



# Station adoption & community projects: using an outcomes-based approach



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**This guide aims to help station adoption and friends groups, and others delivering local community rail projects, to develop an outcomes-based approach. This can help activities to be as impactful, inclusive and successful as possible.**

This guide outlines why outcomes are helpful and important to those involved in station adoption and community rail. It offers advice on identifying outcomes and using them to plan, monitor progress, involve more people and partners, and attract funding. This can be especially helpful in the wake of the pandemic, enabling your group to take stock and be resilient through change, and helping you to play a key role in your community’s recovery. This guide also introduces Impact, a system available for free to Community Rail Network members that can be used to record and evidence community rail activities.

Further support on this topic is available from Community Rail Network for our members. You can contact the relevant person in our support and development [team](#) for advice, and access a host of [resources for station groups](#) via our website.



Station adoption is when a group of volunteers, or an existing community group or organisation, ‘adopts’ a station, getting local people involved in the station and railway through volunteering. It is one of the major successes of the growing community rail movement. Groups often become immersed within their local area and their railway, and so are well placed to work with the community and rail industry to ensure stations and the railway are serving local people’s needs. For more information and examples, have a look at our [station adoption handbook](#).

“ Station adoption has been one of the outstanding successes of community rail. More than 1,000 adoption groups have been formed nationwide, equally at home in an inner-city environment or in a rural setting. As well as engaging thousands of people in volunteering, bringing people together and creating pride in their station and community, these groups play an important role in making their stations welcoming, pleasant and attractive places. ”

Department for Transport (DfT), Community Rail Development Strategy



The number of station adoption groups continues to increase, as does the wider community rail movement. In 2019, we calculated that every year, almost 8,500 volunteers, many of whom are regularly involved in station adoption activities, contributed more than 390,000 hours to community rail, worth £33.2m. This was based on a conservative estimate of there being 1,000 active station groups across Britain, but the overall figure may be higher.



It is recognised that station adoption and other local groups make a valuable contribution, helping communities get the most from their stations, and turning stations and their surroundings into welcoming, thriving, and celebratory gateways and hubs. Activities are led by local needs and contexts, but traditionally, groups have delivered social value via work including:

- community gardening, food growing and biodiversity projects on station land;
- installing heritage boards or community artwork to help people learn about and take pride in their area;
- basic upkeep and litter-picking to create a welcoming, safe environment;
- working with the rail industry towards improvements, such as better shelters, signage or pedestrian and cyclist access, or sometimes spearheading larger scale developments;
- running events, workshops, or other activities to promote sustainable travel, bring people together, and celebrate the local community.

“ You want to say, we care about this town, this is our station, and we want to give you a warm welcome. When people ask why we do what we do, I say because it makes the station more of an asset. ”

Neil Williams, Glossop Station, Derbyshire

Station adoption also plays a key role in bringing communities together and supporting social inclusion, in some cases having life-changing effects. This includes improving confidence and skills among volunteers and providing opportunities for healthy, outdoor activities, helping to address health inequalities and social isolation.

Simply having a human presence at stations has shown to be important to passengers, increasing their feelings of safety, comfort, and wellbeing. Any station adoption or local project can help position the station as a community focal point, increasing feelings of community pride and ownership, leading to reduced levels of vandalism and anti-social behaviour.

As well as engaging thousands of people in volunteering, bringing people together and creating pride in stations and communities, station adoption and other local groups also play a critical role in making their stations welcoming, pleasant, and attractive places that can become true community ‘hubs’. This value is also recognised by the rail industry, which sees the need for good community relations to be able to promote use of the railway and draw on local views and input.

