

GREENSPACE IS GOOD...
AND WE'VE PROVED IT!

SROI
PROGRAMME
SUMMARY
REPORT



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

greenspace scotland has enabled environmental community groups to use a Social Return on Investment (SROI) approach to measure the value of their activities. *Greenspace is good – so prove it!* was a two year programme supported by the Big Lottery Fund. This report provides a summary of the findings and key learning points from the programme.

The SROI reports have identified those groups of individuals and organisations who derive multiple benefits from being able to take part in events and activities in Scotland's greenspaces and have placed a financial value on what the experience is worth to them. This has made it possible to prove the value of the positive effects delivered by activities such as community growing, environmental volunteering, health walks, using greenspace for diversionary activities, and community engagement with parks, youth ranger schemes and cycling activities in wooded areas.

The process has involved hundreds of individuals and organisations to varying degrees and in different capacities. From the community volunteers and professional staff who were an integral part of project steering groups to the individuals and organisations who reported how activities in greenspace areas had changed their lives.

In relation to the process of undertaking SROI analyses, key findings include:

- everyone who is involved needs to have a basic understanding of the SROI process in its simplest form – that is about measuring and valuing change
- a flexible approach is required at all stages but particularly in relation to the initial identification of the scope of the analysis
- from the outset there has to be recognition that SROI requires time, resources and commitment – it is easy to underestimate what is required!
- only one of a group's activities may be being valued
- an emphasis on the technical aspects of SROI can discourage groups from participating in the process and so it is important to focus on establishing understanding
- use everyday language to define key terms and offer simple explanations of important concepts
- illustrate the key processes involved using relevant greenspace or environmental examples

The report suggests that the SROI approach needs to be refined to make it more relevant and accessible to greenspace and environmental community groups. That process has already started with the production of '*Social Return on Investment – in simple terms*' and '*Social Return on Investment – working with community groups*'.

Proposed areas for further development include: exploring the potential linkages between SROI and other outcomes based evaluation methods; widespread dissemination of the unique resources that have been produced through this programme; and, a review of the long-term use of the SROI analyses and their success in meeting stated objectives.

The report presents a review of the benefits and challenges of using the SROI approach and of its applicability as a means of demonstrating the value of greenspace activities from the perspective of those organisations that participated in the programme.

CONTENTS

Executive summary	i
1. Introduction	01
1.1 Greenspace and SROI	02
1.2 What is SROI?	02
2. Greenspace is good – so prove it!	03
2.1 The community groups	03
2.2 Recruitment	06
2.3 The agreement	07
2.4 Training and support	08
3. The process	09
3.1 The project or event whose value is being measured (scope)	10
3.2 Identifying who is involved (stakeholders)	10
3.3 Predicting changes (outcomes)	11
3.4 Consulting stakeholders	11
3.5 Putting a price on change (financial proxy)	11
3.6 Calculating how much of the change is due to the project or activity (impact)	12
3.7 The return on investment (SROI ratio)	12
3.8 Group views of the process	13
4. Using the SROI analysis	14
5. Programme evaluation	15
5.1 Assessment of skills and competencies acquired by individual group members	15
5.2 Review of understanding of the SROI principles and processes	16
5.3 Big Lottery Fund programme outcomes	16
6. Conclusions and recommendations	18
Appendices	20
1. The principles of SROI	20
2. The SROI process (in simple terms)	21
3. Summary of key learning points	22

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges facing environmental groups is being able to demonstrate the real value of their projects. It is fairly easy to see how a community growing project may help transform a piece of derelict land into a vibrant community space but less obvious are the other changes it brings about. The new horticultural skills volunteers gain and the better health participants experience may go unreported and ignored. Or consider a weekly health walk – the health benefits for participants are fairly evident but how often are the other changes, such as the organisational skills volunteers gain or the enduring friendships that are forged taken into account?

A Social Return on Investment (SROI) approach would be able to offer a way of measuring and valuing such changes. But how accessible would it be to community groups and how useful would they find it?

greenspace scotland, through earlier work, had identified and demonstrated the benefits offered by the SROI approach, as well as highlighting some of the challenges. To date, most of the work had taken place with professional groups and organisations and it seemed appropriate to also explore the approach from the perspective of community groups.

In 2009, greenspace scotland secured a research grant from the Big Lottery Fund to support individual community environmental groups to carry out an SROI analysis of one of their activities and to prepare a report on the collective findings.

This provided an opportunity to comprehensively and rigorously test the methodology with a range of greenspace community groups who applied it to a variety of their activities. The findings of this two year research project are reflected in this report.

The purpose of this report is to:

- give a brief introduction to SROI
- introduce the community groups who participated and the subject of their analyses
- outline the approaches used to engage the groups with the process
- record the key learning experiences of working with community groups
- explain the techniques used to evaluate the programme
- make recommendations on the future development and application of SROI for use by community environmental groups

The report draws on the experience of greenspace scotland and the ten community groups that participated in the research programme. The detailed SROI analyses for each of the projects, a guide for greenspace groups '*Social Return on Investment – working with community groups*', a short briefing note '*Social Return on Investment – in simple terms*' and other resources and materials are available at

[www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/
communitySROI/](http://www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/communitySROI/)

[www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/
resourcesSROI/](http://www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/resourcesSROI/)

1.1 Greenspace and SROI

greenspace scotland's work on SROI, started with pathfinder and pilot projects in 2008. With support from Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), Glasgow & Clyde Valley Green Network Partnership, Central Scotland Forest Trust, British Waterways Scotland and Glasgow South West Regeneration Agency, greenspace scotland has pioneered the application and development of the SROI approach to greenspace. Collectively, the partners were interested in the potential of the SROI approach as a way to demonstrate and quantify the multiple benefits and impacts of greenspace sites and the activities which occur on them. The early work demonstrated the potential value of applying SROI to greenspace projects and activities. It also began to identify a number of challenges.

Our report '*Social Return on Investment of Urban Nature Sites*'¹ suggested that the SROI approach needs to be refined to make it more relevant and accessible to greenspace and environmental organisations. Many of the challenges highlighted in the report that were experienced by professional staff are shared by their community group contemporaries.

