



# Review of outcomes frameworks

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The Advice Services Alliance, Age Concern England, Citizens Advice, the Law Centres Federation and Youth Access will be working together over the next three years on a project to pilot approaches to measuring advice outcomes. This paper is a review of work that has already been done. It will focus on lessons learned from past work in order to inform development of our own pilots.

## **Non-advice models**

In recent years, there have been a number of projects in the voluntary sector to develop ways to measure outcomes. Amongst the tools developed, I looked at the Outcomes Star<sup>1</sup> and the SOUL Record<sup>2</sup> to see whether they could be adapted for the legal advice sector. The Outcomes Star was developed by Triangle Consulting and is used by housing and homelessness charities and the SOUL Record was developed by Norfolk VCS as a means of gathering evidence of the progress of clients in relation to informal learning.

Both tools have been successfully used to demonstrate change brought about in individual clients in a number of areas including health, relationships, motivation, drug and alcohol misuse, practical skills and attitudes.

However, it is difficult to see how the tools could be easily used by advice agencies wanting to measure the effects of their advice work on clients. The main purpose of advice work is to solve the client's problem or problems. It is desirable and quite probable that this work will have side-effects on other areas of the individual's life. However, in general, bringing about change in the individual is not the purpose of advice.

The non-advice outcomes tools seem to be most effective where the main purpose of the service is to bring about change in the individual. In these kinds of services, outcomes tools can be used as an integral part of the work done with clients.

For example, the Outcomes Star can be used at the start of work with the client as a way of determining what kind of help the individual needs. So, if the client gives themselves a poor rating for alcohol misuse, this is important information that can be used to ensure the client gets help with this. Over time, the Outcomes Star can be used to measure whether the client has made progress in this area and so determine what other help they need.

When giving advice, the advice worker's focus is on solving the legal problem for which the client has sought help. Therefore, getting information about the client's non-advice needs would take up time that the advice worker cannot afford to spend. Moreover, whilst solving the client's legal problem may mean that they drink less alcohol, it is not the purpose of the advice agency to achieve this.

The non-advice models tend to rely on observation of the service user by the service provider. This is possible because the services involved have much more interaction with users than advice services have. Advisers generally do not spend enough time with clients to make judgements about progress that clients have made in other parts of their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk/The\\_Outcomes\\_Star.aspx](http://www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk/The_Outcomes_Star.aspx)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.theresearchcentre.co.uk/soul/soulrecord.htm>

Therefore, whilst we may be able to look at outcomes in relation to some of the areas of clients' lives that these non-advice models look at, the models themselves are likely to be too time-consuming for the advice sector to use.

## **Advice specific models**

In the past couple of years, several of the advice networks have started piloting outcomes tools for use by their members.

### ***Youth Access***

Youth Access have developed a Youth Advice Outcomes Toolkit. The toolkit includes two self-assessment questionnaires, which have been piloted with 3 agencies that undertake in-depth casework with young people. The first questionnaire is given to the client when they seek advice, the second 3 months later or when the problem has been resolved. The questionnaire outcomes are mapped against the Every Child Matters outcomes.

### ***Citizens Advice***

Citizens Advice have developed an outcomes toolkit after pilot work with 12 bureaux. The toolkit includes postal, telephone, quantitative and qualitative questionnaires, a tool to analyse results, and detailed guidance. A training programme has educated 359 delegates from 250 bureaux on outcomes, and the resources available in the toolkit.

Citizens Advice case management database has been updated to allow multiple outcomes to be recorded and reported. 80% of bureaux (340) are now recording some outcomes.

### ***Age Concern England***

In 2007, ACE piloted outcomes surveys with seven local Age Concerns. The surveys included postal questionnaires, telephone interviews with clients and a few home visits, all using prepared questionnaires. Using the different methods, the ACs collected information about practical changes as a result of advice, also consequential outcomes and in some cases client satisfaction with the service.

## **Common Themes**

Some common themes have emerged from the work done by networks and from other projects. These are set out below.

### ***1. The problem of resources***

Outcomes work is complicated and takes a considerable amount of management and staff time. Depending on the methodology, it can also be expensive.

The Impact of Debt Advice Research Project (IDARP) was a large-scale project, funded by the then Department for Constitutional Affairs. It aimed to look at the impact of debt advice using four different research methodologies.