“ We realised we were making a difference, and that people cared a lot about the station. The group has been a reason for, or a basis for, very strong friendships. ”

Elsbeth Broady, London Road Station, Brighton



“ Everyone can see that investment, not so much of money, but of time and thought into creating something that is very much part of the community. It’s our station, it’s for us, that makes people care about it. ”

Larry Heyman, Elstree & Borehamwood Station, Hertfordshire

## Recognising and celebrating your work

Station groups offer value to communities – and how inclusive, sustainable, thriving, and resilient they are – in a host of different ways. Highlighting what you do and how it delivers value may help you to:

- celebrate achievements;
- recruit new volunteers;
- stimulate wider community interest;
- raise awareness and promote your group/your work/the station and the railway.



As the diagram shows, there are many potential benefits from taking an outcomes-based approach. It can assist with:

- attracting funding, stimulating and underpinning funding bids, and reporting to funders;
- demonstrating the value your work has to the community;
- identifying priorities and ways in which your group can progress and develop;
- telling your story and communicating your work to a wider audience;
- engaging local people and partners, who can support you in planning and delivery.





## Identifying and making use of outcomes

As a station adoption or community group, it is likely you will have some form of activity plan, even if it is simple and informal. Within that, your group may have outlined your main aims, and put forward potential activities to work towards achieving them.

Advice on how to develop activity plans can be found in our [station adoption handbook](#), which also offers ideas and examples of activities undertaken by station adoption groups across Britain, including gardening and horticulture, community art displays, engaging schools and young people, and promoting healthy and sustainable travel.

Before embarking on projects, or to help you decide whether or how to continue with prior or existing activities, you may want to consider:

- why does your community need your project?
- how do you know?
- if you meet this need, what will change?

Members of your group will naturally have knowledge of your station and the communities it serves, and this local insight will be vital when planning ahead or formulating project ideas. To help identify the need for projects, you could also:

- consult people via some form of community engagement exercise, e.g. events, meetings, online consultations;
- carry out surveys and/or questionnaires;
- do your own field-based research via audits and observation;
- use existing statistical evidence, such as data from your train operator or local authority.



### Community benefits:

- Improves community services
- You can gain a sense of local pride
- The station is at the heart of a community, a significant building and a valuable community asset
- Integrates rail services into the community, and community services into the railway

### Social benefits:

- Station-based projects provide a unique opportunity where there is support and resources to grow ideas and enable social change
- You can add value to the station and railways in ways that are beyond the remit of the rail industry
- You can create a community space where people can come together and volunteer
- You can brighten up and showcase a window into your community

## Why should you get involved with adopting your local railway station?

### Rail industry benefits:

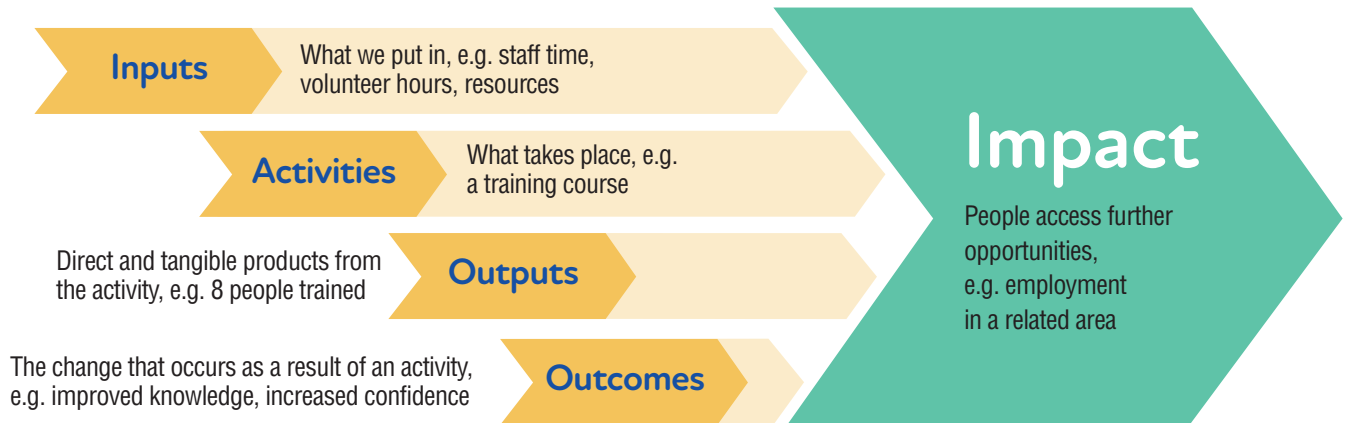
- Saves a station from falling into disrepair, makes it loved
- You can be a critical friend to train operators
- You can improve the customer experience and brighten up journeys for passengers
- You can add colour and care to a station, which helps to discourage anti-social behaviour