1.2 What is SROI?

Social Return on Investment (SROI) provides a principled approach that can be used to measure and account for a broad concept of value. SROI is much more than just a number. It is a story about change, which is told through case studies, qualitative, quantitative and financial information.

SROI provides a framework for measuring social, environmental and economic change. It offers a way of accounting for the value created by activities and uses financial amounts to represent the value of the changes to those who experience them. In this way it is possible to compare the overall value to the investment in the activities. Put simply, SROI involves people in measuring the changes they experience and giving them a financial value. The approach can be used to plan activities (by predicting the likely impact they will achieve) or can be used to evaluate activities (by measuring the changes they have delivered).

The approach is premised on the belief that value can be assessed by measuring change and this can then be expressed in monetary terms by using a financial proxy.

To allow this to happen, consideration needs to be given to: the level of resources provided (input); how many activities are delivered (output); what changes as a result of them (outcome) and other factors affecting the amount of change (impact). The results are expressed in both qualitative and quantitative ways from the perspective of those who experience or contribute to the changes that are recorded. By using this approach to measure the changes that result from an activity, the overall value generated can be compared with the investment in the activities.

SROI is based on clear principles² and progresses through six stages³. Each stage of the process is recorded and used to produce an SROI report which contains a mixture of qualitative, quantitative and financial information. It includes a detailed narrative that explains how change is created, an evaluation of the impact of the change through the evidence that is gathered, and a ratio of cost to benefits. Unlike a cost-benefit analysis, SROI focuses on measuring the changes that are relevant to stakeholders and makes a clear distinction between outcomes and impacts. In SROI, an outcome is the resultant change, whilst the impact is the outcome 'adjusted' to take account of all the other things that may have contributed to the change.

There are two types of SROI analysis: a **forecast SROI** predicts the impact of a project or activity and an **evaluative SROI** measures change that has already taken place.

1 www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/urbannatureSROI/

2 See appendix 1 for the principles of SROI

3 See the individual project SROI reports for worked examples of the stages of undertaking an SROI analysis and '*A guide to Social Return on Investment*' published by the Office of the Third Sector for more detail on the methodology: www.sroiproject.org.uk/media/8353/SROIGuide2009-single-pages.pdf

2. GREENSPACE IS GOOD – SO PROVE IT!

The purpose of the research programme was to support environmental community groups to use an SROI approach to value one of their activities.

By undertaking an SROI analysis groups would gain an understanding of how to measure and value the many benefits that greenspace projects deliver. The learning they acquired would be shared internally with the other members of their group and externally with partners, local decision makers and funders. By taking part in the programme, groups would acquire new skills in communication, engagement and project planning and evaluation.

From the outset it was acknowledged that groups might need considerable levels of support to carry out an SROI analysis. It had been hoped that this could be provided by locally based professional staff whose role included offering advice and assistance and who would work alongside staff from greenspace scotland. This was only possible to a limited extent and most of the support was provided by greenspace scotland staff who also recorded the programme findings.

2.1. The community groups

The following groups took part in the programme:

Ardler Environment Group is a group of volunteers involved in encouraging greater community involvement and promoting local pride in environmental issues through practical projects. These include developing three community gardens, working with local schools and litter picking. Their report provides **a forecast of the social return from investing in an annual gardening competition** promoted by Ardler Village Trust and funded by Sanctuary Housing Association. For several years, the Trust have organised the event which contributes to Dundee's entry into Beautiful Scotland. The purpose of the competition is to encourage residents to take pride in their community and, on an individual basis, to gain the social, health and wellbeing benefits of gardening.

Auchinleck Community Development Initiative was constituted to stimulate and develop new initiatives to encourage the regeneration of their rural community using a partnership approach. The organisation is developing a range of initiatives to tackle poor health, lack of youth provision, poverty and unemployment. Their report provides **a forecast of the social return from investing in a horticultural training and community growing facility**. Community growing will provide opportunities to improve social cohesion, help generate civic pride and assist in improving the appearance of the area. Individual members of the community will feel better, be healthier and gain new skills. The social enterprise element, and related volunteering activities, will increase individuals' employability prospects.

Bridgend Growing Communities

is a voluntary organisation that operates from an organic local authority allotment site in Edinburgh. Whilst recognising its health and wellbeing benefits, the organisation seeks to use community growing as a way of bringing people together and changing lives. Their report provides **a forecast of the social return from investing in a programme of training sessions on community growing for volunteers and professional staff**. Training sessions will include horticulture skills and the use of community development techniques. This will take place in tandem with separate sessions targeted at key groups. Members from identified priority groups will be given tailored support and assistance on an individual basis. The groups that have been identified include individuals overcoming addiction issues, single homeless people and young people not in education or training. All the individuals who take part in the training will gain health and wellbeing benefits, learn new skills, and have stronger connections to their community.

Bums Off Seats is a Fife walking initiative supported by Fife Council, Fife Active and Paths for All. It currently employs two coordinating staff who manage a network of volunteers organising walks in ten locations across Central, East and West Fife. The report provides **an evaluation of the social return from investing in a single health walk as part of a wider programme**. BoS run walks to encourage individuals to adopt active lifestyles as a way of improving mental and physical health and enhancing social connections. Walks are free and last between 30 minutes and one hour depending on the nature of the group.

Craigshill Greenspace Group is a small group of active residents in the Craigshill area of Livingston in West Lothian who are interested in their local parks. Over the past two years the Group has focused on Almond Park, helping to inform park improvement works including signage, path upgrades and picnic facilities. Their report provides **a forecast of the social return from investing in a one day community event taking place in Almond Park.** The event aims to encourage local people to use their local greenspace on a regular basis by demonstrating the kinds of activities that can take place, and what is on offer in terms of nature and wildlife. It is hoped that the event will result in more local people becoming involved in the park's future development.

Edinburgh & Lothians Greenspace Trust is an environmental charity which works to enhance the local environment and engage communities with their open spaces. Since 2006, ELGT has worked in partnership with the local community to make environmental improvements to Hailes Quarry Park in Edinburgh and involve them in outdoor activities. Their report provides **an evaluation of the social return from investing in a summer bike club.** It was hoped that by offering an organised activity in Hailes Quarry Park, local children would have more opportunities to access the social and health benefits of an outdoor physical activity. In addition, families within the wider community would become more aware of, and hence more likely to use, their local greenspace.

