MONITORING AND EVALUATION

Outcomes and Outputs

Outcomes are the changes that our organisations are trying to achieve — the differences that we aim to make with our services.

People often get confused about the difference between outcomes and outputs. Outcomes are the changes that you are looking to achieve. Outputs are the services, products and activities that your organisation offers to its users.

For example, a local charity might seek to reduce the number of families reaching crisis point. This is an outcome. To achieve this outcome, the charity might decide to run a series of parenting classes, and start a drop-in support group. These are outputs.

Hard and soft outcomes

Hard outcomes are changes that are clear and obvious, or that involve an external change in people’s behaviour or circumstances. For example, the number of people who give up smoking for at least six months after finishing a non-smoking group our group ran.

Hard outcomes involve a visible change, and for this reason, can be easier to measure. For example, it’s relatively simple to record the number of people who achieve an NVQ.

Soft outcomes are the changes that are less easy to observe or measure, or which involve some form of change inside people, such as change in attitude or a change in the way they see themselves (for example, increased self-confidence).

Make sure that you think about how to measure both hard and soft outcomes. Both are valuable, and worth measuring.

Aims and Objectives

Let’s start by defining what we mean by “aims” and “objectives”.

It’s important to be clear about what these words mean, because they’re often used by different people in different ways. When your stakeholders talk about objectives, it’s always worth double-checking what they mean!

When talking about aims, objectives and outcomes, we use the widely-accepted definitions given by the **Charities Evaluation Services**.

An **aim** says what you hope to achieve. An **objective** is an planned programme of activity that you need to carry out to achieve your aim.

So, for example, one project aim might be to “make users more employable”. And the project objectives helping to achieve that aim might be to “run workshops on writing a CV” or to “provide one-to-one help with writing job applications”.

How aims and objectives fit together

Every objective should clearly contribute to achieving a project aim. Think for a moment about the objectives your organisation is carrying out at the moment – can you say how each one is helping you achieve a particular aim? If you find your organisation is carrying out activities that don’t have a clear link with your aims, it might be a good idea to think about whether to continue to offer that service!

Objectives are often changed mid-way through a project – perhaps because an activity isn’t contributing to the overall aim of the project in the way you had expected. It’s much harder to change project aims – and much more disruptive to the project.

Outcome Indicators

An outcome indicator is a measurable sign of progress towards achieving a particular outcome.

Let’s imagine that you’re running a project to improve the employment chances of women in north Westminster, by increasing their confidence in interviews. That’s your overall **outcome**. An **indicator** of progress towards that outcome might be the level of confidence in interviews, as reported by participants.

In some ways, this process is like going for a **country walk**, and navigating using **landmarks** along the path: you walk through the forest until you reach a stream, then turn left along a stone wall, for example. **Outcome indicators** are like these landmarks along the way.

Often, there will be a number of indicators which you could use to measure progress towards achieving an outcome. But there’s no need to use more than one indicator for each outcome – choose the one that will give the most **meaningful evidence**, without being too difficult to measure.

For example, in our example above, we looked at how an organisation might measure progress towards improving women’s employability by increasing their confidence at job interviews. There are a number of outcome indicators they could use:

- Number of interviews women are attending

- Whether women are preparing themselves for interviews
- Reported level of confidence when being interviewed.

Outcome indicators can be based on **exact measurements** (the number of interviews attended) or **softer measurements** to do with how people feel, or how they describe themselves (the number of women reporting greater confidence in interviews).

When you're gathering evidence for your outcome indicators, you can build up a **richer picture**by using a variety of sources. For example if you would like to know if children have increased their happiness, you can ask them to report their levels of happiness, make your own notes on how often they use your services and keep records of participation on playing sessions. Using a variety of sources of information like this can give you a more complete picture of the changes your project is bringing about.

In the end, **you and your organisation will know best how to spot the changes your work is bringing about.** How do you know that your users are more happy, or more confident or healthier? Which attitudes or behaviours indicate that something has changed in the lives of the people you're working with? What kind of comments will a new user tell you? How will these comments vary after they have being using your services for a while?

Six Steps to Monitor Project Outcomes

If you want to have evidence about how your work makes a difference to people's lives, you need to think about monitoring. By monitoring, we mean the routine and systematic collection of information that will help you to check the progress towards achieving your outcomes.