### Individual benefits:

- You can have fun and be creative
- It contributes to your wellbeing, and that of others
- You can take action and make a difference
- You can meet people and make new friends
- You can demonstrate your community pride and share your passion

The benefits listed in the diagram were highlighted by Community Rail Network members as reasons why groups and individuals should get involved in station adoption. Many could be potential outcomes in themselves, and they help to show the range of outcomes station adoption can achieve, linked to wider social issues such as sustainable travel, social inclusion, community cohesion, regeneration, and personal development.

## Outcomes - the difference we make



Outcomes help you to demonstrate the difference and impact your group makes as a result of what you do. They are changes that come about as a direct result of your work. They tell a story about how an activity or intervention has created change, and help you to prove and emphasise the difference you are making, and the value you provide.

Understanding and measuring outcomes will help you to be clear on:

- what you are aiming to do: the intended impacts;
- how successful you are in achieving them;
- what you have contributed to your community and railway.

It can be tempting to stick to activities that you might be comfortable with delivering. Habits can easily build up over the years, and you might find yourself planning tasks or events almost automatically, without ever taking a step back to ask, ‘actually, why are we doing this?’ Moving from a ‘what we’ve always done’ approach to ‘what do we want to achieve’ is not easy and can take time.

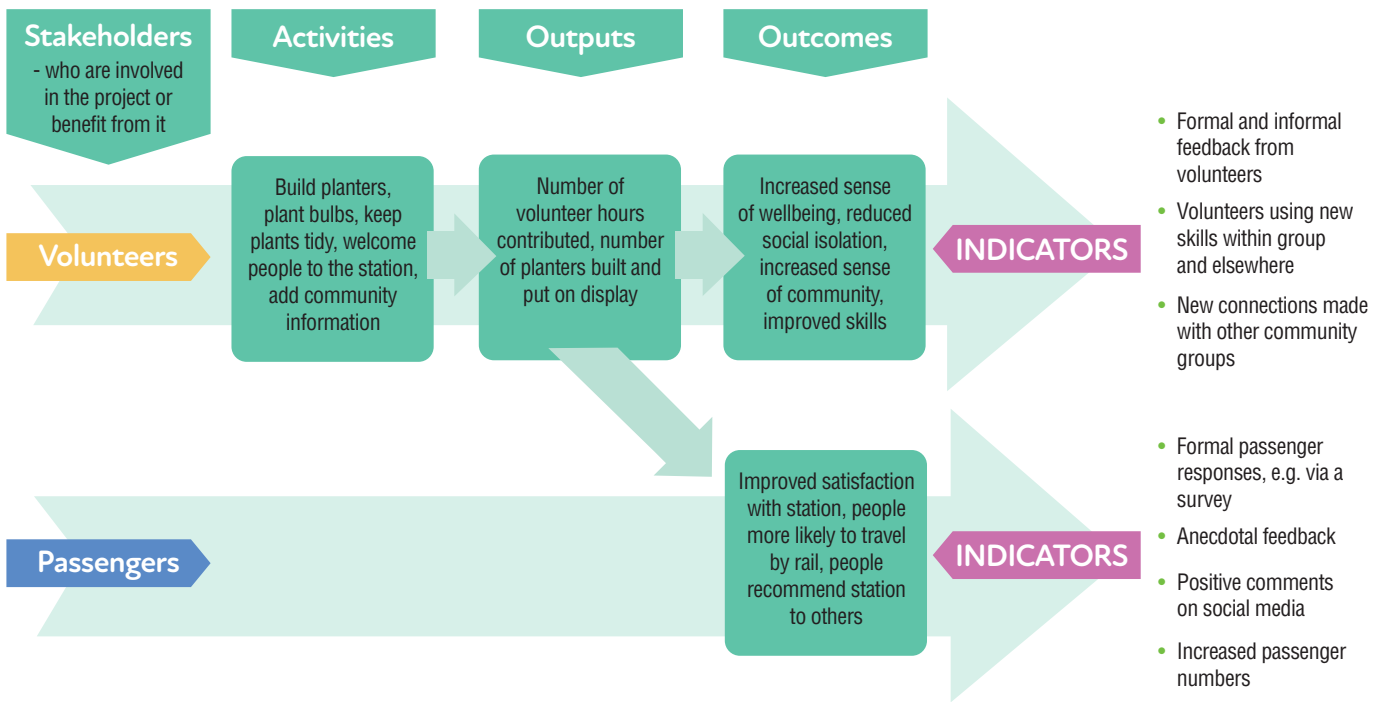
But, taking that time to reflect on what your group offers and the value it provides, both internally to those involved and externally to the people and place around you, can be very worthwhile.

