWh of green electricity generated goes down. This doesn't necessarily make a kWh of electricity any less valuable, but you may want to add an explanation in your reporting.

6. Sharing your findings with stakeholders

How you communicate your impact is just as important as what you measure. See the 'get inspired' section of this guide for some great examples.

Think about:

- **Frequency:** How often should stakeholders receive updates?
- **Level of Detail:** Tailor reports to suit different audiences.
- **Presentation:** Use relatable metrics (e.g., "homes powered" instead of kWh generated).
- **Comparing Different Metrics:** Measuring non-financial outcomes can be tricky. Social Return on Investment (SROI) converts social, environmental, and economic impacts into financial values for easier comparison. However, calculating SROI can be resource-intensive, rely on subjective assumptions, and require extensive data.
- **Format:** Use different formats to make reporting engaging, such as reports, case studies, infographics, videos, and photograph

7. Evaluating impact and navigating partnerships in a complex system

Decarbonisation and the energy transition involve many factors, making it hard to isolate the impact of a single initiative. Partnerships add complexity, as multiple organisations contribute to success. Placing data within wider trends helps demonstrate the value of community energy, but fairly attributing contributions can be challenging.

For example, partnership work often makes it unclear who can, or should, claim credit for specific outcomes. Community energy groups support third-party services, but defining their fair share of impact is difficult, especially when feedback is limited or results take time. Similarly, organisations providing grants may under-report impact to avoid double counting or placing reporting burdens on recipients.

Acknowledging these challenges and setting clear impact measurement strategies can help ensure fairness and transparency in reporting community energy's contributions.

Get inspired

There are many great examples of impact reporting by community energy organisations, found in case studies, annual reports, and impact reports. Here are a few examples:

Case Studies
Brighton and Hove Energy Services Co-operative showcases community energy projects and their impact.

Impact Reporting
Central Coast Community Energy Annual Impact Report demonstrates how a community energy organisation communicates its successes.

Sector wide reporting
State of the Sector Wales: Report
that balances statistics with case studies to bring the story of community energy to life.

Using videos to inspire
Local Energy Scotland's Community Energy Fortnight highlights the real-world impact of different community energy projects.

Examples from Ashden Award Winners

The Ashden Awards celebrate pioneering organisations that promote sustainability and energy innovation. Many community energy organisations have been recognised for their outstanding impact. Here are some examples of the way these organisations have reported on the impact they have delivered.

Energise Barnsley
This video brings to life the way has ground-breaking partnership is delivering clean energy and lower bills in South Yorkshire, benefiting older residents.

Low Carbon Hub
This community energy enterprise uses a People, Planet, Prosperity and Perception outcomes framework to report on their work in their Annual Impact Report. Their 10th Anniversary Video is a good example of using third-party endorsements to showcase impact.

Repowering London
A case study and video that sets community energy in the context of local challenges and highlights the importance of community involvement.

Exploring these examples can help you find inspiration and ideas for reporting the impact of your own community energy projects.

Useful resources for measuring and evaluating impact

We hope we've convinced you of the importance of communicating your impact. Now it's time to put it into action. Whether you're starting small or scaling up, the right tools and resources can help you track progress, strengthen your case for support, and showcase the real difference you're making.

Getting started: the basics

Introductory resources and step by step guides

Measuring Social Impact – A practical guide on how to measure impact for social investment.
Step-by-step guide to measuring impact – Think NPC

Strategy and Evaluation Guidance – Learn how to develop your organisation's strategy and assess its impact. Covers evaluation methods, Theory of Change, planning, analysis, reporting, and using findings effectively.
National Council for Voluntary Services (NCVO)

Community Energy Monitoring and Evaluation Guide – Guidance tailored for community energy organisations, including surveys and an outcome framework.
Community Energy London

Going deeper: In-depth guides for progammes

For more detailed evaluation frameworks and policy-level guidance

Social Impact Navigator: A detailed guide from Phineo on understanding social impact, covering the why and how, with checklists and templates.
Read the Social Impact Navigator

The Green Book: HM Treasury's guidance on how to appraise policies, programmes, and projects to assess their value and impact.
Read The Green Book

The Magenta Book: HM Treasury's guidance on designing evaluations, including a wide range of analytical methods and when to use them.
Read The Magenta Book

Other resources
The Institute for Social Value resource library has a wide range of resources:

The Energy Learning Network has published a comprehensive report of evidence of the value-add from a community energy approach.
Community Energy in Action: Demonstrating the calue of community-led solutions to net zero

Glossary

Additionality: The extent to which an activity creates a positive outcome that would not have happened without your intervention. To show your unique contribution, compare it to a counterfactual - what would have happened without your involvement.

Attribution: A discount applied to account for the share of impact that may be due to other people or organisations rather than your intervention alone.

Baseline: The starting point for measuring impact, showing conditions before an intervention.

Counterfactual: A comparison to what would have happened if an activity had not taken place.

Decarbonisation: The process of reducing carbon dioxide emissions, often through energy efficiency and renewable energy.

Deadweight: The percentage of outcomes that would have occurred naturally, without the intervention. This is often deducted from Social Return on Investment (SROI) calculations to ensure only the added impact is measured.

Displacement: When an intervention shifts a problem to a different location rather than solving it, meaning the overall issue remains unchanged.

Impact: The broader, long-term effects of an activity on individuals, communities, or systems. It reflects the ultimate value created, such as reducing fuel poverty or advancing the energy transition.

Impact measurement: The process of tracking and evaluating the effects of a project or intervention.
Inputs: The resources (such as time, money, and materials) used to carry out activities.

kWh (kilowatt-hour): A unit of energy measurement that represents the amount of electricity consumed or generated over time.

Leading indicators: Data that predicts future impact (e.g., the number of energy assessments conducted).

Lagging indicators: Data that measures past performance (e.g., actual energy savings achieved).

Outcomes: The short- to medium-term changes resulting from activities, such as behaviour changes or cost savings.

Outputs: The direct results of an activity, such as the number of solar panels installed or advice sessions delivered.

Quantitative data: Numerical data used to measure impact in a structured way. Examples include energy generated (kWh), money saved, or the number of people reached.

Qualitative data: Descriptive data that captures personal experiences, opinions, and broader social impacts. This might include testimonials, interviews, or case studies.

Social Return on Investment (SROI): A method of valuing social, environmental, and economic benefits in monetary terms to compare different types of impact.

Stakeholders: Individuals or groups affected by or involved in a project, such as funders, community members, and policymakers.

Theory of change: A framework that outlines how activities lead to outcomes and impact, helping organisations plan, track progress, and evaluate success.

Value chain: The sequence of steps from inputs to impact, showing how change is created.