

ASA outcomes evaluation – lessons learned from the pilots

This paper will provide a brief overview of the work carried out by the Working Together for Advice (WTfA) outcomes workstream. It will go on to draw conclusions from the experiences of the workstream partners in carrying out outcomes work.

The project

This work was carried out as part of Working Together for Advice, a partnership project involving ASA, Law Centres Federation (LCF), Citizens Advice, Advice UK, Age UK and Youth Access.

ASA, Law Centres Federation, CitA, Age UK and Youth Access participated in the outcomes workstream. All partners except for CitA carried out pilots with advice agencies as part of the workstream. CitA carry out outcomes work with their members under other funding and contributed their knowledge and experience throughout the project.

What we set out to do

The main focus of the work was to develop ways for advice agencies to measure client outcomes. We define client outcomes as those which relate to the wider aspects of the client's life such as their physical and mental health and general well-being.

At the start of the project we agreed that while much work had already been done by the voluntary sector on how to measure the outcomes of its work, the methods developed were not appropriate for the advice sector (read our analysis of why not here – [link to earlier paper](#)).

We also agreed that whilst it was important to work together to share resources and ideas we could not produce a single outcomes questionnaire that would be appropriate for the whole sector. The sector is diverse in terms of the types of work it does, its client groups, its staff and ways of working.

Therefore we wanted to find different ways of measuring outcomes that were appropriate to advice and that could be used by all agencies.

We also wanted to try to develop ways of measuring outcomes that did not require too much input from the agencies in terms of time and resources as very few agencies have any funding set aside to do this work.

What we did

Youth Access had developed and tested a two-stage questionnaire before the project started. As part of WTfA they consulted their members, other project partners and young people (using focus groups). Following consultation they developed a single stage questionnaire which they piloted with ten of their members. All pilot agencies were asked to use the same questionnaire. At the start of the pilots agencies were given training on how to use the questionnaire. They submitted their results to an independent evaluator who collated the results. Youth Access's intention at the start of the project was that all pilots would collect data in the same way so that it

could be collated and Youth Access could use it to demonstrate the impact of advice on young people. Once the pilots were over some agencies commented that they would like to be able to adapt the questionnaire slightly to make it more suitable for them. Youth Access have agreed to this.

Age UK had also done some preliminary work on developing outcomes questionnaires. As part of this project, they tested the questionnaires in 5 local Age Concerns. They gave agencies the same questionnaire but they allowed individual Age Concerns to change them to suit their own needs. Age UK's main aim in developing the questionnaires was service improvement rather than to demonstrate the outcomes of advice to an external audience.

Advice Services Alliance took a different approach. Rather than producing a single system for all pilot agencies to use they decided to work with the individual pilot agencies to develop ways of measuring outcomes that were designed by the agencies themselves to suit their needs and ways of working. They chose a diverse range of pilot agencies to reflect the diversity of the sector. They also included a Youth Access member, a group of 3 Age Concerns working in partnership and a CAB in the pilots to see whether, when given free rein, these organisations chose different ways of working to those designed by their networks.

Law Centres Federation wanted to look at what outcomes are achieved for clients in niche areas of law. Law Centres work mainly at specialist level and have expertise in some areas of law not covered by most of the rest of the advice sector. They worked with Law Centres to develop ways of measuring the outcomes of advice in education, community care, and other areas of social welfare law for clients with mental health problems.

Conclusions

Each network carried out its pilot independently of other networks but by the end of the project they had come to many of the same conclusions about how advice agencies can best measure their outcomes.

The need to be flexible

At the start of the project we recognised that in order to demonstrate the benefits of advice most persuasively it would be best if we could aggregate all the information we collected. In order to do this we would need agencies to collect information in the same way and ask their clients the same questions. However, we recognised that this aim was not compatible with the desire to develop a variety of ways of measuring outcomes to suit different types of agencies. We hoped that the project would help us to find ways to resolve this tension.

By the end of the project we agreed that any method of collecting outcomes had to be flexible. A single method that cannot be changed by agencies to fit with the way they work would probably only be taken up by a small number of agencies.

For their pilots, Youth Access and Age UK started with pre-drafted questionnaires for all their members to use. Age UK were prepared to allow agencies to amend their questionnaires but Youth Access wanted all their pilots to collect the same data in the same way. Given that all the participants in the pilots were in the same network and had similar client groups, we thought it was more likely that agencies would be able to use the same questionnaire.

