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A complete guide to writing social value reports

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Introduction



As organisations, we have incredible potential to change lives, communities, and the environment. Thankfully, many of us have acknowledged and embraced that, ready to do our part to have a positive impact on wider society and the world.

But making this difference is only half the battle. You have your initiatives. You have your beneficiaries. And you have your data to show what you're accomplishing. But to draw real long-term impact, you need to bring this data to life. To communicate all the good you are accomplishing.

That's where social value reports come in. Done right, these can be an extremely effective way to bring the crucial data, stories, and explanations of your efforts to the forefront and into the hands of people who need to see them most.

It's about ensuring what you've done matters and will continue to do so well into the future. Let's take a look at what constitutes a great social value report and how you can ensure your impact continues to make a difference.

Why do social value reports matter?

As an organisation that's committed to making a difference to people's lives through your social value efforts, generating engaging, accurate, and thorough reports is a crucial piece of the puzzle. The reasons are twofold. Social value reports help your organisation...

...prove its impact.



Competitive differentiation

In markets that are saturated with organisations offering similar services or products, demonstrating an unwavering commitment to doing better by people and the planet helps you to stand out.



Boosting reputation

[82% of people](#) feel more inclined to be loyal to a brand whose values align with their own. Evidencing your impact and producing public-facing social value reports opens up dialogue with your customers/audience and presents this valuable opportunity to bond over shared values.



Marketing opportunities

The very action of accumulating data and generating an engaging social value report will arm your marketing department with extensive insights to share and shout about on social channels. In this way, the content of your social value reports can become a conversation starter across multiple channels.



Bolstering recruitment

An organisation's [percentage of 'highly engaged' employees rises from 40 to 60%](#) when the business takes conscious action on social issues. Showcasing your social value will help you engage your workforce and strengthen your talent pool, attracting more talented and driven people.



Securing funding

Running your operation, as well as continuing to increase your impact, takes funding. There are increasing expectations from external stakeholders for businesses to become more purpose-driven. Clear evidence of social value, and a long-term plan for the future, could make the difference between securing critical funding or not.

...improve your value generation long-term.



Informed decision-making

Data-driven decisions are the best way to ensure success from your efforts. The more evidence you have of what works and what doesn't, the more methodical you can be when shaping future decisions and strategies.



Adding more value to your beneficiaries

The ultimate goal of social value is to improve people's lives, bolster communities, and save our planet. By using your social value reports to become more aware of your inputs, outputs, and outcomes - both the good and bad - the better placed you will be to refine your approach and add more value to your beneficiaries over time.



Ensuring the best use of resources

Whether resources and funding are tight or you simply want to be more savvy with the resources you have, social value reports help you determine where your money is best spent. Rather than wasting valuable time and money on an activity that isn't going to bring about the intended outcomes, reports show exactly where to tweak your approach.



Minimising risk

You don't want to spend valuable time and resources on a future service that's going to fall short or have adverse impacts. Social value reports allow you to consider and evaluate the impact of your efforts ahead of time, minimising the risk of them failing and allowing you to prioritise where your focus best lies.



Actively engaging your team

Social value reports put clear and meaningful progress right in front of your staff. Not only does this enable you to celebrate your wins as a collective unit, but aligning efforts with real-world outcomes will encourage teams or individuals to become more actively engaged with your organisation's social value efforts.

To continually improve your organisation’s social value, you’ll need support in the form of funding from external stakeholders – such as investors or governments – a strong, dedicated workforce, and/or buy-in from consumers. You’ll also need a firm understanding of what works and what doesn’t. These internal insights will shape decision-making and allow you to proceed with less risk and ensure the best possible use of resources.

In short, while you might think social value reports come second to the actual act of improving lives or the environment (generating social value directly), they actually prove critical to the success, impact, and longevity of your efforts.