One of the studies involved face to face interviews with 42 people who had reported a money problem in the 2004 English and Welsh Civil and Social Justice survey. The research did have positive findings in that respondents described feeling reassured, less anxious and less depressed. They also reported feeling more knowledgeable and confident about how to tackle their debts and often advice improved a respondent's financial situation.

It is worth considering the amount of work and therefore cost that went into obtaining these results. The interviews were conducted by independent researchers trained in non-directive interviewing. This means that they were given topics to explore and not pre-worded questions.

The interviews were done in respondents' homes and the respondents were given £25 to thank them for their time. Verbatim transcriptions were made of each interview and in-depth analysis was done.

The amount of money needed to fund this kind of project is well beyond the reach of the advice sector.

Another of the IDARP projects involved working with advice agencies that deliver debt advice, to find out what impact their work had on clients. 14 agencies were involved and the study was conducted in three stages: when the client first sought advice and 6 and 12 months later.

The researchers found it very difficult to recruit agencies to the study. Whilst supportive of the aims of the study, agencies often felt they could not commit the time needed and so preferred not to get involved.

Work carried out within the advice sector also faced similar issues. Islington Law Centre (ILC) has been running a project over the last year and a half to measure the outcomes of its employment work.

Staff at the Law Centre have done a rough calculation of the time taken to work on the pilot. Devising the questionnaires and training volunteers to use them took about 25 hours of one caseworker's time and the Law Centre director's time. On top of this, a consultant spent roughly another 15 hours attending meetings at the Law Centre and devising the questionnaires.

Completing the whole set of questionnaires with a client took at least an hour of volunteer time and analysis of results took another 5-6 hours. It is a very time-consuming process and it may be difficult for other agencies to find the time to do the work, especially if they don't have any external help.

Furthermore, during the course of the pilot, the Legal Services Commission introduced its fixed fee payment scheme. This had a significant impact on the Law Centre and, as a result of the extra work, they were forced to stop the pilot for several months.

ILC had the help of an external consultant and this has been the case for most of the outcomes projects that have been done so far. These resources are not available to most agencies.

However, better-resourced projects do tend to yield better results. Age Concern England found that home visits yielded the highest quality information, followed by phone interviews. The postal questionnaires were not so successful in generating

useful material. They also found that it was easier to conduct interviews and write them up accurately if they had been done by an adviser or manager with advice experience.

These findings were echoed in Youth Access's report on the pilots it carried out with its members. All the agencies involved were keen to use a robust methodology and chose a two-stage process over a simpler single-stage alternative. However, it proved time-consuming for caseworkers and produced relatively small quantities of data, partly due to difficulties following up young people after their cases had ended. Given the pressure on agencies to increase their output, Youth Access concluded that there is a need for a more straightforward option for agencies needing quick data and for agencies undertaking less in-depth casework. CitA reached a similar conclusion. They found that it was not appropriate for all bureaux to conduct baseline questionnaires because of a lack of resources. Therefore in some cases outcomes have to be based solely on clients' own opinions of the outcomes achieved by receiving advice.

CitA also found that it was difficult to keep some bureaux in the pilots because of the resources needed to do outcomes work. They concluded that in some cases collecting outcomes may not be proportionate because it may take longer to find the outcome than to provide the advice.

In their reports, ACE and Youth Access emphasized the importance of integrating outcomes monitoring into existing ways of working. They also concluded that it was important to involve staff and volunteers in the development process to ensure that they supported the project, and to hold proper induction sessions with staff to ensure consistency.

In their work CitA have found that doing follow-up work with clients some time after the advice has been given can provide a deeper understanding of the impact of advice on things such as confidence, clients' ability to help themselves, peace of mind and health.

All of this work is key to developing and running a successful outcomes project but adds further to its cost.

Finally, lack of time and expertise to carry out proper data analysis was a problem common to all the network projects. This is an aspect of the work that could take many hours of a manager's time. It is therefore important to develop straightforward tools to help them to do this as efficiently as possible.

In conclusion, for most agencies, especially those that are small and have mainly volunteer staff, it will be difficult to develop consistent outcomes monitoring without dedicated funding or at least some outside help.

## *2. Client Profile*

It can be difficult to ensure that the clients sampled for the work are representative of the agency's client profile.

