Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

An Overview for Community Grants

March 2024

Ocean Community Empowerment and Nature

UK International Development

Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

Contents

1. Purpose of this document

This document provides an overview of Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) requirements for Community Grant Applicants and includes information on:

- OCEAN's definition and approach to Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL)
- MEL in Stage 1. and Stage 2. of the application process
- MEL in Project Delivery
- MEL support for applicants and grantees

Additional guidance is available from Flexi-Grant (https://ocean.flexigrant.com/) and the OCEAN website (https://oceangrants.org.uk/). Required templates can also be downloaded from the Flexi-Grant application form. We also run MEL focused training webinars which you can sign up to through our website or watch later via YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/@OCEAN_BPF).

We recommend reading all sections of this guidance note as well as additional guidance materials such as the Application Guidance. More detailed guidance and draft reporting templates for Community Grants will be shared before the opening of Stage 2 Applications in June 2024.

1.1. Who is this document for?

In this document we explain OCEAN's approach and requirements for Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning for Community Grants. We recommend reading this document if you are interested in applying for an OCEAN Community Grant and wish to understand:

- At what point in the application process you are required to think about MEL and how detailed you expect your thinking to be.
- The nature and scope of routine MEL reporting and inputs to evaluation and learning expected from successful community grantees during project implementation.
- How we support Stage 2. applicants develop their MEL plans.

Contact us

If, after reading this guidance, you have any further questions and you require any assistance, contact us on helpdesk@oceangrants.org.uk.

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2. What is Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL)?

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL) is an important part of effectively implementing projects, demonstrating results, and learning from activities and experiences to understand what works and what does not. The three elements of MEL are defined below:

Monitoring	The systematic and routine collection of data on project resources, activities and results. This includes the routine monitoring of progress towards a project's targets, expected outcome and impact.
Evaluation	The assessment and analysis of project resources, activities and results that can assure or inform a project's design and decisions to help it achieve impact.
Learning	The process through which evidence and information is reflected on and used to address evidence gaps and identify what works or doesn't, helping to continuously improve the ability to achieve results by the project and others.

It can be helpful to think of Monitoring as regularly collecting and analysing data to answer questions mostly related to 'what' and 'when'. i.e. is the project delivering what it set out to deliver and within the expected timeframe? Monitoring helps ensure that activities are on track and achieve the desired results. The information collected through Monitoring is also critical for planning as it allows projects to adjust their approach depending on what has worked or has not worked.

Evaluation is about taking a step back and looking at the big picture. It involves assessing the intended and unintended effects of an initiative or a group of initiatives, including its strengths and weaknesses at key points in the project cycle. Evaluation tends to provide richer insights than monitoring as the questions driving it are usually about, 'how' and 'why'. i.e.: how and why positive, or negative, change happens.

Learning on the other hand involves using the information gathered through monitoring and the insights emerging from evaluation to understand what can be done to improve. It's about being open to change and using insights to do better in the future.

3.   MEL in OCEAN Community Grants

We want MEL to be useful for your project. That means we give you tools and training in how to use those tools at a time that suits you. We know there may be a lot that is new to you and may be difficult to understand, so we will slowly introduce different bits of MEL to give you time to get used to how it works and to get the best from it.

Applications submitted under the OCEAN Community Funding Pathway are assessed in two stages. Stage 1, involves an initial concept note where projects will be requested to describe their project design, approach and intended impact. Successful applicants from Stage 1. Will then be invited to submit a Stage 2. Application. This will entail completing and submitting a more detailed application form and additional supporting material.

A timeline with the opening and closing dates for Stage 1 and Stage 2 applications is shown in Figure 3.1.

- Stage 1. Applicants submit a concept note which does not include any formal MEL tools.

- Applicants invited to submit a Stage 2 application will be invited to Stage 2 Workshops to learn about project design and MEL tools.

- Stage 2. Applicants submit a full application, which will include the MEL tools used to support the project design process. .

Detailed MEL guidelines for Stage 2. Applications, including indicative draft report templates, will be published before Stage 2 launches in June 2024.

Figure 3.1: OCEAN Community Grants Proposal Timeline

4. MEL During Project Design

4.1. MEL Foundations in Stage 1.

At Stage 1 in the application process there are no formal MEL requirements. However, some of the information that you supply at this stage will provide the starting point for you to plan your project, and think about how you will monitor and evaluate progress.

In this section we provide guidance on how to approach the key questions about your project design at Stage 1.

4.1.1. Understanding the challenge you will address

At Stage 1., you will be asked to describe the current situation and problem your project is trying to address, where possible, using evidence to support your answer. It is here that you should first take time to understand the challenge your project will address.