Friends of Sunnybank Park was established in 2009 when the Park was considered for development. It had become run-down and anti-social behaviour and vandalism were causing problems. In 2011, FOSP assumed the lease and management responsibilities of the Park from Aberdeen City Council with a view to securing the long-term future of the Park as a multi-functional local greenspace for the benefit of the local community. Their report provides **a forecast of the social return from investing in developing and delivering a programme of regular community events in Sunnybank Park.** It is envisaged that the programme will help to create a more connected, engaged and active community, contributing to the health, wellbeing and quality of life of local people. The Park will be viewed as a vital community hub and focal point. This will help create and sustain the impression that the surrounding area is a great place to live.

Gorbals Healthy Living Network (GHLN) was launched in 2001 as a 'hub and spoke' initiative with a central base that supports the delivery of programmes and activities in community centres, health services and leisure facilities throughout the Gorbals. The aim is to address health inequalities by helping individuals maximise their opportunities for health and wellbeing. Their report provides **a forecast of the social return from investing in a community growing facility.** GHLN wants to grow fruit and vegetables in different community spaces using a variety of techniques. Community growing activities will be available to GHLN clients, local groups, schools, relevant organisations and any member of the local or wider community. Growing will generate opportunities to improve social cohesion, help increase civic pride and assist in improving the appearance of the area. Individual members of the community will feel better, be healthier and gain new skills.

Merkinch Local Nature Reserve

is hidden behind a housing estate near the shores of the Moray Firth. It provides a home to many species of animals, birds and plants. The reserve is managed by a committee of Merkinch Greenspace, a community group with an environmental remit, who seek to promote and enhance their unique local environment by actively encouraging community participation. Their report provides **a forecast of the social return from investing in a young ranger scheme to be delivered on the Merkinch Local Nature Reserve (LNR)**. The scheme will provide opportunities for young people to gain environmental skills, knowledge and understanding through outdoor, educational sessions and by being actively involved in maintenance work. It is expected that the project will be delivered during school hours. The report draws on the learning from an earlier pilot scheme.

North Lanarkshire Scramble and Quad Bike Club

was formed by a former North Lanarkshire Council Ranger in response to greenspace misuse by moto-crossers and quad bikes within and around North Lanarkshire. Key partners involved in establishing the Club were Strathclyde Police Force, North Lanarkshire Council and the Scottish Auto Cycle Union. Their report provides **a forecast of the social return from investing in a transferable model which is able to decrease the use of illegal biking in greenspace areas**. There are three equally important components to the approach. Firstly, unauthorised bikers are made aware that their activities are illegal and carry weighty consequences. Secondly, a purpose built track is offered on which the bikers can enjoy their activity. Lastly, membership of a club creates a culture of inclusiveness and supportive camaraderie which encourages progression towards other organised legal events. By taking part in the club members gain new skills and improve their social connections.

2.2 Recruitment of community groups

An initial briefing event for all interested groups and support staff was organised at which the principles of SROI were outlined along with details of the programme. This was followed by an open call for applications that was widely circulated through greenspace networks. Potential applicants were asked to complete a brief application form in which they identified a potential activity which could form the basis of their analysis and explained how they would use their SROI report. To be eligible for consideration groups had to satisfy two criteria: there had to be community participation in their organisation and the activity for analysis had to be connected to greenspace.

Although the response to the initial advert was positive, some groups did not satisfy the criteria. It was necessary to clarify certain issues, such as the degree of community involvement, with others. Additional groups were identified by approaching greenspace network members and asking partner organisations to suggest groups who might be interested in participating. Inevitably this caused delays and recruitment took longer than anticipated – this became a recurring theme throughout the process.

Although twelve community greenspace groups were eventually recruited, it became apparent in the early stages that the continued participation of two of them was in doubt. One of the groups was composed of housing association tenants who had been encouraged by their landlord to form a residents' association which could provide a tenant perspective in relation to proposed development plans and design. After taking part in a few meetings to discuss SROI, several members of the group were allocated their new homes.

The group had originally decided to carry out an SROI analysis of a woodland play park located adjacent to the development. As individuals moved into their new homes, and their attention shifted to more domestic priorities, it was increasingly difficult to maintain interest. Individuals' attendance at regular community meetings became more sporadic and this meant it was no longer possible to carry out the SROI analysis or indeed many other community based activities.

The driving force behind another group was one individual who was particularly interested in using the SROI approach to value a paths network between the local secondary school and the town centre. He managed to persuade fellow group members to overcome their initial reluctance and to take part in the programme. The level of commitment from his fellow group members was already fairly low and when, for personal reasons, the member had to withdraw temporarily from the group the remaining members decided not to continue to participate in the programme.

The original risk assessment for the programme identified as a key risk that groups would not be able to complete their SROI analysis and would withdraw from the programme. Mitigating actions were identified and put in place.

Regular updates on the progress of the programme had been circulated using existing green networks and as a result its profile remained fairly high. Several groups had already made late requests to take part but these had been declined because all twelve places were filled. As a result, when the two groups dropped out it was possible to approach other interested parties. Unfortunately only one group who were able to meet the criteria and timescale the programme required could be recruited.

The third group that withdrew did so at a very late stage in the programme. One of the conditions of participation was that the activity that was the subject of the group's analysis had to be connected to the use of greenspace. The group, encouraged by a support worker, wanted to carry out their analysis on an activity that did not meet the programme criteria. Protracted discussions ensued in an attempt to identify an alternative activity. Eventually when a suitable activity was agreed it was discovered that the group possessed very little relevant data and were reluctant to collect the additional information that was required. As a result, it was mutually agreed that it would not be in greenspace Scotland's or the group's interest to continue to participate in the programme. Due to the late stage at which this group withdrew it was not possible to recruit a replacement group.

Key learning points

- a community group needs to have several members who are committed to the SROI process
- although it is important to take time to fully explore possibilities, a deadline for agreement on the activity that the analysis will cover should be set

2.3 The agreement

Even with support, the SROI process requires considerable commitment and enthusiasm from community group members. It is important to be absolutely clear from the beginning what is expected. Many community groups are small organisations composed of volunteers who have a limited amount of time and many other commitments. Whilst this has to be recognised and accommodated it is important to ensure that any agreements are usually kept and, if a lack of commitment is demonstrated on a regular basis, it may be in everyone's interest to stop the SROI analysis. greenspace scotland attempted to make the mutual expectations of the process absolutely clear by asking groups to enter an agreement. It is fair to say that this had varying degrees of success.