Don't leave monitoring until the closing stages of the project

Sometimes we only start to think about monitoring at the end of a project, when we remember that we've got to submit report to funders. This is a mistake – when you've already done the work, you'll have missed the opportunity to monitor your project properly. To get the most from monitoring, and to avoid a last-minute rush to gather evidence and prepare a report, it's essential to start thinking about monitoring from the beginning, during the project planning stages.

Decide what you're going to monitor, and how often

Start by clearly identifying the outcome indicators you're going to measure. Write them down, and make sure the whole project team is aware of them. Now decide how often you're going to monitor the outcome indicators – every time people make contact with your services? Or on a weekly or monthly basis? Or just at the start and end of the project?

Keep it proportionate

As long as you're monitoring the right things, and have taken the time to think about the best way to measure them, you don't need to gather huge quantities of information, or use lots of different methods. Focus on quality rather quantity, and be realistic about what you have time to do.

Think about tools for monitoring

Have your tools for collection of information ready. Are you going to use questionnaires, interviews, focus groups or observations from different people involved in the project?

Appoint someone to be in charge of monitoring

Monitoring is one of those tasks that can be forgotten, or can fall between job responsibilities. That's why it's essential to be clear about who is in charge of monitoring. It could be the project leader, a volunteer, or even service users themselves. The most important thing is that everyone is clear about what's expected of them.

How and to whom will you report the findings?

As obvious as it sounds, the person collecting the information should know who they should report their findings too, and in what format. Deciding this at the beginning is one way to make monitoring a practical process, rather than a wasted exercise.

Measuring Effectiveness

There are lots of ways to gather information to help you monitor outcome indicators – from focus groups and interviews, to surveys. But which is the most suitable for your organisation?

Choosing a research method: three things to think about

1. **What kind of information do you need?** The method you use to collect information will affect the kind of information you get. Looking for lots of detail, and personal stories? Interview people, and ask plenty of open questions. Need hard facts and figures? Do a survey and ask people to mark things on a scale of one to five.

2. **Who do you need to collect it from?** Choose a method that suits the people using your service. That might mean doing interviews with people who have poor written English, and online surveys with keen internet users.

3. **Who is collecting the information?** Don't choose a method that requires specials skills your team doesn't have. Not everyone knows how to run a focus group, or how to set up an online survey.

Choosing a question to ask

The questions you ask need to be directly related to your project outcomes (the specific change your want to bring about), and the outcome indicators for your project (the visible sign that this change is happening).

For example, if your project outcome is that parents have better parenting skills, you might have an outcome indicator based on reported level of confidence when handling tantrums. So the question you ask emerges directly from this: you ask parents to rate their level of confidence.

Tried and trusted research methods

There are many methods you can choose, but we have found that for many voluntary organisations, the following are the most practical.

- **Interviews** are a series of questions that can be asked face-to-face or by telephone. The questions can be open so that the interviewee have the freedom to elaborate the answer or closed, so that the interviewer keeps more control of the answers.
- **Questionnaires** are normally filled in by the user and can include scaled questions, tests, diagrams and visuals.
- **Records** are normally gathered by staff or volunteers and need to be regularly kept up to date. For example, you might keep statistics on the number of visits to the GP or number of support hours given.
- **Observations** can be recorded by staff (for example, in the form of periodically updated reports) or by users (for example, in the form of diaries).

Measuring Long-Term Impact

When people talk about impact, they're often talking about different things. For example, some funders ask you about impact but are actually looking for information about outcomes (the change you bring about).

So is there an agreed definition?

We use the definition from the Charities Evaluation Service, which defines impact as “the broader or longer-term effects of your outputs, outcomes and activities”.

Impact can be a slippery thing. Perhaps you never intended to have the impact that you did. Perhaps your impact was greater than you expected. Often, impact is the result of several organisations working in the same area, so your organisation is likely to make a contribution to the impact without being the only organisation to claim credit for the change.

Our advice is: don't worry too much about long-term impact.

Focus on the short and medium term, and the long-term will take care of itself. By taking time to build a robust foundation at the start, you can build a chain of evidence that will help you to recognise and demonstrate your impact in the future.