All projects should explain the need or the challenge that they are trying to address, and engage with the relevant stakeholders on how they will deliver change. Consider how your project could contribute to wider programme objectives (see Section 4.1.3).

To clearly explain the need or the challenge, it can be helpful to answer the following questions:

- What are the root causes of the problem that you want to address?
- What has or has not worked in the past, or in other similar contexts?
- Who is affected by the problem, and does it affect different people in different ways?
- What are the evidence gaps?

Where possible, it is good to refer to evidence that supports your answer. Evidence takes many different forms and does not only include results in scientific publications. For OCEAN, evidence is broadly defined as information, facts, or data that can be used to support your application or that can demonstrate project actions, outputs, outcomes and impact. It can vary in format, quality and relevance and can include local knowledge, documented and undocumented experiences, data, studies, policies and best practices.

4.1.2. Involving critical stakeholders

It is essential to also engage with the communities and partners you wish to work with, and the wider stakeholders involved in your project to get more information. The questions included below can help guide these discussions:

- What is the specific problem your project will address?
- Who are the main stakeholders?
- Are different groups of people affected differently? (See further information on Gender Equality and Social Inclusion in Section 8.5 of the Guidance Note for Applicants.)
- What do you think is the best way to address the problem?

- How will the project achieve this? What activities need to be carried out?
- How will the project promote equitable participation and benefits for persons of different gender and social characteristics?
- What resources, people, and equipment will you need?
- What potential problems or risks may affect your delivery?
- How can you mitigate and manage these problems or risks?
- How will the progress and ultimate success of the project be demonstrated and measured?

Difference between a Partner Organisation and a Stakeholder.

A Partner Organisation is an organisation that has a formal governance role in the project, and a formal relationship with the project that may involve staff costs and/or budget management responsibilities.

A Stakeholder is an organisation or an individual that does not have a budget management, or a formal governance role, within the project but is consulted, engaged and may participate in project activities.

4.1.3. Defining project objectives, and short and longer-term changes resulting from activities

In addition to understanding the challenge your project is trying to address, the Stage 1. application form will also ask you to express your project plans by:

- Indicating the **activities** that will support your stated **objectives** (Q3.2, Q3.3)
- Defining **the short and longer term changes** (Q3.4, Q3.5) in relation to the marine environment and poverty reduction that you wish to bring about or contribute to as the result of your activities.

At Stage 2 you will come up with a plan to monitor the effectiveness of these activities, set some targets on your objectives. Once you are implementing your project, this will help you to evaluate if they are leading to the changes you expect.

4.2. MEL in Stage 2.

Applicants who are invited to submit a Stage 2. Community Grant application will have the opportunity and support to refine and expand on their Stage 1 proposal.

Specifically, organisations invited to Stage 2. will use their answers on project activities, objectives, etc, in their Stage 1 application, together with any relevant feedback from the Technical Expert Committee as the starting point to:

- **Demonstrate the pathway to change:** by explaining how your activities will achieve results, and how these results will bring about the desired change by the end of the project. You will also explain how the changes brought about by your project will l contribute towards longer-term change and impacts on marine protection and poverty reduction.
- Decide what project results, activities, short-term and longer-term effects they want to monitor and evaluate, and how.

Submission requirements (see Guidance Note for Applicants pp. 32-34) for Stage 2. will vary depending on the grant size.

- For grants between £100K and £250,000, we will expect applicants to submit a logframe. This is a table that sets out the activities, outputs, outcome and impact of the project. It includes indicators to measure the project's progress towards specific targets. A logframe template and training will be provided when Stage 2 opens.

- For grants under £100K, applicants will be expected to submit a simple outline of what they intend to track and measure using tools appropriate for their needs and OCEAN requirements. A template and guidance will be provided when Stage 2 opens.

Stage 2. applicants will be supported through dedicated MEL training, one-to-one guidance, and participation in the OCEAN Community – an online networking and support platform that can be accessed via the OCEAN website. Figure 5.1 illustrates some of the learning resources that will be made available to Stage 2 applicants.
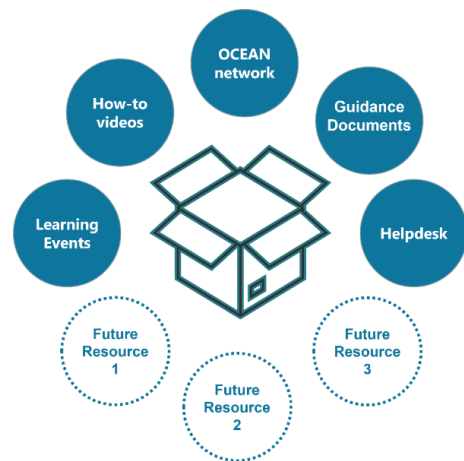

Figure 4.1: Stage 2 Applicants and Grantees Learning Toolbox

If you need any support with your application then please do not hesitate to reach out to our helpdesk and a member of our team will respond as quickly as possible: helpdesk@oceangrants.co.uk.