For example, Islington Law Centre has a very high proportion of ethnic minority clients, many of whom are not fluent in English. When devising the project, Law Centre staff knew it would be important to ensure that a sample of those clients was

included in the work. However, because they had no funding for the project they were unable to pay for interpreters and as a result those clients were excluded.

Age Concerns also found that it was hard to get a truly representative sample of their client groups. It was felt that many clients would have difficulty coping with the kinds of questionnaires involved. For example, some felt the need to exclude clients with dementia from their survey.

CitA found that because of the chaotic nature of clients' lives, their changing contact details and their unavailability during office hours, it was often difficult to get hold of clients after advice for the purpose of doing follow-up surveys.

The advice sector provides services for high numbers of clients not fluent in English and also disabled clients and clients with mental health problems. Some clients move house and change their phone numbers frequently. Despite the difficulties, it is essential that these clients are represented in work to measure outcomes.

It may be possible to develop ways to do this that do not involve extra resources, but it is more likely that some resources will need to be found. This will be an issue for the pilots developed as part of this project as we will need to ensure that the work does not only cover the most articulate, settled, English-speaking and accessible groups.

### *3. Different types of agencies*

The advice sector is diverse. There are different types of agencies doing different types and levels of work and serving different client groups. Developing a single model to cover this diversity will be challenging.

CitA found that generalist agencies have very different outcomes to specialist agencies as they tend to refer a lot of clients. A referral is not a bad outcome but it is hard to show its benefit as the case is not concluded and it is unlikely that the agency will be able to stay in touch with the client.

Also, agencies that serve different client groups will have different needs. I have already mentioned the need for interpreters in some cases but it is not just foreign languages that are an issue. Following their pilot Youth Access found that they needed to do further work with users to refine the language used in the questionnaires so that they make better sense to young clients.

It is therefore important to develop a flexible scheme that different agencies can use for their own purposes. This will mean running pilots in a variety of settings.

### *4. Measuring the financial benefits of advice*

A number of projects have attempted to quantify the benefits of advice work. Tom Williams's Review of Research into the Impact of Debt Advice (LSRC 2004) summarises some of these.

In relation to positive economic benefits, research indicates that there is significant financial benefit arising out of the receipt of debt advice but concludes that little work has been done to quantify this.

The review also reports on studies into the impact of advice on health. There are a number of studies that show improvements to mental and physical health after advice. However, quantitative evaluation of this is difficult because of the ethical issues of having an effective control group from whom you withhold advice.

Some attempts have been made to look at costs saved following the receipt of advice. The University of Brighton's Health and Social Policy Research Centre has published a report on the work of Littlehampton CAB.

The research measured the financial gains to clients resulting from the work of the one part-time Welfare Benefits adviser. Between 1st April 2005 and 31st March 2006 she helped clients claim benefits totalling £428,507.60.

The research also consisted of interviews with 15 service users, discussions with bureau staff, advisers and with staff of referring organisations. After advice, clients reported less stress, renewed feelings of hope, improved health meaning fewer visits to GPs and fewer prescriptions, and an end to suicidal thoughts.

The report concludes that CAB work generates "cross budget savings" to the NHS or local authority housing departments (amongst others) and suggests that in the Littlehampton area these savings could represent a return on investment of at least 5.8 to 1.

The advice networks involved in this project have little doubt that advice does result in savings to the public purse in some cases. However, we take the view that quantifying this is problematic. To reduce the outcomes of advice to a formula is dangerous as it may encourage comparison. Because of the very diverse nature of agencies, types of work and clients, it would be hard to compare like with like.

## **Conclusions**

The sector has conducted a number of different projects, all of which have produced useful results and raised interesting issues.

A key issue that the WTfA project will have to bear in mind is that of resources. We must ensure that we develop a system that can be used or at least adapted for use by agencies that have little or no extra funding for outcomes work.

We must also make sure that we record fully the time agencies spend doing the work. This will allow other agencies to make informed decisions about the type of work they want to do to measure their outcomes and whether they want to do any work on outcomes at all.

This will also help demonstrate to funders that if they require reporting of outcomes they will have to make appropriate funding available.

Finally, we must ensure that the project reflects the diversity of the advice sector in terms of types of agency, types of client and types of work.

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