

2 partners 1 event – measuring impact to meet different priorities

Dr Judith Keene

University of Worcester, UK

Introduction: The Hive

The University of Worcester is unique in the UK and more widely for its joint, fully integrated library The Hive, which is run in partnership with Worcestershire County Council who provide a public library service. As well as the public and university library, the County Archives and Archaeology service are based in the building, with over 12 miles of archives and records being housed in strongrooms in the basement. The Hive opened in 2012 and one of the fundamental principles from its inception is that as many of the services and facilities as possible are offered to all customers, both public and university. Print stock is available for anyone to borrow, all parts of the building and PCs are open to all customers depending on what they want to do, and the archives service provides work placements to students as well as being available to university researchers and members of the public. The front of house library team is made up of both Council and University staff who have common job descriptions and support many of the regular activities and events as well as the day-to-day customer service and library work. There is a Strategic Board made up of senior members from each partner, and managers working in the building regularly meet to discuss their plans to ensure that they are taking all customers into account.

The cultural and events offer

The links each partner has with wider bodies enables us to offer a very diverse programme of events, cultural opportunities and activities to appeal to our very broad customer base; Baby Bounce and Rhyme, short courses run by University lecturers, Business breakfasts for local entrepreneurs and Exploring your family history are just a few examples. The first challenge in developing the programme is to ensure that it is aligned to the priorities of both organisations.

For the public library, as well as local political concerns these are driven by the Government’s 7 identified outcomes for public libraries (DCMS, 2018). For the university, as well as enhancing the experience of our staff and students, public and community engagement is a focus of the overall University Strategy (University of Worcester, 2019) particularly in the five areas of challenge for which we wish our research activity to be known.

University Areas of Challenge	Public Library Outcomes
Human health and wellbeing	Cultural and creative enrichment
Sustainable futures	Increased reading and literacy
Digital innovation	Improved digital access and literacy
Culture, identity and social exclusion	Helping everyone achieve their full potential
Professional education	Healthier and happier lives
	Greater prosperity
	Stronger, more resilient communities

Table 1. Key priorities for the 2 partners

Although at first sight these may seem very different, there are in fact many common interests. For instance, Worcester has outstanding teacher training programmes and so the ‘Professional education’ strand aligns directly to ‘Increased reading and literacy’ and ‘Helping everyone achieve their full potential’; whilst ‘Human health and wellbeing’ and ‘Sustainable futures’ have overlaps with ‘Healthier and happier lives’.

A programming group which has members from both partners and includes the University’s Head of Public and Community Engagement oversees the programme and assesses expressions of interest for contributions to it against these priorities. They also agree quarterly themes, for instance the current theme (April – June 2023) is ‘Living Well’. Just a few of the activities taking place under this heading include:

- A free talk on ‘Understanding Autism’ for parents and carers, led by a senior lecturer from the University.

- 'Elmer Day' for children and families, focusing especially on the themes of inclusivity and friendship that run through the Elmer books by David McKee.
- Promoting wellbeing at work – business networking events and talks given in partnership with the British Library's BIPC service (Business IP Centre).
- Support for students taking exams across Worcestershire through the University library's Study Happy initiatives.

It's one thing to be offering a wide range of largely well attended events, but evaluating them beyond a simple satisfaction measure has long been an aspiration. This is so that we can assess whether they are making a valuable difference to our customers. But with very different strategic priorities and drivers for running events, how can we decide what data to collect, what sort of feedback to capture and how to measure impact in a way that is simple, relevant to both partners and supports our disparate reporting needs? So for instance, the public library service are very interested in footfall and whether it's recovering since Covid, the number of new members signing up, especially children and young people, and the contribution of library services to addressing loneliness and digital exclusion. They are accountable to County Councillors who are aware of value for money and political pledges. As University librarian, my first concern is with students, with measures of satisfaction and more detailed feedback about how our resources and services are helping them to succeed in their studies. An additional consideration is that the University reports on Public Engagement through the annual public accounts but also the Knowledge Exchange Framework (Research England, 2022). This provides a range of information on the knowledge exchange activities of Higher Education Providers in England. It was developed by Research England - a public body who fund Higher Education Providers to undertake research and knowledge exchange. In future, some of this funding may be directly linked to the KEF outcomes, so demonstrating high quality impact will become increasingly important.

Developing a common approach

We looked at some of the approaches and evaluation toolkits already available or being used in our organisations. For instance, the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (2020) provides UK Higher Education establishments with advice and resources to evaluate Public Engagement activity. CILIP also has an impact toolkit available to its member (CILIP, n.d.). However these approaches are often aligned to one sector or agenda. They also tend to focus on individual activities or programmes and assume considerable amounts of data will be collected. We take this approach for some of our larger projects but don't have time or resource to do this for each activity we run nor is it necessary to gain a quick assessment of effectiveness.

We wanted:

- a simple, consistent but flexible approach which is easy for the staff running events to apply.
- an ability to directly compare similar events with each other.
- objective information to inform future planning and assess which types of events on which to focus our relatively limited staff resource.
- a way to check whether the events programme is targeting all our strategic priority areas.