All of the groups were asked to sign the following agreement which outlined the support that would be provided by greenspace scotland and what was expected from the group in return.

greenspace scotland staff will provide:

- information events and training for staff/volunteers
- ways to engage with other greenspace groups
- materials and resources to assist the SROI process
- a dedicated section on their website
- assistance to set up workshops with stakeholders
- ways of identifying relevant indicators and financial proxies

- research support as required
- drafts of notes of meetings, impact maps and reports
- access to information about national events and activities
- tailored support throughout the SROI process
- meetings at a time and place that suit all parties

In return the group agree to do the following:

- staff/volunteers will be involved throughout the SROI process
- attend 2-3 networking/support events
- attend a focus group and the launch conference
- have regular meetings (6-10) with the Programme Manager and associates
- agree a project and communication plan
- help collect required data
- actively participate in the arrangement of stakeholder workshops
- review all drafts of notes/documents/reports
- be willing to share findings with a wider audience
- participate in training
- share information
- keep in touch with the SROI Programme Manager and raise any concerns at an early stage

Despite having a fairly detailed agreement, which had been the subject of some discussion prior to assent, it proved very difficult to get groups to meet their commitments. Given the nature and composition of several of the groups this was understandable - if on occasion frustrating. Many groups had very few active members and often wanted *"to do things - not talk about doing things"*. Meetings were generally held on a monthly basis and lasted for only a couple of hours. Discussions relating to the SROI analysis had to compete for attention with other issues that were considered to be of higher priority. A few groups were extremely committed to the process and went out of their way to arrange special meetings and organise consultation events. These groups tended to be ones who had at least five dedicated members who all saw the potential benefits of the SROI approach.

Key learning points

- groups have to be realistic and honest about the commitment SROI requires
- members of community groups have limited time and resources to devote to SROI – attempts have to be made to accommodate the analysis alongside other demands, however, a point may be reached at which this is not sustainable

2.4 Training and support

Following on from an initial training session for participating groups on the principles of SROI it was planned to bring members together at regular intervals to guide them through the stages. Given the geographical location of the participating groups who came from as far afield as Aberdeen and Ayrshire, and Inverness and Glasgow this approach was not possible. One session to which all of the groups were invited was held and did provide opportunities to network and exchange information and ideas. Although participants reported that they found the session “very useful”, “inspiring” and one individual suggested he had “became more enthusiastic” many asked if subsequent sessions could take place closer to home. It was decided that a ‘virtual approach’ would have to be taken for information exchange and peer support and this was provided by the creation of a ‘blog’.

To address the support needs that had been identified, tailored training, on an individual basis for each group, was provided on an ongoing basis as part of related activities. To ensure that groups received the assistance that was required greenspace scotland decided to recruit ‘associates’ who, along with the SROI Programme Manager, would guide groups through the key stages of the process and would compile the group’s SROI report.

The associates came from a wide range of professional backgrounds and disciplines. They were required to complete a two day SROI training course. Some were engaged on a consultancy basis, whilst others were seconded by their employer. Although there were minor issues with the approach, in the main it worked well. Groups were able to establish a relationship with an individual who was committed to supporting them in an enabling manner, had a level of expertise with SROI and who was engaged to work with them to prepare an SROI report.

Completing the analyses took considerably longer than expected. Community groups were at the centre of the process and accordingly progress had to be made at a speed with which they were comfortable. Difficulties in understanding the requirements of an SROI approach and in agreeing the activity to which it would apply added considerably to the time required. This was compounded by limited opportunities being available to discuss key findings with groups due to infrequent or cancelled meetings. Information was not always ready or available to discuss because support workers who were involved in the process had sometimes been unable to carry out agreed tasks. Difficulties also arose when individuals acted as gatekeepers and did not share information with other group members. The length of time taken did become an issue and as one community group member commented “we started this process a year ago and we’ve still not finished!”

The unexpected and excessive delays posed considerable difficulties for those associates who were secondees. This was compounded by the frequency of last minute cancellations or changes of plan which were difficult to accommodate within programmed work schedules; as a result one of the associates had to withdraw from the Programme.

All of the associates were supported by the SROI Programme Manager and regular opportunities were provided for informal discussion and dialogue with peers. The varied backgrounds of the associates resulted in the consideration and exploration of key concepts from a range of perspectives. This greatly enhanced the quality of the SROI analyses. Training and review sessions were held which focused on agreed topics and these were facilitated by a member of the SROI Network. Most of the associates found the experience positive, if time-consuming. As one commented “*I have learned so much in this process: new ways to work with communities, the real difference between an outcome and an output, and how to express complicated concepts in jargon-free ways. But the process has taken much much longer than I expected and writing the report was much harder than I anticipated.*”

Another added “*taking part has really helped my understanding of outcomes based systems of evaluation. I am much more confident about taking part in discussions within our management team.*”

Key learning points

- undertaking a SROI analysis may take much longer than anticipated
- carrying out a SROI analysis with community groups requires flexibility and adaptability
- considering a range of perspectives helps in understanding the different ways that concepts in a SROI analysis can be interpreted and explained

3. THE PROCESS

Initially the SROI Guide⁴ was used as the basis of supporting groups to gain an understanding of the principles of SROI and to progress through the stages required to carry out an analysis. It quickly became apparent that groups struggled to understand both the language it used and the way it described the concepts on which SROI is based. Although the greenspace scotland team continued to use the SROI Guide as a reference source, it was not used to any significant extent by community group members. The approach it suggested was adapted and refined. Key concepts were described in simpler terms using language that was easily understood and were illustrated through the use of examples which were more relevant to environmental community groups.

Groups found the initial stages of the process challenging, as one individual opined “*It was really hard to understand – it was like speaking a different language.*”

Although some groups had a level of familiarity with other outcomes based systems of evaluation, their knowledge was not automatically transferable. Groups suggested it would be useful to see how an SROI approach related to other, perhaps more familiar, evaluation systems.