However, in the middle of the project Age UK found that agencies in different parts of the country were having difficulty with the agreed approach. Two of the Age Concerns were

conducting outcome interviews with clients that had received telephone advice. They were using the same questionnaire but got differing reactions from their clients. From analysis of the original enquiries and feedback from the interviewers it appeared that the more articulate clients who, having received advice, felt able to deal their problem on their own, found the interview intrusive and disproportionate to the level of service they had received. The clients who were less able to deal with their problems alone and had received a more in-depth service were happy to talk at length about the service and discuss its impact.

At the end of Youth Access's pilots, they found that the questionnaire worked well for the pilot agencies but that some flexibility was needed to accommodate the different areas of work that their members cover.

From the start ASA and LCF took the approach of allowing agencies to come up with their own ways of measuring their outcomes. Whilst there were similarities in how the agencies chose to do this, there was a lot of variety. For example, one of the agencies only gave one-off advice over the phone and therefore felt they could not ask clients to stay on the phone to answer a long list of questions. They therefore developed a very short questionnaire. Three agencies felt that holding focus groups was a much better approach for their client groups as one agency's clients had limited English and the other two had clients with mental health problems which made completing questionnaires difficult.

We have therefore produced a varied mix of questionnaires and other methods for measuring outcomes. Furthermore, we would not recommend that an agency use any of these methods off the peg without considering whether they need to amend them to suit their needs.

Resources

Throughout the project, finding the resources to do the work was difficult for agencies.

At the start of the project we found it difficult to recruit agencies to the pilot. Agencies always expressed enthusiasm for doing work to understand their outcomes better but they were concerned about finding the time to do the work. In order to recruit pilots, Age UK and LCF eventually decided to offer a small financial incentive to agencies and this helped with recruitment. Half way through the pilots Youth Access offered a small bursary to their members to encourage them to prioritise the collection of outcomes information from clients.

ASA's pilot agencies were given up to 6 days of consultant time to help them devise their own schemes for measuring outcomes. This is a resource that most agencies will not have if they choose to measure their own outcomes. Each agency then spent on average 2-3 days of staff and volunteer time developing the project. This did not include the time needed to go through questionnaires with clients nor the time spent holding focus group meetings. Age UK members spent 3-4 days on their projects. This included training in how to use the questionnaires, time spent interviewing clients and evaluation of the work.

It was also the case that most of ASA's pilot agencies stopped and started the work several times. This was because of pressure of work. Outcomes work is not central to advice service delivery, therefore when other work builds up, outcomes work will often be one of the first things to be put on hold.

There is no way around the fact that measuring outcomes takes time.

Keep it small

Given this fact, and unless an agency is able to get funding to do the work, the best approach is to start small.

We found that when setting out to do outcomes work a lot of agencies were ambitious about the information they wanted to collect. It was common for agencies to want to interview clients before they had received advice in order to establish their clients' starting points. They also wanted to interview clients shortly after they had received advice to see what effect the advice had had. Some agencies wanted to interview clients several months later to see whether the advice had any ongoing impact.

However, when it came to carrying out the work, most agencies found that this was too much work to do on their own.

There were also other difficulties. Most agencies felt it would be insensitive to ask clients to fill in a questionnaire or be interviewed about their personal lives before they had received advice. Clients tend to seek advice at times of crisis. They may have no money or be about to lose their home. In these circumstances, the first thing that an agency needs to do for a client is take steps to solve their problem, not ask them about how the problem has made them feel.

Agencies also found it was very difficult to stay in touch with clients for months after they had received advice, for the purpose of doing a follow-up questionnaire. This is because advice is often a one-off event and even when it is not one-off, once the client has received advice or their problem has been solved, there is little reason for them to stay in touch with the advice agency.

Most agencies therefore concluded that the best time to interview clients is shortly after they have received advice and that this should be the only time they are interviewed.

Agencies found that most clients are able to reflect on the difference between how they were before advice and how they are after and comment on changes to their feelings and their situations which are brought about by having received advice.

We therefore concluded that, given that most agencies have limited resources, the best type of questionnaire to use is a single questionnaire, shortly after the client has received advice asking them to reflect on changes in themselves or their situation brought about by having received advice. You could do this directly after the client receives advice and before they leave the agency. Alternatively, if you think this will be too much for clients to do in one visit or if you would prefer them to have time to reflect on how receiving advice has affected them, you could arrange to call the client in the week following their advice interview. Bear in mind, however, that advice may not have an outcome that the client can identify so soon after receiving advice. In such cases you may want to try to contact clients after more time has elapsed. However, given how difficult it can be to stay in touch with clients, you will have to accept that there are some clients whose outcomes you cannot track.