We started with the key strategic priorities as outlined above plus additional ones within the respective library service strategies. We then developed a list of desired outcomes mapped to these priorities:

more connected with local community
more positive about mental health and wellbeing
more confident using technology & accessing information and services online
more confident & motivated to learn, go on to further education or training

more confident & motivated to look for work or volunteer
more confident to navigate and evaluate information
more confident to set up and run a new business
more confident and motivated to read

Table 2. Desired outcomes for joint university / council events and activities

This list was tested county-wide in the annual Customer Voice survey. It was then trialled as the basis for post-event feedback by including it in a short form which can be adapted for different events by selecting the outcomes which are most appropriate for each. A simplified version is used with children. Additional questions may also be included or this basic tool supplemented where appropriate by collecting additional qualitative and / or quantitative data. It can also be included as part of more thorough and formal impact assessment. So for instance, the university library has a detailed impact framework it uses for projects, but we now consider whether any of this list of outcomes could be included as part of the data that is collected so we can demonstrate our support for and contribution to County Council objectives. An example would be student work placements which are primarily evaluated against the module outcomes but we include the question about connection to the wider community. Similarly, we collect a range of information and data about our Study Happy programme, including comments and student stories about how it has helped them, but also ask the questions about mental health and wellbeing and confidence and motivation to learn.

Customers have engaged well with this approach. It takes minimal time for them to complete the form but still gives us useful feedback and we have now widened it to most of the events we run other than the regular activities.

**Some specific examples:
Space Day 2022 – a children and families event**

The main objectives of Space Day 2022 from a Hive perspective were to hold a large-scale event to:

- drive footfall
- raise profile in the local community
- engage the local community
- to work with partners

We have partnered with British Interplanetary Society (BIS) West Midlands to deliver this event several times in the past and it has been extremely successful. We were keen to see the return of this event post-COVID because it promotes STEM to the community, it is an event which is suitable for all ages and appeals to key demographics including teenagers, males between the ages of 8-14 years old and individuals who are neurodiverse (all of whom are underrepresented in the public library). It also attracts partners from the local and national community who are unlikely to visit or work with The Hive on other projects allowing us to introduce the building and the library services to a wider community. It therefore addresses a number of the priorities listed in Table 1. It's also a lot of fun!

We collected feedback both at the event and after the event through our social media channels and using MS Forms. We focussed on 2 of the impact measures in order to make the feedback forms easier for people to fill in and enable us to ask more detailed questions pertaining to the event and include a free text box. 78 customers responded in total.

The highlights of the feedback are as follows:

- 100% of respondents said they enjoyed Space Day 2022
- 91% said they learned something new
- 44% said their favourite part was the Planetarium (35% said the Exhibitions, and 21% said the Junk Modelling)
- 43% said that coming to Space Day 2022 made them want to visit the Hive more regularly

- 36% said they wanted to learn more about Space
- 11% said they felt more connected to their local community

These figures along with the free text confirmed that the main objectives were met and gave us information to inform the delivery partners about the most successful activities.

Media and Culture short course

A very different event was the recent short course on Media and Culture ran by a university lecturer. After the first session we were able to tell her that 100% of participants were pleased they had attended, with the most frequent impact selected being 'inspired to learn on go on to additional education' – potentially good news for a university seeking to increase its student numbers. Interestingly, several participants also considered that it had benefitted their mental health. Our favourite free-text quote was "You gotta love the Hive! And Worcester University!". This was very useful feedback as it was the first event of its kind and will encourage us to consider a similar offer in the future and possibly approach other university lecturers. It was also very pleasant to be able to communicate the positive response to the course leader who had proactively suggested the course and was giving her time for free.

Requirements for success

Although simple, some key things needed to be in place to successfully find an approach to suit both partners, most notably the longstanding strategic commitment to work in close partnership and provide integrated services and solutions where possible. After over 15 years of developing and then running The Hive the respective Heads of Library Services are used to working together, but this did not happen overnight and still requires conscious effort (Keene, 2020).

Running a joint library, joint events or even a joint evaluation approach takes a constant commitment to communicate and a willingness to acknowledge each other's priorities, even when they are less important to one partner. This is sometimes in the face of a lack of understanding from

those less aware of or invested in the partnership model and principles. We worked hard to come up with and implement what looks like a simple list of desired outcomes, that nonetheless are relevant and meaningful to both University and Council and can be embedded into other approaches and frameworks.

Conclusions

This tool is clearly not a total approach to assessing impact but met the immediate needs of simplicity, flexibility and basic information on the appropriateness and effectiveness of our events programme to inform planning and report against our respective agendas. It is now well embedded into our processes. It demonstrates that it is possible for two or more partners with seemingly different priorities to arrive at a mutually satisfactory solution.

Ongoing challenges remain around where to store the data to be easily accessible to staff from both partners and in a format that makes it easy to draw on for different reporting purposes.

References

CILIP (n.d) "Impact Toolkit", available via <https://www.cilip.org>.

(Accessed 3 July 2023)

Department for Culture, Digital, Media and Sport (2018) "Libraries deliver; Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021", available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/libraries-deliver-ambition-for-public-libraries-in-england-2016-to-2021> (accessed 3 July 2023)

Downes, J. and Keene, J. (2020) "Do library partnerships work and how can they help build a strong future for the library?", In Weaver, M. and Appleton, L. (eds.) *Bold Minds: Library leadership in a time of disruption*. Facet Publishing

National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement (2020) "Evaluating Public Engagement", available at: <https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/> (Accessed 3 July 2023)

Research England (2022) "Knowledge Exchange Framework", available at: <https://kef.ac.uk> (Accessed 3 July 2023)

University of Worcester (2019) "Strategic Plan 2019 edition", available at: <https://www.worc.ac.uk/about/university-information/strategic-plan.aspx> (Accessed 3 July 2023)