Groups found the language used in SROI particularly challenging. It was necessary to use the terms used in the Guide in tandem with a simpler definition until all members of the group were comfortable with the terminology. A point arose for most of the groups when members felt at ease with the language and started using technical terms. As one group member wryly commented “*you can stop talking about changes now – I know what an outcome is.*”

It is not necessary for groups to be familiar with all of the principles and stages of an SROI approach before they start on their analysis. Many groups started to lose interest or feel overwhelmed when initial discussions concentrated on these procedural aspects. The method does not lose its rigour or relevance if groups don't understand the key concepts from the outset but learn them as they go along. The new approaches that were developed to meet the challenges that were identified have been drawn together and used to produce ‘*Social Return on Investment – working with community groups*’.⁵

The stages in the Guide were expressed in simple action based language that groups could understand and relate to:

- which of our activities are we going to look at?
- who takes part in it? what happens to them as a result? how do they know? how will we check this with them?
- how can we put a price on change
- what else is happening when our activity is going on?
- who needs to know about our findings?

This is illustrated in the briefing note ‘*Social Return on Investment – in simple terms*’⁶ which was prepared as part of the programme. The flow diagram which illustrates the process is included as Appendix 2.

Key learning points

- use everyday language to define key terms
- offer simple explanations of important concepts
- illustrate the key processes required using relevant greenspace or environmental examples

The following sections highlight those stages of the SROI analysis which proved particularly challenging and from which learning experiences can be distilled. Comments are not made on those aspects which were straightforward or in which groups had minimal involvement (these include writing the report and researching financial proxies). More detailed explanations of the findings and suggested ways of dealing with the issues raised can be found in the accompanying report ‘*Social Return on Investment – working with community groups*’.⁵

⁴ ‘A guide to Social Return on Investment’ published by the Office of the Third Sector www.sroiproject.org.uk/media/8353/SROIGuide2009-single-pages.pdf

⁵ ‘Social Return on Investment – working with community groups’ can be downloaded from www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/communitySROI/

⁶ ‘Social Return on Investment – in simple terms’ can be downloaded from www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/resourcesSROI/

3.1 The project or event whose value is being measured (scope)

Getting groups to agree the activity they wished to value in the SROI analysis required considerable discussion and debate which often appeared to be inconclusive. There was a tendency for groups to want to include all of their activities as they felt that in this way they would be able to demonstrate the best value and generate the highest ratio. This was tackled by encouraging groups to consider why they were doing the SROI analysis and making sure that the activity covered related to the purpose of the analysis. Most groups started off wanting to evaluate an existing activity but fairly quickly discovered they didn't have the data that was required. It was necessary to persuade them that it might be better to use their SROI analysis to predict or forecast an activity and to use existing work to influence and inform this. Although accepted, this caused some consternation as a forecast analysis was initially perceived to be a less useful approach. This view was revised as their analysis progressed and groups were able to understand everything that an SROI approach can offer.

Case study

One of the groups wanted to carry out an evaluative analysis of a horticultural activity which provided employment training opportunities. Detailed discussions identified that there was insufficient data to carry this out. Careful consideration of the purpose of the SROI analysis revealed it would be used to meet two objectives. Firstly, to persuade the local authority to release land for a new community based growing project and, secondly, to raise the funds to develop it. In these circumstances, it was agreed that a more appropriate approach would be to prepare a forecast of the potential impact of a community growing project that provided horticultural training. In this way it was possible to reflect the learning from existing experiences in the preparation of the analysis. The SROI analysis would also provide a framework for evaluating the project should it proceed.

3.2 Identifying who is involved (stakeholders)

Groups were quick to identify everybody who was involved in the activity and wanted to include them all... and others as well! It was important to emphasise that SROI is about valuing change from the perspective of those who are most affected by an activity. If stakeholders are not affected, or their sole contribution is to provide resources or they only experience limited change, then there is little point in including them in the analysis as the overall value of the activity will not be significantly affected. Although this was understood, and eventually accepted, several groups had to be dissuaded from including organisations with whom they had a close relationship or whom they wished to influence but who were not really involved in the activity. This argument was made easier when groups realised the amount of work that was required in engaging with stakeholders and valuing outcomes. At this point groups were readily persuaded to spend some time reducing the number of stakeholders to a more manageable size.

All of the groups used the decisions they had made to draft a stakeholder consultation plan that outlined who they were going to talk to and the method they were going to use.

3.3 Predicting changes (outcomes)

There was some confusion over the difference between an output and an outcome. An output is the number of events that make the change or outcome happen. After this was explained and understood groups managed to identify the outcomes their stakeholders were likely to experience.

Case study

Having decided the activity which would be evaluated, one of the groups considered the outcomes or changes that were likely to have been experienced by participants. The intention had been to use the analysis to seek funding for what was perceived as a successful project. As discussion progressed the group came to the conclusion that the changes it had hoped the project would deliver had failed to materialise. The reasons for this were identified and discussed. It was decided that instead of seeking to replicate a project which had not been very successful it would be better to plan a new project with a different focus that would deliver the outcomes sought. One of the group members said that the SROI process “helps us think through and plan what we need to do”. As a result it was agreed to carry out a forecast analysis which would use the learning from the previous project to provide a framework for delivering a more successful activity.

3.4 Consulting stakeholders

Having identified the individuals and organisations who should be consulted and the best method for carrying it out, groups were usually fairly eager to start doing something practical that they thought they understood. Whilst this was a very positive development and should be encouraged, it is necessary to inject a cautionary note. The SROI approach is based on valuing change. To find out what changes it is necessary to ask the right questions. Exploring the changes that have or may be delivered and how this can be proved is not particularly easy. Some groups were able to gather lots of information but much of it wasn't relevant.

To assist them in this task groups were provided with support materials including simple questionnaires for use at community events and structured questions for use in one-to-one interviews. Groups identified stakeholders with whom they had previously had very limited contact and were sometimes uncertain how best to consult them. Suggestions were made as to which approach which might best be adopted. For example, several groups were unsure of the most appropriate way to consult young people and new techniques for engaging with young people through the use of drawing and games were developed.