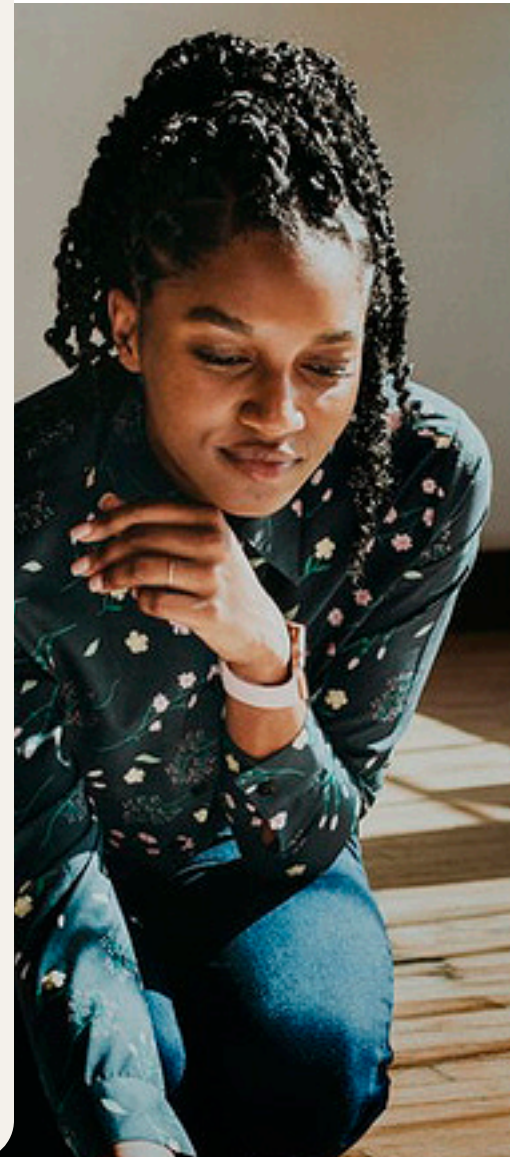


What does good look like?

Not all social value reports are created equal. It isn't just about collating a document with stat after stat with no common thread to tie them together. You want something that's engaging; that's well thought out and clearly outlines your efforts in a logical manner.

If you want to actually reap the benefits we just listed, your social value reports have to be valuable in all the right ways.

Your organisation could achieve massive amounts of social value, but if all your efforts and outcomes are lost in translation, you can't ever draw out all of the value you could.



But what exactly does a good social value report look like?

01

It looks good

Humans are visual creatures. No matter who your intended audience might be, they're likely to switch off if all they see are blocks of text. While incorporating detail and explanations for your data is important, you need to be careful in how you're presenting your information.

To boost reader engagement, pay attention to your colour scheme, opt for a layout that leaves plenty of white space, and use visual representations of information - such as graphs, charts, images, and diagrams - as much as possible. Think about what TED Talks did for PowerPoint presentations; your social value report should be equally groundbreaking.

02

It's clear and succinct throughout

The best social value reports will look to make life easier for their readers, not harder. If your audience has to go through your reports with a fine-toothed comb to uncover the information that's relevant to them, or grab a dictionary to understand half of what you're saying, you're going to lose them.

Keep your language simple and try to avoid overloading any one page with too much information. Paragraphs should be short, and subheadings and bullet points will prove helpful at breaking up large chunks of information. Resist the urge to use more than two fonts. Stick with one for your titles and another for your text. And to tie it all together, make good use of your brand colours.

03

It considers and caters towards different audience types

Chances are you'll be targeting multiple audience types with one report. Somehow you need to juggle the needs of external stakeholders, beneficiaries, consumers, and whomever else may stumble across it.

Whenever you're generating reports, it's best to consider the needs of all the people you're trying to reach and find some optimum middle ground. This is no easy feat, but we will be covering this in more detail later!

04

It's fully transparent

No matter how well you plan and how committed you are, initiatives and activities can always go awry. In your reports, you always want to be telling the full story, not just the feel-good one. They should be an honest, transparent reflection of your efforts, including all the positive, negative, intended, and unintended consequences of your actions.

[66% of consumers](#) believe transparency to be one of the most attractive brand qualities. The mistakes you've made and lessons learned are equally as important as all your success. Try to always acknowledge and embrace your capacity for improvement, outlining how you're taking any adversity in stride to be better next time.

05

It follows a logical structure

Social value reports shouldn't be made up of disparate pieces of data or case studies. From start to finish it should follow a natural progression.

What is your organisation's relationship to social value, and why do you care? What is your current approach?

06 It balances qualitative and quantitative data

What are the results? What have been the lessons learned that you're taking forward? It should follow a logical order, flowing seamlessly throughout the report.