An outcomes-based approach can help to identify your longer-term aims and more immediate priorities, and how you might deliver them. Rather than starting with the activities, you might think about the outcomes you want to achieve, and then design projects that you think will achieve them.

As the diagrams show, outputs are metrics that can be observed or measured to help you see whether your activities are helping to achieve your outcomes. By identifying your intended outcomes – the changes you want to make happen – you can also consider your impact, the longer-term effects that you want your group to bring about, linked to your core vision and purpose.



One way to use outcomes to help in planning and developing projects is to create a simple ‘Theory of Change’. This is a rationale that can specify the WHAT and the HOW: what you want to achieve (outcomes), and how you think you might achieve them (activities).



This example looks at a station adoption group performing gardening activities. The outcomes – what they want to achieve – are to improve people’s perceptions of the station and attract more people to use it. To do this, they build planters, plant flowers, keep displays tidy, and generally improve the look and community ‘feel’ of the station.

They can measure certain outputs, e.g. the number of planters built and filled, and monitor and evaluate a series of indicators. In this example, the indicators are ways the group could find out if they are achieving the outcomes they set out to. As the diagram shows, this could involve the collection of formal data via surveys or questionnaires, or more anecdotal feedback. Positive indicators would suggest an outcome of more people using the station, which could be linked to a longer-term impact of supporting more people to travel sustainably via rail.

The example also shows how the same activities can result in different outcomes for different stakeholder groups.

