

# **The case for an outcomes focus**

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# The case for an outcomes approach

## Introduction

This paper places the adoption of an outcomes approach by third sector organisations within its wider context, and reviews some of the findings on the value to be obtained from an outcomes focus.

## The National Outcomes Programme

Charities Evaluation Services (CES) has received seed funding to turn an innovative and wide-reaching outcomes initiative, previously grant-funded, into a self-sustaining programme. The National Outcomes Programme, delivered and run by CES with funding from the Big Lottery Fund, had at its core a two-day training course, delivered first to 'outcomes champions', then cascaded throughout the nine England regions to frontline organisations. Over the period 2003 to 2009, training was delivered to 169 outcomes champions and approximately 1,500 voluntary and community organisations.

The programme was independently evaluated in 2006 and 2009 by the Open University and Tribal Consulting respectively. The Open University found that after the first three years of the programme, confidence was high, with over 90 per cent of over 1,000 participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had the tools and understanding to introduce an outcomes approach. The majority of outcomes champions had started to implement the approach in their own organisations, and the majority of frontline voluntary and community organisations receiving training were seeking to shift towards, develop, or improve an outcomes focus in their organisations.

The evaluation of the second phase, 2006-2009, also showed significant increases in understanding of outcomes and of how to express outcomes in a way that stakeholders and partners understood, and how to collect data. Champions reported that learning from the programme had helped to develop relationships with their funders. The evaluation also found that, although it was difficult to separate out the contribution of the National Outcomes Programme activities from the increasing awareness of outcomes more generally, the programme had raised awareness of the role and the importance of outcomes monitoring, contributing to establishing this as part of the mainstream agenda.

## The wider trend towards an outcomes approach

Health services have led the way in an emphasis on outcomes. Research into health outcomes and clinical drug trials developed widely in the period of post-second world war pharmaceutical expansion. The acceptance of evidence-based medicine has had the result that some practices thought of as best clinical practice have fallen out of favour.

From the 1990s, there have been increasing moves in the public sector in the US and other western economies to address outcomes as a key part of performance measurement. This has been in part because services focusing on outputs often

required costly review when user needs and benefits had not been sufficiently considered. Advantages could also be seen in the added value that could be modelled and estimated in terms of population outcomes. For example, learning or health incomes impacted on improved productivity, increased tax revenue, fewer days lost through sickness and disability, and so on<sup>1</sup>.

## UK government policy

In the UK, voluntary sector organisations delivering public services operate within policy and regulatory requirements which over previous years have increasingly incorporated an outcomes focus. The 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review introduced Public Service Agreements (PSAs), setting out agreed targets that all departments<sup>2</sup> were expected to deliver and report. An independent study analysed the targets in the 1998 PSAs and found that they were mainly process targets (51 per cent) and output targets (27 per cent) with a relatively small proportion of outcome targets (11 per cent). However, these targets became increasingly outcome-focused in subsequent spending reviews.<sup>3</sup> A later report by the National Audit Office suggested that by the 2000 PSAs, 67 per cent of the targets were outcome targets, with 14 per cent process targets and 8 per cent output targets, with the trend continuing.

The numerous government departmental and non-departmental agencies play a key role in delivering public services. The achievement of government targets therefore requires agency priorities to be aligned with those of government departments, and agency performance targets to be consistent with the delivery of the PSA targets. High-level outcome targets are translated into operational targets on the ground. One of the challenges is to define an individual agency's distinct contribution towards the wider policy objective so that a clear outcome can be articulated for the agency itself.<sup>4</sup>

Recent government policy documents have urged commissioners of services to put outcomes for users at the heart of the strategic planning process, and for the achievement of outcomes to be used as a key indicator of success in service delivery (Cabinet Office, Office of the Third Sector, 2006). Since 2008, as a result of reforms set out in the Department of Health White Paper *Our health Our care Our say* (Department of Health Jan 2006),<sup>5</sup> primary care trusts and local authorities have been expected to report on progress against strategic outcomes.

The Local Government Association has campaigned for a national outcomes framework, in line with a move away from a predominant focus on inputs and

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1 For example, see a New Zealand study by PricewaterhouseCoopers (Jan 2003:22-30)

2 There are PSAs for the main government departments, together with PSAs for cross-departmental areas of policy where all the departmental targets relevant to delivery of the government's objectives in that area are drawn together in a single agreement. Cross-departmental PSAs can be a useful tool for coordinating inter-departmental and inter-agency work where several departments are involved in delivering a number of related outcomes, and the task is of major importance to the government's key objectives.