So many people and organisations are stuck with a binary view of social value as being all about financial metrics and hitting targets. While statistics and percentages have their place in your reports - especially for the benefit of external stakeholders - so too do meaningful, human stories.

The best reports strike a balance between the two, offering a top-line, succinct overview, while weaving in the affecting human stories that give your efforts true meaning.



What a report can be

When you hear the word “report” what do you think of? A document that’s a wall of text with a few images or graphs throughout? The idea of the stuffy old report is a relic of the past. It can be so much more than that now. Later on, you’ll see some amazing examples that introduce modern design elements to make it not only easier to read, but a joy to read. Interactive documents and websites are a much better way to bring your social value data to life.



Of course, how much you can do will depend on your resources, but taking the advice from the previous section, there’s no reason you can’t create something that stands out in some way. It doesn’t have to be the standard boring document or presentation.

And your audience will thank you for it; especially anyone outside your organisation. It creates a much more digestible package that saves the reader time and makes your efforts look all the more impressive. So while you read through the rest of this white paper, why not consider what alternative ways you could be reporting your impact?

Understanding your different audience types

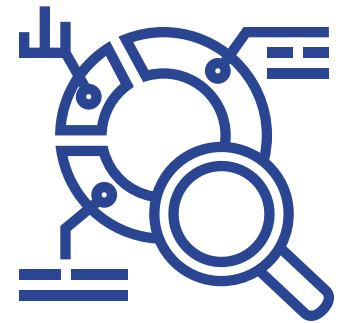
External stakeholders/funding/grant providers, consumers, and staff will all approach your reports from different angles or with unique agendas. Rather than using your precious time and resources writing multiple reports, or running the risk of excluding certain readers with what you publish, it's important to get super clear on who will be viewing your report and what they will need or want to see.



With this in mind, let's take some time to break down your potential audiences, considering what matters most to each.

External stakeholders

These are going to be time-strapped professionals who aren't necessarily going to be familiar with your business's mission, ethos, and approach. They're going to care less about the nitty gritty detail and meaningful, human stories of your impact.



To them, it's more about getting a clear, concise topline overview of what you're doing, why you're doing it, and what the results are.

To make for quicker understanding, this is an audience that will benefit from straightforward data. You want to respect their time. They want clear lines to be drawn between inputs, outputs, and outcomes, and a logical structure that enables them to skim past the pages that aren't as important. Graphs, charts, tables, and other visual elements will be key here. To add some qualitative angles to this, include a testimonial or quote from one of your beneficiaries to back up what you're saying and tease some deeper level meaning to the numbers.



Employees and internal stakeholders

This audience has very much the same requirements as above. They will want to effortlessly and easily understand precise, reliable performance data, with a goal to build a solid understanding of all efforts and outcomes. But, unlike external stakeholders, they are already going to be somewhat familiar with your business and its approach.

While they may not be quite as time-poor, they will still probably bypass some of the more detailed portions of your reports in favour of the need-to-know insights.



Customers/beneficiaries

For your customers, beneficiaries, and the wider public who come across your reports online, it's all about storytelling. Stories over statistics, always. They want to know the true meaning of your efforts. The lives you've improved or the communities you've helped to flourish and crucially, how.



To cater for this audience in your reporting, you want to weave examples of the value you’re adding to real people throughout your reports. Acknowledge the bigger picture and context of your efforts. Move past outputs - such as “100 volunteer hours” - and look into outcomes - such as “17 families brought off the streets and in their own, stable home”. Look to testimonials or responses from beneficiary surveys or research to bring these stories to life.

Competitors

While this isn’t necessarily an audience you will intentionally target with your reports, we still thought it was worth mentioning them.

Wider industries have a lot to gain from becoming more open and transparent in terms of success and mistakes.

A healthy dose of competition can work wonders for squeezing more value out of competitors. While the valuable lessons you’ve learned along the way could prove equally valuable for another business in a similar position.



Do you see where the problem lies? Bringing out the affecting, real-life stories needed to engage the public, and the cold-hard numbers for board members and external stakeholders - without doubling your workload - is where creating social value reports can become tricky.

What this means for you is structuring your reports in a way that caters (as much as possible) to all these audience types simultaneously. While you're never going to please everyone completely, you can consider the above needs and work to find an ideal middle ground.