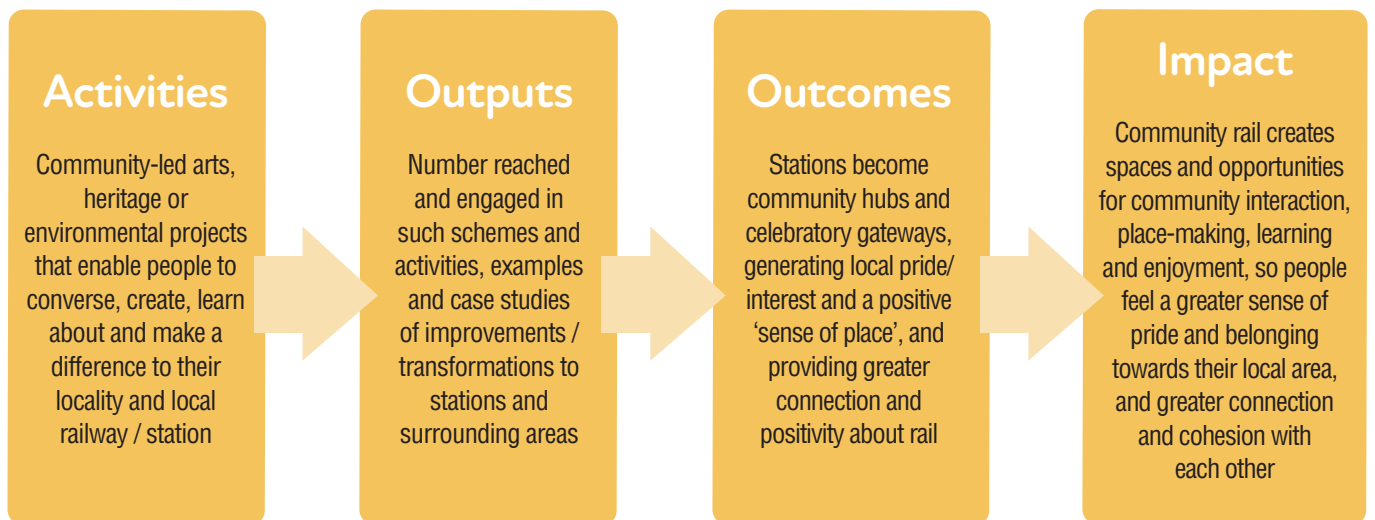
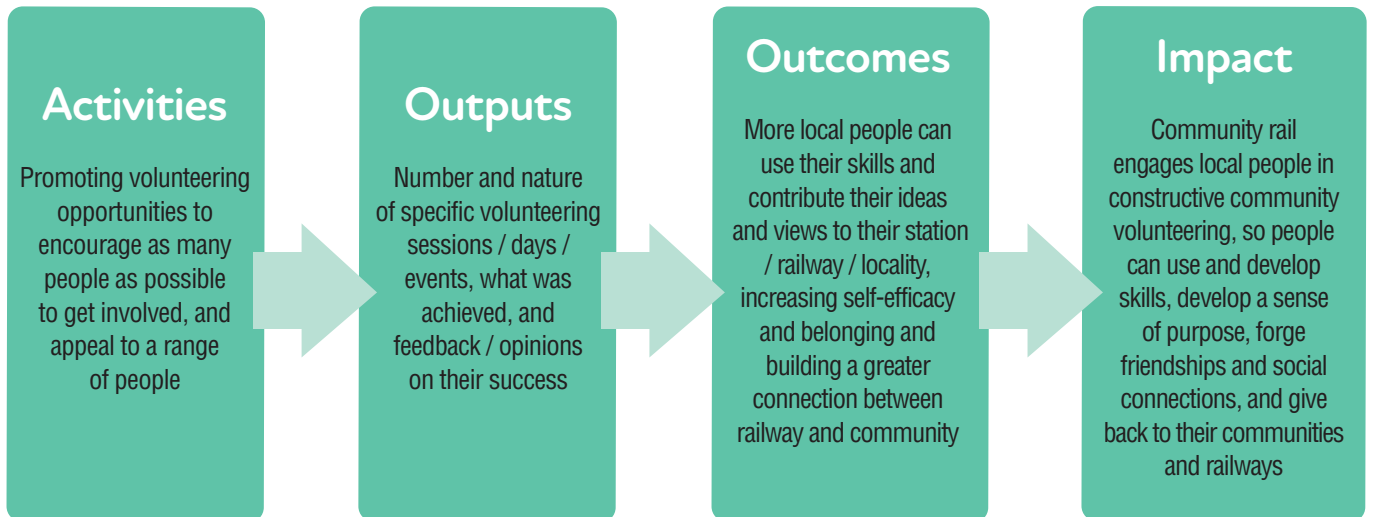
So, an adoption group might decide they want to organise a gardening project because they want to improve the appearance of the station. In devising that, they might also find that the project has benefits for the volunteers involved, in terms of their physical and mental wellbeing. Gardening can offer opportunities for people to work together as a team, socialise, enjoy the outdoors, and learn new skills. Again, this can be measured by formal and informal feedback from stakeholders, in this case, the volunteers themselves, and could encourage impact in creating healthier, happier, more connected communities.