3.5 Putting a price on the change (financial proxy)

There was a degree of scepticism about placing a value on personal or intangible changes. In an attempt to overcome this group members took part in a series of valuation exercises. These were designed to demonstrate how individuals may value the same thing differently and that something which is not usually valued can be related to the price people are willing to pay. This helped groups to understand the rationale behind the process and gave them the confidence to explore valuation with stakeholders using similar approaches. Discussion with stakeholders provides one way of identifying financial proxies, another is to use relevant primary research or to consider other financial proxies that have been used. Groups considered the relevance of the financial proxies that had been used in other greenspace scotland SROI analyses or which were found on the SROI database; these provided a good starting point for discussion. The identification of possible financial proxies using primary sources of research was undertaken by the greenspace scotland team.

3.6 Calculating how much of the change is due to the project or activity (impact)

In this part of the SROI analysis other factors that may have contributed to, or been affected by, the changes which the activity delivers have to be taken into account. Current research may be of use in identifying what would have happened anyway (deadweight) and how long changes are likely to last (drop-off). To consider the contribution of others (attribution) and any activities that have been displaced (displacement), in the absence of stakeholder responses, it is likely that value judgements or estimates will be required. Groups were extremely uncomfortable with this stage of the process and one individual expressed the view that it felt like *“they were plucking figures out of thin air”*.

When all of the influential factors have been considered and, if necessary, valued, it is possible to calculate the impact of the activity. It was explained that any estimates or judgements made when doing the analysis would be tested to see how crucial they were to the final result. Many groups found the way that the impact is calculated particularly disconcerting and perplexing. This was undoubtedly compounded by the fact that it is usually carried out using an Excel spreadsheet or impact map. Although groups were given copies of the tools used and took part in discussions about the amounts that should be allocated to each factor, many group members retained a residual sense of unease.

As this is probably the most complex part of the SROI process, calculating impact and carrying out a sensitivity analysis was undertaken by the greenspace scotland team.

3.7 The return on investment (SROI ratio)

The groups wanted to achieve the highest possible ratio and regarded it as a valuable part of the process. However, unlike the organisations who took part in the urban nature sites SROI programme, all of the participants did not see it as an essential element of the process. A few concerns were expressed about the reliability of the ratio and discussions took place about the best way in which it should be presented. Groups accepted that the ratio forms a small part of the final overall SROI report. Despite this recognition, as the end of the process approached, interest grew in the level of ratio the analysis would produce.

Key learning points


- everyone who is involved needs to have a basic understanding of the SROI process in its simplest form - that is about measuring and valuing change
- a flexible approach is required at all stages but particularly in relation to the initial identification of the scope of the analysis
- from the outset there has to be recognition that SROI requires time, resources and commitment – it is easy to underestimate what is required!
- both organisations and participants need to understand that the purpose of SROI is to identify and measure change from the perspective of those who actually experience it
- engagement methods need to be flexible and adaptable and must meet stakeholder needs
- dialogue with stakeholders needs to focus on the changes they experience and how they are measured
- an emphasis on the technical aspects of SROI can discourage groups from participating in the process and so it is important to focus on establishing understanding
- the SROI Guide needs to be used in the most appropriate way for individual groups
- using estimates and making value judgements are part of the process
- only one of a group's activities may be being valued

3.8 Group views of the process

Overall, most community groups found the process challenging but worthwhile as one commented *“the process was hard, took forever, and we needed help to do it, but it was really worthwhile.”*

For one group the complexities of the process and the level of commitment required meant that they said they would not wish to use an SROI approach in the future. It is worth noting that at the start of the programme almost all of the participating groups stated that one of their reasons for taking part in the programme was to learn how to do an SROI analysis so that they could apply the process to another of their activities at a later date. By the time they had reached the end of the programme, all of the groups indicated that it would have been impossible for them to carry out the analysis without a significant level of support. Most thought that some form of support and/or a simplification of the process would be required if they were to use the SROI approach in the future. Four of the groups who had undertaken a forecast analysis indicated that they hope to use it as the basis for subsequent evaluations but were not sure whether this would be possible unaided.

Members of all of the groups experienced a sense of pride in the results of their analysis and welcomed the increased credibility it provided. As one individual commented *“It gave us a sense of achievement and confidence in what we are doing. We’ve always felt we did a good job for the area - now we can prove it”*.



**“THE PROCESS WAS HARD,
TOOK FOREVER, AND WE
NEEDED HELP TO DO IT, BUT IT
WAS REALLY WORTHWHILE”**



**“IT GAVE US A SENSE OF
ACHIEVEMENT AND CONFIDENCE IN
WHAT WE ARE DOING. WE’VE ALWAYS
FELT WE DID A GOOD JOB FOR THE
AREA - NOW WE CAN PROVE IT”**

4. USING THE SROI ANALYSIS

All of the groups initially identified ‘securing funding’ as their primary reason for producing an SROI analysis. As the programme progressed, groups saw the potential the analysis offered as a way of raising their public profile, increasing credibility and influencing decision makers.

When asked about the opportunities the SROI analysis offered members commented:

“The report will help us raise funds - funders are already asking for a copy”

“When I mentioned SROI the council took us seriously”

In the course of developing and reviewing a communication strategy, groups identified the purposes of their analysis and the ways in which the findings would be disseminated. It is interesting to note that at the end of the process, although use of the report for funding was still the most likely option, other potential uses had also been suggested. A significant number of the groups plan to use the analysis to develop new projects or to improve current activities. Despite an initial reluctance to produce a forecast SROI analysis, groups have clearly seen the benefits such a report can deliver in relation to project planning.

Table 1: Groups use of SROI analysis

Use of SROI analysis	Number of groups
Raise profile	2
Plan new projects and/or improve current activities	4
Secure funds	8

To assess the impact having an SROI analysis has made on community groups and their stakeholders there would be merit in undertaking a review in six months time to explore the uses that are being made of the report and to identify any changes that have resulted.

5. PROGRAMME EVALUATION

Evaluation of the programme took place in three ways:

- assessment of skills and competencies acquired by individual group members
- review of the groups understanding of the SROI principles and processes
- achievement of Big Lottery Fund programme outcomes

5.1 Assessment of skills and competencies acquired by individual group members

The skills and knowledge of individual group members was assessed by asking them to complete a short questionnaire at the start and end of the programme. Responses were received from 30 community group members.