For example, taking special care when crafting your first few pages - which we'll see later serve as an overview of the whole document - as this may likely be all external stakeholders and funding providers look at. By approaching these few pages with them in mind, you can gather all the hard-hitting data and topline overviews needed to bring them up to speed. Similarly, you might want to begin every section with a summary, so different audience types can quickly deduce whether it's worth their attention or not.

Perhaps you can create your full report and then pick out the highlights for a light version. This way, you give people the freedom of choice as to how much time they're willing to invest. They may want to scan through the abridged version before committing to diving deep into the full report.

This is all about being respectful to your audiences. Respectful of their time, interests, and agendas. The more you cater to the direct needs of your readers, the more engaged and receptive they will be with your reports.



What to include

We've spoken a lot so far about why social value reports are important, who you might be writing them for, and some best practices for making them more effective. But what should your reports actually look like? What needs to be covered?

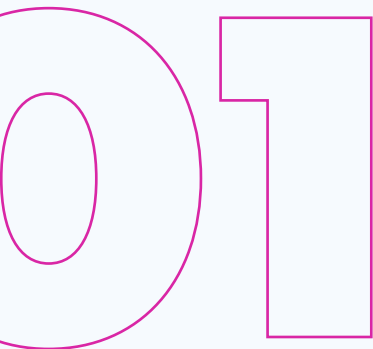


Below, you'll find our outline for a standard social value report.

Overview

This should be an overview of the entire report to follow, including a brief introduction to what the report is about, any key findings, and an overall conclusion.

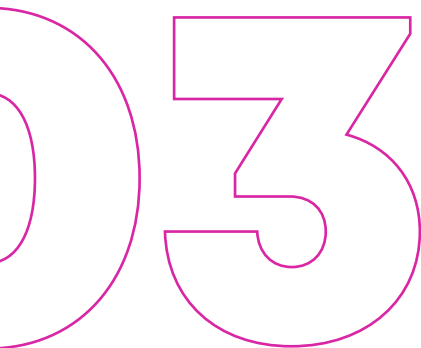
Think: if your readers were to only read this overview, would they come away more informed? Would they have a good feel for your organisation's priorities and efforts? Does it entice your reader into reading further, leaving just enough unknowns and questions to pique interest? Ideally, the answers to these questions should be yes.





Introduction

This helps to set the scene and position your social value in the wider context of your organisation. You want to cover your wider mission, purpose, and goals, as well as those specific to social value. What do you do? Why do you do it? What does social value mean to you? What’s your journey with social value been like to date? What are your priorities when it comes to social value?



Methodology

Here, you want to explain and justify the social value approach used to capture your impact data (for example, TOMs, HACT, or theory of change). The goal is to assure your reader that the data and insights to follow are accurate and reliable. Did you survey beneficiaries? How was this done? How do we know what you are telling us is true and not inflated? How do your staff log and analyse their activities?