Within a Theory of Change, the focus may be less on what you do – or perhaps what you have traditionally done in the past – but what you want to achieve.

You can then think of the best way(s) to achieve your aims and goals, and work back from there. However, it can also be used as a way of checking that what you already do achieves the results you are hoping for. You don't always have to work backwards, you can also go forward, e.g. what do you want to do, and what do you think the

In simple terms, the change is what you want to see happen, and the theory is the process that creates an environment to allow and encourage those changes - your desired outcomes - to happen.

As part of our 'Value of Community Rail' report, we developed an exploratory outcomes framework for community rail to try to assist groups in identifying and assessing the social value they provide. Two examples from the framework can be seen below, linked to community rail volunteering and station-based community projects.



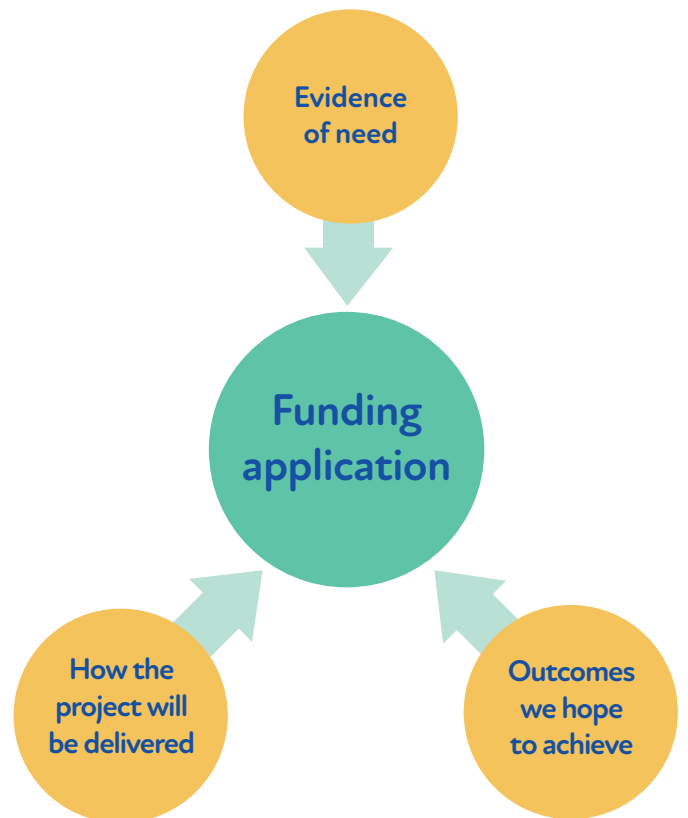


## Using outcomes in funding bids

Knowledge of outcomes can be key to identifying and attracting funding. It can help you focus on exactly what you are trying to achieve.

For example:

- funding organisations will want to know the difference, changes, or benefits that their support may bring about. Thinking about outcomes, and using them as part of funding bids or applications, shows that you have thought through what you are planning to do, and why you are doing it. Funders are increasingly looking for assurance that you understand the need for your project, what the outcomes might be, and how you will evidence them;
- identifying outcomes effectively within a funding bid can help your project to get noticed and stand out from others. Using outcomes can be a useful way to plan a project and articulate why that project is needed, particularly if you are approaching funders from outside the rail industry;
- if you put some thought into what you want and why, it can help you to research and identify a wider range of funders. Your work around outcomes might help in seeking out funding organisations who focus on particular issues, e.g. the environment, who have specific aims, e.g. improving health and wellbeing, or who certain target groups, e.g. young people;
- being clear on outcomes can help you to focus on funders who are looking to support the type of work you want to do, rather than wasting effort. To give a simple example, if you wanted to devise a project to celebrate the history and heritage of your station, you might consider The National Lottery Heritage Fund, as the outcomes you are hoping to achieve would be likely to align with their priorities.