The results demonstrate that individuals feel that their analytical, critical thinking and problem solving skills have improved markedly as a result of taking part in the SROI programme. To a lesser, but still substantial extent, communication skills have also been enhanced. Almost all of the participants felt that their ability to learn new things had got better, possibly because they were able to make the connection between this and their ability to understand and use a new complex process. Perhaps not surprisingly, only one individual reported a positive change in the use of Excel. This reflects the way community groups engaged to a limited extent with the impact mapping process. Very reassuringly, no reductions in skills and knowledge were reported. Responses were received from 30 community group members – these are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Changes in individuals' skills and competencies

Skill / Knowledge	Number reporting a positive change	Number reporting no change	Number reporting a negative change
Time management	4	26	0
Planning and organising	10	20	0
Problem solving	20	10	0
Effective communication	18	12	0
Working with others	9	21	0
Critical thinking	16	14	0
Information Technology	3	27	0
Use of Excel	1	29	0
Analytical	20	10	0
Ability to learn new things	27	3	0

5.2 Review of the understanding of the SROI principles and processes

The groups' knowledge and awareness of the SROI process was tested at three points: at the start of the process using a quiz; midway through using word association; and, at the end of the process by repeating the quiz. A slight improvement was measured at the end of the process. This probably reflects the fact that the quiz had been designed to assess understanding of the principles and terminology of SROI. As the programme progressed detailed understanding of the terms and process as set out in the Guide became less relevant as people gained a more general understanding of the SROI approach.

5.3 Big Lottery Fund programme outcomes

The programme also needed to meet the identified outcomes that had been agreed with the Big Lottery Fund. It should be noted that these are brief summaries of the key points and have been extracted from the more detailed reports which have been submitted to the funder:

(1) Participating community groups and key stakeholders would have an understanding of the SROI approach and see the benefits of applying it to their work

10 community environmental groups and over 100 stakeholders participated in the programme and through it gained a basic understanding of the SROI approach and of how it values change. Groups were able to identify the potential beneficiaries of their activities, consider the changes participants were likely to experience and agree ways in which these could be measured. Being able to calculate the impact of an activity and to demonstrate it in financial terms has increased the credibility of groups and allowed them to clearly communicate the changes that they deliver. The programme enabled the 10 community environmental groups to produce an SROI analysis which they are using to attract funding, raise their profile and plan projects.

(2) Participating community groups and key stakeholders can prove the value of their greenspace work and can demonstrate it to others

All 10 groups established small steering groups. Whilst groups did not actually write their SROI reports they were involved, to varying degrees, in all the stages of the process. As a result of taking part in the programme, groups can demonstrate how organisations and individuals benefit from their activities and are able to prove the value of the changes which others experience.

The reports provide confirmation that for many individuals community greenspace activities will result in better health, the acquisition of new skills and the establishment of new social networks. They also demonstrate how greenspace activity at a local level delivers increased environmental sustainability, improved amenity and better delivery of services.

The SROI reports that the groups have produced will be independently assured and can be used to provide evidence of the value of a wide range of activities in greenspace such as health walks, youth projects, community engagement, diversionary programmes and community growing.

Each of the groups has produced a communication plan which contains details of how their SROI report will be used and how its findings will be disseminated and used to influence others.

(3) By understanding the SROI approach key policy makers, funders and practitioners have a better understanding of the multiple benefits greenspace delivers

The SROI approach has been used by groups to demonstrate to external bodies the benefits that may be delivered by investment in community based activities. The production of a detailed report, allows policy makers and funders to see the many changes that are likely to result and which groups and organisations stand to benefit. The ratio of investment to benefits demonstrates the value of the changes in financial terms.

Many of the groups held local events at which they outlined the key findings from their SROI analysis. Local policy makers, practitioners, key stakeholders and interested parties were invited. From an early stage, the research findings have been shared at every opportunity e.g. presentation at the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations' Research Conference. Regular updates have been provided to greenspace professionals and the SROI Network through websites and e bulletins.

The SROI reports will be used on an individual basis at a local level and collectively at a national level to raise awareness of the SROI approach and of how it can be used to demonstrate the multiple benefits of greenspace activities.

(4) Community groups feel confident to carry out research

Tailored training was provided for groups and over 50 individual members took part in one or more sessions. Individuals have learned basic techniques and approaches to project planning and evaluation, communication and consultation. As a result of having to establish dialogue with key stakeholders, groups have improved their communication skills and developed new engagement techniques. Analytical and critical thinking and problem solving skills have improved markedly as a result of taking part in the SROI programme. The understanding of individual group members of outcomes based approaches to project planning and evaluation has been significantly enhanced. All the knowledge acquired can be transferred and applied to other methodologies and approaches.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SROI demonstrates the value of greenspace and environmental activities in a way that no other assessment tool does. It identifies the multiple benefits that are delivered by measuring and valuing the changes that groups and individuals experience. By looking at an SROI report it is possible to see who experiences change as the result of an activity and the nature of the change – be it better health, new skills or something else. In addition, SROI makes it possible to place a financial value on the resultant benefits.

Undertaking an SROI analysis is challenging and requires a very wide-ranging set of skills. The process requires time and commitment from both the bodies undertaking an SROI analysis, and to a lesser extent, the organisations and individuals most affected by the group's activities whom they wish to consult.

It is most unlikely that community groups would be able to undertake an SROI analysis using the methodology as it currently exists without some form of support or assistance. Depending on the interests and skills that members of the group possess this support might take the form of mentoring, tailored training or consultancy services.

The experiences of environmental greenspace community groups and professional staff in environmental organisations in carrying out SROI analyses are very similar. This reinforces the conclusions that have been drawn from both reports. Further information on this can be found in the '*Greenspace is good – and we've proved it!*' summary report⁷.

The *Greenspace is good – so prove it!* programme has identified key learning points arising from the practical application of the SROI process that environmental community groups and those who support them may wish to consider. These have been reflected in the report and are summarised in Appendix 3.