We recommend joining our webinars to help you with your project design at application stage. We will cover the best practices for planning for MEL in your project.

Check our website for upcoming learning events or recordings of past events: www.oceangrants.org.uk. Recordings from the webinar are available on the OCEAN YouTube Channel.

5. MEL During Project Implementation

5.1. Routine Monitoring

Project monitoring is the routine collection, analysis and use of information about project progress and results being achieved.

Effective monitoring is critical for good project management, learning and accountability. Better monitoring leads to improved outcomes, enabling project teams to make informed management decisions based on good quality information about project performance, and adapt to change.

OCEAN grantees will need to update us on the progress of their project every six months using report templates that we provide. This would involve completing and submitting a Half-Year Report in October and an Annual Report in April each year of the project.

The Half-Year Report (2-3pages max) is an opportunity for grantees to give a short update on how things have progressed in past 6 months, and let us know if there are any notable challenges or achievements to share.

The Annual Report is a more a detailed account of progress over the previous year. The report template will provide guiding questions to help you reflect and evaluate how you are progressing towards your targets. For grants between £100K and £250K, you will share your progress towards the targets set out in the logframe.

To support learning during your project, OCEAN will provide feedback on your Annual Reports. Your report will be reviewed by a MEL expert who will be able to provide recommendations on how to strengthen your reporting or MEL processes.

5.2. Evaluation and Learning

Grantee reporting templates, and especially the Annual Report template, are designed to encourage self-evaluation and learning. In OCEAN we see the writing of the Annual Report as an opportunity for grantees to reflect on achievements, identify important lessons and unexpected results, and propose how they can take advantage of what they have learned to adjust their approach. At the end of the project, grantees will then be expected to submit a Final Report, evaluating the overall performance of the project.

Grantees may also be asked to participate in in-person or desk-based reviews of their projects conducted by the OCEAN team or an independent evaluator. If this is the case the OCEAN team will coordinate with grantees in advance to ensure that the timing of these events does not coincide with important project activities.

Similarly to monitoring, we want evaluation and learning to generate lessons that support grantees work and growth. We will, therefore create opportunities for grantees to inform the research agenda of big-picture evaluations that examine critical issues across different projects in the OCEAN portfolio.

The OCEAN team will provide ongoing MEL support during project implementation through its helpdesk and one-to-one discussions where necessary.

6. Glossary

Activities	The actions carried out by the project to effect the desired change and lead to outputs, outcomes and impact in the results chain.
Biodiversity	"Biological diversity" is the variability among living organisms from all sources including terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems, and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems.
Defra	OCEAN is a programme of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), UK Government.
Evidence	Ranges in format, quality and relevance and includes documented and undocumented experiences, data, studies, policies, best practices etc. but is particularly valued when it is quality assured, accessible and applicable.
Impact	The Impact is your project's long-term objective, and is often a contribution to a wider advance in the field, for example, in conservation and poverty reduction. Note that the Impact will not be achieved solely by the project and will often be achieved outside of the timeframe of the project.
Logframe	Logical frameworks, commonly known as Logframes, are a monitoring tool to measure progress against the Results Chain (Activities -> Outputs -> Outcome -> Impact), comparing planned and actual results using indicators, baselines, and targets.
Multi-dimensional Poverty	Poverty is multi-dimensional and not solely about a lack of money; it encompasses a range of issues that hinder people's abilities to meet their basic needs and better their life with dignity including a lack of income, land, or other means of access to the basic material goods and services needed to survive with dignity, or a deficiency in healthcare, security, education or necessary social relations.
OCEAN Expert Committee	An independent panel of experts selected by Defra to assess your application. The OEC will provide recommendations to Defra on which projects to fund, and will provide feedback to applicants on how to improve their proposals for future submissions.
Partner(s)	Have a formal governance role in the project, and a formal relationship with the project that may involve staff costs and/or budget management responsibilities.
Pathway to Change	A narrative description of how your project activities will lead to a desired change in marine environment and a reduction in multi-dimensional poverty. This is a written section in the application form.
Stakeholder	A person, organisation or group of people who have an interest or concern in the project and its impact. They are consulted, engaged and/or participate in project activities. They can also be partners, but if not, they would not have a budget management, or a formal governance role, within the project.