## Using outcomes to develop projects

### CASE STUDY: The Friends of Hunmanby Station

One of the long-term aims of the Friends group at Hunmanby Station in North Yorkshire is to see more people travelling sustainably by rail, including local residents and tourists visiting the area. In 2019, the station was upgraded with new facilities and a more frequent train service.

The challenge the group faced was how to attract more passengers. They devised a project to develop Hunmanby as a 'community station' acting as a gateway to the village. The main intended outcomes were increased awareness of the revamped station and timetable, an improved station environment, and greater engagement of local groups with the station and railway.

Using those desired outcomes, the group set out a series of activities to achieve their goals. To raise awareness, they designed a website to promote local attractions alongside the new train service. To improve the feel of the station, they transformed platforms with flower displays and artwork created by local school children.

To engage the community, they produced an easy-to-read train timetable and events guide with support and contributions from a number of local groups and businesses.

The group incorporated various outputs to measure the progress and success of different elements of the project, including: passenger numbers; website traffic figures; the number of volunteers involved and hours



contributed; details of plants and artwork installed; number of timetables and guides produced and delivered; and other anecdotal feedback.

This work succeeded in supporting significant passenger growth, and the project was recognised at the 2020 Community Rail Awards.



## CASE STUDY: The Friends of Rose Hill Station

Two principal aims of the Friends of Rose Hill Station group are to increase involvement with the community and to improve the station environment. Having recognised that their area had an ageing population, the group identified an apparent lack of inter-generational engagement and active participation in local life, resulting in a gap in the transfer of local knowledge.

To combat this, the group wanted to design a project through which different generations of people could connect with each other. The desired outcomes were increased community cohesion, and an improved station environment, with the station seen as a focal point for the community coming together.

The group decided that an inter-generational art project was the most appropriate way of achieving their outcomes, and developed a series of activities on this theme, with

the community involved in the design, development, and delivery of all aspects of the scheme. A huge mural was created for the station, celebrating local history and heritage.

Outputs used to indicate progress and success included: the number of people contributing to the mural; the number of attendees at creative workshops; numbers at open days and launch events; the number of local schools engaged; the number of volunteers involved and hours contributed; the amount of funding generated to support the project; the number of project booklets produced and distributed, feedback and comments on social media; and local media coverage.

The project has established a permanent legacy at the station, and won a Community Art Schemes award at the 2019 Community Rail Awards.





## The Impact activity tracking tool

One issue you may have as a station adoption or community group is finding the time to monitor and report progress against project or activity plans. Sometimes it can fall on one person to keep consistent records and make sure things are on track.

We have worked with the social enterprise Impact Reporting to develop a tool to help enable groups involved in community rail to track and record their activities and indicators of change and support them to demonstrate their outcomes and impact.

The tool is user-friendly and suitable for small groups who want to collate evidence to build a picture of the work they do. It can also be used by larger organisations, including community rail partnerships, who might be running multiple projects and strands of work. It can be easily accessed on a desktop, laptop, tablet, or mobile phone.

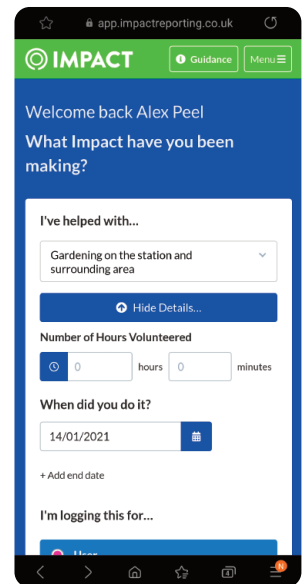
Potential benefits of using Impact include:

- capturing activity data and feedback in real-time, whilst out and about;
- collating evidence for funding bids and communications;
- reporting outputs and progress against outcomes to funders and partners;
- prioritising activities to maximise impact;
- demonstrating how much you do and the difference you have made.

Impact is populated with a range of activities, including those common to many station adoption and other community rail groups, such as community projects, e.g. involving gardening, heritage, the arts, station maintenance or enhancement, community events, installing local information displays, and marketing or communications activity. There is also the potential to custom build activities so that you can track exactly what you need to.