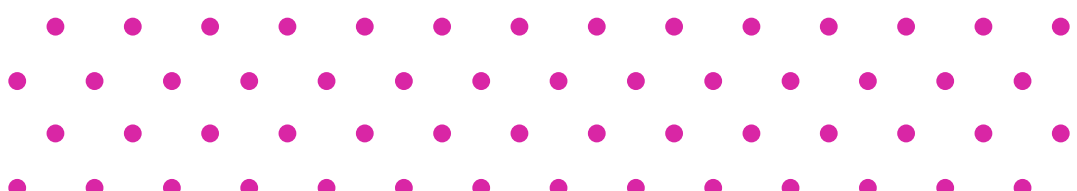
The scope of your efforts

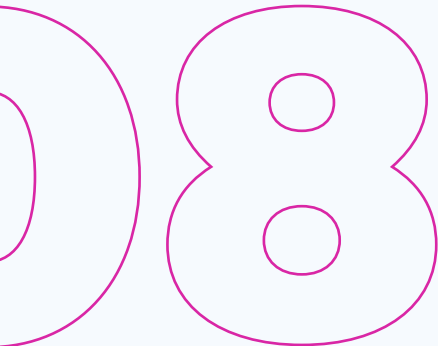
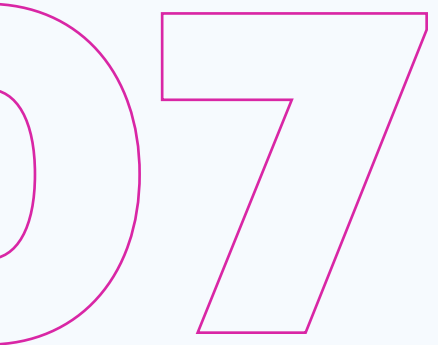
Next, you want to break down your organisation’s social value into project specifics. You have options here. This could be done by theme - for example, employment, financial support, mental health. Or by individual project - for example, a specific community centre or professional skills seminar series. Begin to paint a fuller picture of your efforts and activities, linking these back to your previously outlined priorities and goals.



Spotlight on a specific project

Pick a standout project or initiative, something that really showcases how great the work you do is, and discuss this in greater depth. This might be a far-reaching project that hit many of your priorities and goals or one that really exceeded all expectations and targets. Or even a project that didn’t necessarily go to plan but provided a key learning experience for you and your team.





Results

The best reports will include results throughout the wider report, interweaving insightful statistics and graphs that add value to what you're saying. That being said, you should also include an overview of all your results and data together. This way, anyone who wants a quick summary of your success has somewhere specific to go.

Case studies

While human stories should be weaved throughout your report as a whole, this case study section is where you can really bring them to life. Focus on any notable activities, projects, or people you've helped. Try to include variety in terms of project size, scope, and theme.

Investments

Anyone looking to provide funding or support will care about value for money. To cater to this, it's best to dedicate a section of your reports to outlining the money your organisation has invested into its projects and services. The key is to demonstrate a significant commitment to helping others, while evidencing a sensible, informed use of money and resources.

Taking your reporting from good to great



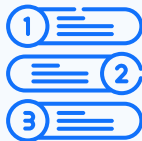
Once you've got the basic structure down and have scoured your organisation for the relevant data to fill it, how can you take your social value reports to the next level?

As we said earlier, not all social value reports are created equal. Here are some extra tips for elevating your reporting:



Incorporate photos

These allow you to better tell the story of the work you do and results achieved.



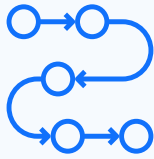
Bright, bold infographics

Capture attention and better engage audiences with your data.



Use direct quotes

Hearing from participants, beneficiaries, or external stakeholders adds more weight to your reports and encourages greater trust and transparency.



Outline your lessons learned and next steps

What do you want to achieve next? How will you continue to draw on the momentum you’ve built? How have certain challenges or mistakes made your organisation better equipped for next time?



Don’t overlook staff insight

Those who deal with your organisation’s social value on a daily basis are a valuable resource worth tapping into for your reports. The more perspectives and insights you can gather, the more accurate and far-reaching your reports will be.



What to avoid

While we hope this document has helped you realise that generating first-class social value reports doesn't have to be a challenge, there are still bad habits that can slip through and harm the effectiveness of your finished product.



Next time you're tackling your organisation's social value reports, try to

avoid these mistakes:

Focusing too heavily on monetary values



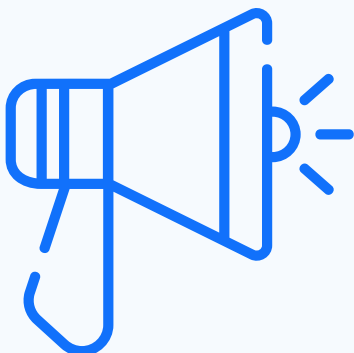
Monetary values and financial proxies will always have their place in your reporting, quantifying the social impact you're creating. However, focusing on these too much can massively diminish the real-world impacts of your efforts. We spoke about the various shortcomings of monetary values over in a [blog](#), which you can check out [here](#).

Overclaiming on your social value figures



Nobody wins by you overclaiming your social value figures. You're not painting an accurate picture for your readers and aren't equipping yourself with the data needed to truly improve and evolve your organisation's approach. Don't underestimate your audience, either; they're smart enough to tell when they aren't reading the truth. One way you can avoid this is by having your social value data and results externally audited.