To enhance and develop the SROI approach it is suggested that the following areas merit further investigation and discussion:

R1. To participate in an SROI approach community groups need to understand what is required and have confidence in their abilities to deliver

Groups find the language of SROI and its use of technical terms difficult to comprehend. Although it is important to understand the principles of an SROI approach this may not be the best starting point from which to promote the confidence and understanding that is required. Groups can relate better to the process if it starts with familiar concepts which are expressed in a relevant way. From the outset, it is important to emphasise that the approach is flexible and decisions, such as the area covered, can be reviewed and amended on an ongoing basis.

R2. Community groups and key stakeholders need to be aware of the commitment, resources and time scale required in an SROI analysis

Preparing an SROI analysis requires significant resources and members or staff with specific skills. Groups will need to have several dedicated individual members who are prepared to devote a substantial amount of time to carry out the preparatory work and ongoing activities that are required.

Some groups took over a year to prepare their SROI reports and this might result in the priorities and focus of the group changing in the course of carrying out the analysis.

R3. Potential linkages between SROI and other outcomes based evaluation methods should be explored

Increasingly funding agencies and public bodies are using outcomes based approaches to assess the value and investment potential of projects. There is confusion amongst members of community groups and decision makers about what actually constitutes a change or outcome. Using an SROI approach helped groups to identify the changes their activities would deliver, for whom and how they could be measured.

Initial scoping work has been undertaken to examine the potential use of SROI alongside more commonly used evaluation systems. At different stages in the process of evaluation and project planning certain tools may be used to the greatest advantage. This area merits further investigation and could form the basis of guidance for community greenspace groups on which technique is best suited to their individual needs and circumstances.

⁷ *Greenspace is good – and we've proved it!* summary report can be downloaded from www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/communitySROI/

R4. The long term use of the SROI analysis and its success in delivering the group's objectives should be reviewed

Groups and organisations were quick to identify why they wanted to undertake an SROI analysis even if they sometimes struggled to make the connection between its purpose and the relevance of the proposed area of activity. Early indications are that groups are using the reports to assist with the preparation of funding applications and that funders are keen to receive them. Other potential uses that have been identified include raising public profile and project planning. A systematic review of the impact of each of the analyses involving group members, support workers, key stakeholder and funders should be carried out.

R5. A simple greenspace guide to SROI should be produced

Throughout the implementation of the research programme ways of simplifying and expressing things in a more relevant way had to be found to ensure that groups understood, and were actively engaged in, the SROI process. Within the limits of the research programme attempts were made to refine the approach and make it more accessible by producing a briefing paper '*Social Return on Investment – in simple terms*' and a report '*Social Return on Investment – working with community groups*'. These will assist groups to understand and clarify some of the points the SROI Guide contains. A guide to SROI written specifically for greenspace groups, using practical examples and case studies and which includes community participation in the development process would enable community groups to make greater use of an SROI approach and to take advantage of the benefits it offers.

R6. The unique resources produced including financial proxies, indicators, evaluation frameworks and engagement techniques should be made widely available.

All of the resources produced in the programme are available from greenspace scotland's website www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/resourcesSROI. Additional ways of publicising, sharing and disseminating them in partnership with others should be identified.

Appendix 1: The principles of SROI

Principle	Description
Involve stakeholders	Inform what gets measured and how this is measured and valued by involving stakeholders
Understand what changes	Articulate how change is created and evaluate this through evidence gathered, recognising positive and negative changes as well as those that are intended or unintended
Value the things that matter	Use financial proxies in order that the value of the outcomes can be recognised Many outcomes are not traded in markets and as a result their value is not recognised
Only include what is material	Determine what information and evidence must be included in the accounts to give a true and fair picture, such that stakeholders can draw reasonable conclusions about impact
Do not over-claim	Only claim the value that organisations are responsible for creating
Be transparent	Demonstrate the basis on which the analysis may be considered accurate and honest, and show that it will be reported to and discussed with stakeholders
Verify the result	Ensure independent appropriate assurance

For more information on the SROI process refer to:

www.sroiproject.org.uk/media/8353/SROIGuide2009-single-pages.pdf

www.socialimpactscotland.org.uk/understanding-social-impact-/methods-and-tools-/sroi-measurement-method/how-to-do-sroi.aspx

Appendix 2: The SROI process (in simple terms)



Appendix 3: Summary of key learning points

- from the outset there has to be recognition that SROI requires time, resources and commitment – it is easy to underestimate what is required!
- a community group needs to have several members who are committed to the SROI process
- groups have to be realistic and honest about the commitment SROI requires
- members of community groups have limited time and resources to devote to SROI – attempts have to be made to accommodate the analysis alongside other demands, however, a point may be reached at which this is not sustainable
- undertaking an SROI analysis may take much longer than anticipated
- carrying out an SROI analysis with community groups requires flexibility and adaptability
- considering a range of perspectives helps in understanding the different ways that concepts in SROI analysis can be interpreted and explained
- everyone who is involved needs to have a basic understanding of the SROI process in its simplest form – that is about measuring and valuing change
- a flexible approach is required at all stages but particularly in relation to the initial identification of the scope of the analysis
- although it is important to take time to fully explore possibilities, a deadline for agreement on the activity that the analysis will cover should be set
- both organisations and participants need to understand that the purpose of SROI is to identify and measure change from the perspective of those who actually experience it
- engagement methods need to be flexible and adaptable and must meet stakeholder needs
- dialogue with stakeholders needs to focus on the changes they experience and how they are measured
- an emphasis on the technical aspects of SROI can discourage groups from participating in the process and so it is important to focus on establishing understanding
- use everyday language to define key terms and offer simple explanations of important concepts
- the SROI Guide needs to be used in the most appropriate way for individual groups
- illustrate the key processes required using relevant greenspace or environmental examples
- using estimates and making value judgements are part of the process
- only one of a group's activities may be being valued

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to extend our thanks to the members of all of the community groups and the stakeholders who supported the SROI analyses.

The *Greenspace is good – so prove it!* programme was supported by a research grant from the Big Lottery Fund.

For further information please contact:

greenspace scotland
12 Alpha Centre
Stirling University Innovation Park
Stirling, FK9 4NF
Tel: 01786 465934
E: info@greenspacescotland.org.uk
W: www.greenspacescotland.org.uk

greenspace scotland is a registered Scottish Charity (No. SC034078) and a Company Limited by Guarantee registered in Scotland (No. 236105)