Not all clients will have a positive outcome

Some clients approach advice agencies with misplaced expectations of what advice can achieve for them. They may have problems that cannot be solved at all or that cannot be solved by the advice agency. In such circumstances it is appropriate for an advice agency to tell a client that they cannot help them or refer them to another service. However, the client may not

feel any differently about their situation and may feel they have not been helped. In this situation you may want to check whether there is anything more that could have been for the client. If there isn't you will just have to accept that you can't help everybody.

Essential information

For the reasons given above, we believe that it is justified for agencies to limit their outcomes monitoring according to their resources. For some agencies this may mean that they are able to hold a focus group with five clients once a year. Despite being small, such a project will provide useful information to the agency and provide evidence to funders and other stakeholders of how that agency's work affects clients' lives.

However, given that agencies will be asking their clients different questions, interviewing different numbers of clients and using different methods for selecting and interviewing clients, we think it is essential for agencies to include in their reports of outcomes work, some basic information about how the data has been collected.

The information below should be set out at the start of the report. Any questionnaire or focus group questions should be annexed to the report.

We recommend including the following information:

- The number of clients involved
- How representative of all the agency's clients were those clients that were involved

If an agency interviews 5 clients in a month and on average it sees 100 clients a month, it should include this information in the report.

An agency might provide services in several areas of law or in different ways but focus their outcomes work on one area, for example housing advice delivered over the phone. Therefore they should provide information about all the services they provide but state that the outcomes project only looked at housing advice delivered by phone.

- How they were selected

There are many different ways to select clients to be interviewed or participate in focus groups. If an agency is looking at its housing advice outcomes, it could simply contact all the housing clients it saw in one month. It should state this in any report and include the number contacted and the number that actually participated in the outcomes work.

Alternatively an agency might want to look at the outcomes of its work for a particular client group, for example young people. It should include this in the report and state that it contacted all under 25s that had received advice in the last month.

Another option is to look at a sample of all your work whatever the area of advice or method of delivery. For example, you could sample 20% of all the clients you had seen in the last 6 months.

- Who did the interviewing

Most agencies used someone other than the clients' caseworkers to interview them. This was to ensure that the client did not feel pressure to give positive answers. Some agencies used

volunteers, others used caseworkers that had not advised the clients. If there is no alternative, caseworkers can be used to interview their own clients but this must be declared in the report.

When holding a focus group, most agencies tend to use an external facilitator. The report should include some information about their background and whether or not they were paid for the work.

- Whether any incentive was offered to client

Some agencies offered vouchers to clients for participating. Others provide the cost of travel to the agency. It is legitimate to do this as clients are giving up their time. Our pilots did not indicate that clients felt unable to give critical feedback because of having received an incentive but it is important to let your audience know that an incentive has been used.

- Start and end dates of the project

For example “we interviewed 15 clients whose cases were closed between 1st and 30th June 2010”.

What are client outcomes good for?

There are many reasons why agencies find measuring their outcomes useful. We interviewed participants in the ASA pilots at the end of the project and they listed the following benefits:

- In the past we just collected numbers but now the agency is able to demonstrate its impact on well-being. We didn't know how to do this before.
- The clients were able to express how important the agency was for them. This made the staff feel appreciated.
- It helped us identify areas for internal quality improvement.
- We now have an evidence base demonstrating the value of advice. We will be able to use this to show funders how we contribute to their aims.
- We will use the information to shape our training and development plan.
- We will use it alongside case file review for staff development.

What are client outcomes not good for?

Outcomes work provides an illustration of the changes that advice work brings about, it does not quantify that change.

As the comments above show, agencies see outcomes as a useful way of demonstrating to funders the value of what they do. Rather than presenting numbers of clients seen, outcomes give an insight into the negative effect of problems on people's lives and the positive impact of getting advice to help resolve those problems.

But client outcomes cannot be bundled together into a set of figures and used by funders to compare an agency's quality or effectiveness with that of another.

Clients are all different. When they first make contact with an advice service they will all have unique starting points. When asked to rate changes to their confidence or stress levels, their

answers will not represent an objective truth that can be compared with the ratings of others, rather they will reflect each client's personality, upbringing, life experiences and current situation.

Depending on the kind of work it does and its clients group, an agency might only see very small changes in its clients but those changes may be very significant to the individuals concerned. Such an agency should not be compared unfavourably to an agency able to demonstrate bigger changes.

What matters is the change in the individual.

This is something that should be of interest to funders but that should never be reduced to a crude measure of success or value for money.



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