Making illogical claims



It can be difficult to draw direct lines between inputs and outcomes. But that doesn't mean you should make outlandish claims in the absence of proper evidence. For example, 15 young men were supported out of depression through a fishing activity group. How did that work? How do you know the fishing activity had any impact on their wellbeing whatsoever? There would clearly have been other factors at play here. And ignoring them only reflects badly on your organisation and its efforts.

Cramming in every single piece of data collected since your previous report



The best reports are targeted and considered. They don't compile every scrap of data available. Not all data captured by your organisation will be accurate or relevant to your priorities and goals. By packing your reporting with irrelevant information, including that which is over a year old and probably no longer relevant, you're only detracting from the insights that do matter. Allow the important gems to shine by removing the white noise.

Viewing your social value reports as an isolated document



It takes time and effort to create an engaging social value report. Which means you want to make the most of your investment by using it in other ways. Use some of the insights gathered to start conversations on your social channels, for example. Write a series of blog posts related to some of your key findings. Or simply make sure you're revisiting your report regularly to maximise progress and accountability.

Social value reports done right

We've shared a lot of dos and don'ts about social value reports. But now it's time for us to show you great social value reporting in practice.

Here are some examples of high quality social reports from organisations who have perfected them:



Places for People has designed a crisp, clean web version of their social value report that has everything we believe it needs. From simple numbers at the start to give people the figures they want upfront to dedicated pages that dive into what they've been doing, it's as broad and deep as it needs to be.

They make sure to inform you just how much their efforts have made a difference. They don't just tell you how much money they've generated in terms of social value, but also the countless lives they've been able to change and how. You see clear as day where their priorities lie and where their impact is going.

Every page has detailed testimonials, too. Quotes from people at the heart of the issues lend credence to their work and show anyone reading that this work matters. It's well worth your time taking a look to see just how much is done right.



In both their 2018 and 2019 reports, One Manchester has produced documents that perfectly align with their organisation's voice and branding. Their reports are engaging, interesting to read, and successfully communicate their efforts, results, and case studies.

Serving as an example of a denser, longer-form report, they maintain a logical, approachable structure that's shaped around their four key objectives of social value. We also love the use of topline, impactful statistics on the website's landing page, putting key information front and centre for those who need it.



This one just goes to show there's no hard and fast rules when it comes to producing engaging social value reports. Creating a cool interactive, web-based report, Clarion has found a modern, heartfelt way to share their efforts and results.

Sections follow a clear structure of “this is why we care about X”, “this year, we achieved X on this objective”, and “this is an example of someone we helped along the way”. This serves as a great example of how to provide impactful, hard-hitting statistics and summaries



Amey is another organisation opting for an interactive, web-based approach to their reporting. Although, they also offer a more conventional document option through the landing page.

The landing page takes a flexible approach, encouraging visitors to click through on the links that are most relevant to them. And Amey’s core pillars are crystal clear when it comes to social value and the human stories of who they’ve helped and how.

The extended document is structured around their four social value priorities, with each of these sections following the same structure of data and performance indicators up first, followed by next steps and future goals, leading into a more thorough breakdown of the past year’s projects and activities.

What all of these examples have in common is that they clearly foreground their results and outcomes alongside their organisation’s priorities and core social value approach. Readers can easily understand what their priorities are, what actions have been taken, what has been achieved, and who or what has been supported in the process.

No matter your colour scheme, layout, maturity in terms of social value, or the frequency or length of your reports, this is what you should always be striving to achieve.



If you take anything from this guide, let it be this:

your organisation's social value reports matter.

From securing funding and building awareness to informing decision-making and reducing risk, you can expect plenty of valuable benefits from producing thorough, engaging reports each year (or however often your social value plan requires). They help you show your impact, drawing lines between actions and tangible, real-world outcomes. They also demonstrate an ongoing commitment to making a difference and evolving your organisation's approach to its social responsibility.

But you can only expect to get out what you put into the process. There are ways to do your social value reports right, and some ways we'd advise you to avoid. A subpar report isn't going to engage your reader how you'd like it to or get across the valuable insights you want to share. If anything, it will only collect dust on the metaphorical shelf of your website or recipients' inboxes.

The next time you're tasked with creating a social value report, take this new information and confidence, and transform it into what you need. And remember, you can always refer back to this guide whenever you need!