3 See HM Treasury, Spending Reviews, updated to 2005, [http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spending\\_review/spend\\_plancontrol.cfm](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/spending_review/spend_plancontrol.cfm)

4 See undated HM Treasury paper: Outcome Focused Management in the United Kingdom [http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/1A4/OF/GEP--\\_outcome%20focused%20management.pdf](http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/1A4/OF/GEP--_outcome%20focused%20management.pdf)

5 See also Department for Communities and Local Government (October 2006)

processes, towards a focus on partnership and local outcomes.<sup>6</sup> These outcomes would be included in every council's community strategy and the strategic plans of other public sector providers. The Local Area Agreement is providing the focal point for the corporate plan and the community strategy and require delivery organisations to focus on the end results of their services and the benefits for users.

## The Scottish Executive

The Scottish Executive also made its policy clear in 2006:

*Our national priorities must be about outcomes – the real improvements that people see in their communities and in their lives – better health, reduced crime and anti social behaviour, an improved environment and increased educational attainment.*

It went on to say:

*We now aim to go further, and test out ways of using outcome agreements right across the functions of a local authority or Community Planning partnership.<sup>7</sup>*

## Outcomes in the third sector

The 1990s saw pioneering work on outcomes with voluntary organisations in some sectors. In 1993, the Department of Health decided to trial an outcomes approach with grant-funded organisations and Alcohol Concern piloted work with alcohol agencies on how outcomes monitoring could be used. Housing and homelessness organisations have been exploring the use of outcomes measurements systems since the late 1990s, driven in large part by the introduction of the Supporting People framework,<sup>8</sup> but also by the London Housing Foundation's IMPACT capacity building programme.<sup>9</sup> The government more recently sponsored pilot projects in homelessness advice<sup>10</sup> and community development.<sup>11</sup>

The need for public services to assess their own outcomes and determine how these are contributing to government targets is also an issue for third sector organisations, increasingly drawn into the delivery of public services

6 See <http://campaigns.lga.gov.uk/>

7 See The Scottish Executive (June 2006) Transforming Public Services: The Next Phase of Reform. Chapter Eight: Structures, Outcomes and People, paras 84 and 86. See <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/06/15110925/9>

8 Supporting People was launched in April 2003, ensuring that vulnerable people have help and support to live independently. Around two-thirds of the programme is delivered by third sector organisations.

9 See [www.lhf.org.uk/](http://www.lhf.org.uk/)

10 A pilot project set up in 2004/05 in response to a request from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister proposed four higher-level outcomes for agencies covered by the Homelessness Advice Service (National Homelessness Advice Service, 2005).

11 The Community Development Challenge Report recommended that government and community development organisations work together to establish a community development outcomes and evidence base (Community Development Exchange, Community Development Foundation and Federation for Community Development Learning, 2006)

and funded by central or local government or by government agencies. The 2006 Department of Health Third Sector Commissioning Task Force urged that contracts and monitoring be based on outcomes not process (Department of Health, July 2006). Learning outcomes have been at the forefront of recent curriculum development and part of a change in emphasis from teaching to learning and to a student-focused approach. Individual services, for example those in the health sphere, have been required to demonstrate their outcomes within their assessment and review processes. The personalisation of social care and individual budgets will also strengthen a focus on outcomes.

There is also increased attention to the value of the third sector in terms of its outcomes and impact overall. A 2006 Treasury report emphasised the need to demonstrate the third sector's impact more persuasively through a stronger evidence base, going beyond individual examples of outcomes to identifying how the sector impacts on better outcomes more generally (HM Treasury, December 2006).

## **Outcomes and Value for Money**

The 2007 Audit Commission Hearts and Minds report emphasised the importance for local authorities of shifting their emphasis to value for money information from voluntary sector providers, requiring consideration of outputs and outcomes as well as inputs. One theory of state funding that government is increasingly applying to public services and to third sector public service delivery is that of 'investing to save', with its logic of better returns and reduced costs. From 2008/09, the government has invested approximately £350,000 over three years in its Monitoring Social Value project, to develop a standard for measuring social return on investment.