The Impact platform offers opportunities to capture and record different types of data to help monitor the progress of projects, such as quantitative data, qualitative data, or sequences of photographic images. As such, it can allow you to:

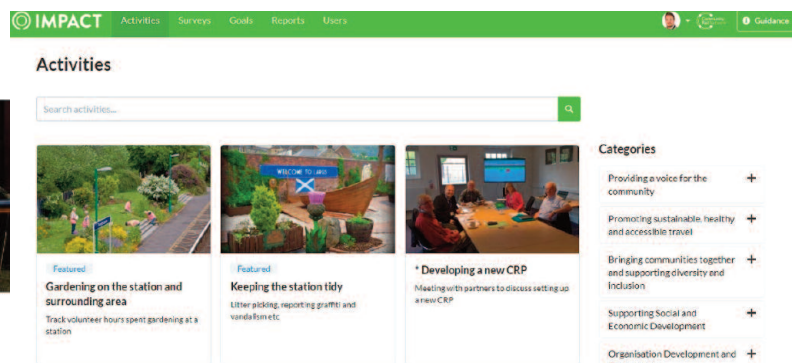
- log volunteer hours/tasks and monitor ongoing progress;
- collect feedback from volunteers about their experience;
- record participant numbers/activity stats;
- build up case study data with pictures, feedback, and quotes;
- build and undertake surveys, analyse data, and create reports;
- set goals within activities and/or make pledges to complete activities in the future.



Community art project  
Community-led art project



Community environmental project  
Community-led environmental project



## Examples of using Impact

**Brian Turrell** is a station adopter at Evesham Station, where he has been working on gardening and community projects since 2014. He uses Impact to log volunteering hours and record gardening and community engagement activity, highlighting ongoing progress against project aims, including photographic records.

He can then report data to contacts at Worcestershire Community Rail Partnership and Great Western Railway if relevant to their monitoring and evaluation.



Brian says:

“ I can share what I’m doing, and they (his contacts) can say ‘well this is what is going on at Evesham’, and they can see the activities and photographs. I can show and highlight the progress we are making. Impact is a good way to share information; that’s the best thing I’ve found. You can keep a record of everything you do. ”

**Jon Knight** is a station adopter at both Stratford-upon-Avon Parkway and Stratford-upon-Avon stations. He uses Impact to record gardening and other activities at the stations, as well as his involvement in meetings and events. He uses the platform alongside another web-based reporting tool used by West Midlands Trains – which only records on-station activities – to give him a fuller picture of his volunteering, and allow him to accurately report progress to stakeholders and partners such as the Heart of England Community Rail Partnership or the train operating company.



Jon says:

“ The ability to record more than just station attendance is definitely an advantage of Impact. For every hour I spend at one of my stations actually doing ‘boots on the ground’ work, there’s probably been 30 minutes of other stuff - online meetings, reading through documentation, writing documentation, designing planters, contacting stakeholders. As Impact data may be useful in showing the overall voluntary effort being put into station adoption, those minutes should count. ”



**Community Rail Lancashire** have started to use Impact to keep a record of their educational engagement and workshop delivery, having approached Community Rail Network for help in creating a bespoke activity log to meet their specific needs. This allows them to track when and where workshops are delivered, and who attends, helping to evaluate the outcomes and wider impacts of their education programmes.



Katie Musgrove, special needs education officer, said:

“ Until now we didn’t have a centralised record of which groups we’d worked with, and we are hoping that, by using Impact, we will be able to see who we are not yet reaching with our work. We also intend to use the Impact tool’s survey function to collect feedback about our workshops, and the in-built map will be a great way to plot where the groups are in relation to their local railway stations. ”

For more information on Impact, including a quick-start user guide, FAQs about how the platform works, and details on how to get started, go to the [Impact page](#) on our website, or e-mail [impact@communityrail.org.uk](mailto:impact@communityrail.org.uk).





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