The social return on investment methodology (SROI) is an outcomes approach originally developed for social enterprises from traditional cost-benefit analysis. The methodology puts a monetary value on the social and environmental benefits of an organisation relative to a given amount of investment. The process involves an analysis of inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts leading to the calculation of a monetary value for those impacts, and finally to an SROI ratio or rating.

SROI studies have now been applied to organisations producing social returns, such as helping ex-offenders into employment, where benefits can be seen as clients cease to receive benefits and start to pay taxes, all of which result in savings to the criminal justice system. It is recognised that the methodology may not be suitable or appropriate for some organisations, but the SROI methodology could help make a good case for providing certain types of services and is especially useful if an organisation's funders require outcomes information in financial terms.

## **The benefits of an outcomes approach**

There are pragmatic reasons for assessing outcomes. First, information about outcomes and impact have become part of regulatory requirements. Second, increasingly, foundations and grantmakers are requiring evidence of the success of projects and programmes and of measurable benefits to clients. The

Big Lottery Fund has been a high profile leader in this, describing itself as an 'outcomes funder,' but other significant funders, such as London Councils, also emphasise outcomes, with grants commissioned against specific families of outcomes. Other independent grant makers now frequently grant fund projects likely to have outcomes that will relate to their own specified grant programme outcomes, and expect to receive monitoring information on their achievement. CES research found that some funders excluded funding organisations less likely to demonstrate outcomes (Ellis, J and Gregory, T, 2008). The indications are that local government and other agencies commissioning third sector services will increasingly request outcomes data. Increasingly, local authorities are moving to outcomes-based commissioning.

For third sector organisations, the important question is whether there is any intrinsic value in an outcomes approach, over and above a response to a funder or government demand for information to feed into higher level data crunching relating to departmental targets.

## US findings

In the US, evidence from the field clearly shows that quantitative measurement of outcomes influences funding success (The Advisory Board Foundation, 1999). However, studies have shown that benefits also go beyond that of financial gain.

A 1999 study by the US Advisory Board Foundation emphasised other gains beyond those of obtaining funding. These were that:

- Defining anticipated outcomes brings clarity to mission and goals.
- Outcomes-based evaluation creates an intense focus on results in clients' lives.
- Outcomes findings create a single voice for the whole organisation.
- Outcomes findings become the basis of grant proposals, brochures, public statements and persuasive conversation.
- Programme weaknesses are starkly evident when results are measured and evaluated, leading to improvement.
- Organisations can use outcomes-based evaluation findings to improve service, accountability and results by redirecting a programme or by augmenting services offered.

In January 2000, the United Way of America carried out a survey of 391 projects, each operated by a different agency, in a systematic effort to determine the extent to which programmes had profited from outcome measurement and the use of the results (United Way of America, January 2000).<sup>12</sup>

Respondents agreed that implementing programme outcome measurement was helpful, particularly in the areas of:

- communicating programme results (88%)
- focusing staff effort on common goals and purposes (88%)
- clarifying the purpose of the program (86%)
- identifying effective practices (84%)
- successfully competing for resources (83%).

<sup>12</sup> The United Way of America is a national organisation of a national network of community-based organisations.



In addition, there was agreement on its helpfulness in enhancing record-keeping systems (80%) and improving the service delivery of the programme (76%). Nine out of every ten respondents indicated that they would recommend that other programme directors consider implementing programme outcome measurement.

An article by Plantz, Greenway and Hendricks (1999) describes 30 lessons learned from implementation of an outcomes focus.<sup>13</sup> Managers of programmes that already implemented outcomes measures reported that:

- A clear definition of outcomes in itself provides focus for work.
- Understanding achievement provides a barometer to assess progress and direct future activities.
- Outcomes monitoring provides valuable information leading to improvement
- An outcomes focus is a powerful motivator for staff, who observe the progress they are making with participants in a consistent and tangible manner.
- Outcomes information can be a powerful recruitment tool for volunteers
- Outcomes funding helps position the agency in the community as a successful organisation.

Findings from a project undertaken by the Urban Institute, Washington DC and The Center for What Works, Chicago, Illinois was published as *Building a Common Outcome Framework to Measure Nonprofit Performance*, December 2006.

These findings reported that better outcomes data would result in better benchmarks and comparisons across programmes and organisations, providing better data on what works, and in turn leading to smarter decisions about allocation of resources, stronger management, improved programme design through identification of effective practices, all contributing in the end to improvements for clients.

There have also been a number of articles written from particular agency experiences. For example, a 2005 article spoke of the effect of using a Beneficial Outcomes Approach within parks and recreation services. A focus on providing amenities in the past had led to underutilised recreation areas, encouraging undesirable behaviour or closure, over-utilisation in other areas and many user populations ignored (Marnell, June 2005).

A new approach concentrating on desired outcomes and experiences of visitors, rather than on numbers of facilities, instilled in managers the need to involve others in the delivery of recreation – local community leaders, local businesses, and representatives of user groups – as well as leading to focus on environmental protection.

## UK findings

In the UK, research into the benefits of an outcome approach have been more limited. A CES research study carried out in 2007 and 2008 (Ellis and Gregory, 2008) had survey responses from nearly 700 third sector organisations and carried out over 100 interviews. It found that although reporting to funders



was a main driver in outcomes-based monitoring and evaluation, respondents rated this important, but less so than potential internal benefits and benefits for beneficiaries. Among survey respondents, the top eight perceived benefits were, in the following order:

- being clear about the benefits of their work
- learning about what is working well/effective practice
- improving the end result for beneficiaries
- better services/strategic planning
- improving the way they worked
- telling others about results
- competing for funding and resources
- improving reporting to funders.

Two studies carried out by the Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) at the University of York are interesting. The first project in 2000 was to implement an outcomes approach to carer assessment (Social Policy Research Unit, November 2000), developing and testing an outcomes-focused approach to assessment and review. The findings were:

- A conceptual framework and tools based on carers' views of valued outcomes were useful to practitioners and carers in exploring desired and actual impacts of services.
- Most practitioners considered that an outcomes-focused approach enhanced their understanding of carers' circumstances and aspirations. In their view, this led to improved care planning, and more creative care packages.
- Outcomes information collated from a small sample of assessment and review records was considered by staff to be potentially useful to inform service development.

A second SPRU report in 2005 also focused on a project introducing outcomes, in this case for disabled service users (Harris et al, September 2005). Before the research began, researchers synthesised findings from previous work with disabled service users into an outcomes framework. This was incorporated into assessment and review practices and used by a multi-disciplinary team of professionals from one Social Services Department in England. Researchers then evaluated the processes of change and the effects on professionals and service users. They reported that:

- The majority of professionals found the new outcomes-focused approach and documents to be useful, workable and an improvement on the original needs-based system.
- Service users valued the outcomes approach because it was clear and because they had greater choice and control in the assessment process
- Using outcomes-focused documents meant assessments were far broader than was possible with a needs-based system.
- Professionals valued the outcomes-oriented approach because it put service users' views first and allowed them to be creative and imaginative in their work.

Additionally, the outcomes framework was consistent with the government 2005 Green Paper on Adult Social Care and the Cabinet Office report *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People*, 2005, calling for an explicit focus on outcomes as a means of driving up standards.

These study findings are consistent with the findings of the London Housing Foundation (LHF), which worked with 200 members of staff from over 50 homelessness agencies to support them in taking an outcomes approach. In its response to a consultation on strategy for the Supporting People Programme, LHF emphasised the benefits that had been obtained for keyworkers by providing greater clarity and focus for their work (Triangle Consulting for the London Housing Foundation, February 2006). Additionally:

- An outcomes focus provided clarity for the client about why they were there.
- Outcomes tools supported client change by helping clients to see where they have come from and what the next step might be.
- It provided a means for learning about what was working and not working in client provision.
- It provided clarity for staff about what the service was there to achieve and a greater focus in keywork in those areas.
- It was a means of improving service delivery.

Overall, LHF found that an outcomes focus had helped to produce a culture of learning and improvement.

Several major UK charities have embraced a focus on outcomes and impact, while there may still be some distance to be travelled in obtaining a distinction between outputs and outcomes and putting appropriate systems in place for assessing them. For many the approach links well with a user focus. Save the Children, for example, say that 'being aware that they will have to answer the impact question has the effect of helping staff realise that they need to be clear from the beginning about the kinds of changes they hope to see, and be sure that the activities they plan will lead to these changes (Scott and Molteno, October 2005) They add:

*In analysing all this information, programme staff can learn what has worked and what hasn't, and where their activities have had unexpected (and sometimes even negative) impacts. This is a vital step in being able to constantly adapt what they do to get better results. By involving children and others we work with, it also provides a means for being accountable to them.*

There is an increasing emphasis on using outcomes information not only internally, for service improvement and developing strategy, but for external policy influence. The influence of outcomes evidence is tempered by the complex environment in which policy is formulated, but there have been noteworthy examples. Evidence from the Dundee Families Project, for example, which supported families facing eviction, persuaded a number of local authorities to adopt its approach. Findings were subsequently taken up by the government's Respect Agenda, action plan cross-government strategy to tackle anti-social behaviour (Dillane et al, 2001; Nixon et al, 2006; Pawson, 2007).

## Some final points

Many advocating that third sector organisations should assess their outcomes emphasise that this should not involve complex, scientific data collection, but rather practical data collection tools and thoughtful questions.

CES' own experience and the research evidence suggest a number of clarifications, or warnings. These include:

- Collecting outcomes data alone has limited value. It is only when it is interpreted and translated into positive changes in practice that it will yield improvements in the quality of services.
- Effective analysis and interpretation of outcome data means there is a need for adequate expertise and systems, and the effective use of findings to inform changes in local service delivery.
- Outcome measurement does not eliminate the need to monitor resources, activities and outputs to make sense of the information.
- Outcome data should be used to identify where results are going well and where not so well. When not going well, the organisation needs to attempt to find out why. This process is what leads to continuous organisational learning and improvement.
- Measuring and improving project-level outcomes does not by itself improve community level outcomes. Except in rare instances, an individual project does not serve enough individuals to affect community-wide statistics, regardless of how successful it is.

Identifying appropriate and relevant outcomes, collecting relevant data, analysing and reporting it, can provide an essential and welcome focus on end benefits and users and prompt a reappraisal or redefinition of organisational or project aims. Outcomes monitoring and reporting serve as important accountability tools and provide useful feedback to frontline providers and managers. A deeper level of learning, essential for replicating good practice, public policy influence and strategy development will require the careful analysis and interpretation of that data, setting it against an understanding of the user group and its specific needs, the operating environment, and the specific service delivery approaches and organisational context.

## Further reading

There are a number of other useful publications and reports available or referenced on the United Way of America website's Outcome Measurement Resource Network, demonstrating how organisations have used outcome measurement. These include the following:

- Spiegel, RA (1999) *Accountable Good: Program Evaluation in the Nonprofit Sector*. This describes the challenges and benefits of outcomes measurement.
- *Educational Achievement Outcomes*, excerpt from the Edna Clark Foundation Youth Development Outcomes Compendium.
- *Outcomes Measurement: Are You Making a Difference?* (video) (2000) shows how to use outcomes data to increase service effectiveness. Staff of four agencies describe challenges faced in implementing outcome measurement and how it has paid off.
- Weil, S and Rudd, P (2000) *Perspectives on Outcome-Based Evaluation for Libraries and Museums*, Museums and Libraries Services, Washington, DC, present clear justifications for the adoption of outcomes-based evaluation.

Additionally:

Buckmaster, N (April 1999) 'Associations between outcome measurement,

accountability and learning for non-profit organisations' in *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, 12 :2 186 – 197, MCB UP Ltd. This paper analyses the benefits of outcomes measurement with a view to encouraging non-profit organisations to embrace the opportunity to promote organisational learning.

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## What services does CES offer?

### In-house training

CES offers training in monitoring, evaluation and quality systems. Training courses can be run in-house and tailored specifically to the needs of your organisation.

### Open training

We also run a programme of training courses covering monitoring and evaluation and quality systems from our accessible central London venue.

Contact us by email: [training@ces-vol.org.uk](mailto:training@ces-vol.org.uk) or call for our training guide.

### Consultancy

Our consultancy service is flexible and provides support for organisations that want to understand and implement monitoring, evaluation and quality systems.

### External evaluations

CES has carried out evaluations of a large number of organisations since 1990 as well as working with funders to evaluate their programmes and funding strategies.

Contact us on [enquiries@ces-vol.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@ces-vol.org.uk) or call for more details.

### Publications

CES produces a range of publications on quality and evaluation. Please look at our website [www.ces-vol.org.uk](http://www.ces-vol.org.uk) for further details.

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