

## **The Value of Outcomes**

As oppose to an outputs focus on service delivery, concerned with actual activity undertaken, an outcomes focused approach can help to improve service delivery by focusing on the changes that occur as a result of the activity.

There are increasing external pressures to demonstrate outcomes and with infrastructure organisations having received huge investment in recent years through ChangeUp and the Big Lottery Fund's BASIS programme equating to some £300m+ in total. Such investment brings louder calls for better evidence of the difference made by infrastructure.

In an economic downturn, focusing on the changes that come about as a result of your organisations intervention could prove a more effective yardstick by which potential funders assess your funding application.

## **Terminology**

"Activities", "outputs", and "objectives" are what you talk about when you answer questions like "What do you do?" and "What does our project provide?" "Outcomes" and "impact" are what you talk about when you answer questions like "What are the results of what you do?" and "What difference are we making?"

## **Outcomes vs. outputs**

Many people confuse the terms "outcome" and "output". Outcomes are changes, benefits, learning or other effects that happen as a result of the outputs you put in place. The outputs are services or products, such as publications or training courses.

So there is a crucial distinction: what you achieve for your users (the outcomes): and the services or other interventions intended to bring about those achievements (outputs).

## **How to Implement**

Firstly you need to be clear about the changes you are trying to make. Most activities are looking to bring about some kind of change.

In committing to an outcomes approach, your understanding of how you contribute to change will develop, which in turn can lead you to provide more responsive services and a more informed strategy to bring about change.

The increased focus on assessment of outcomes is challenging, but may well involve new learning and a change of culture, but will ultimately prove to be a good investment of time and resources.

Outcomes need to be discussed with funders in a meaningful way so each party has a clear understanding of the changes that are being sought and how they might be assessed. These outcomes would need to be reviewed and any learning fed into future plans and strategies.

## **Can infrastructure organisations demonstrate the difference they make?**

The short answer is yes! The Charities Evaluation Services (CES) has just launched entitled ['Demonstrating the Difference'](#) which looks how infrastructure organisations assess the difference their work makes.

## **Meeting the challenge**

Whilst many of the IOs the CES spoke to said that they found outcomes assessment difficult, however the results were encouraging. The problems people identified included:

- demonstrating long-term change
- finding good ways to collect information
- identifying appropriate indicators
- limited time and resources to measure the difference their work makes

### **Yes, we are making a difference**

Respondents also mentioned that outcome information was critically important in enabling them to motivate their staff and trustees. For some, outcome information helped demonstrate a reason for existing.

Measurement is also high on the agenda for regional development agencies and local authorities, many of whom require the IOs they support to demonstrate economic, social and environmental outcomes against government targets.

Support from BASIS and ChangeUp cannot be relied upon in the long term, and the economic downturn is likely to lead to even greater competition for funding. IOs may well struggle to compete with frontline services that make a more visible and immediate difference, or with other IOs that have already developed systems that help them gather outcome data.

Being a step removed from the frontline may mean that IOs feel a greater obligation to demonstrate the impact of their work than frontline organisations do. They may feel pressure to demonstrate not just that their services have helped change practice in frontline organisations, but also that this work made a difference to the service users of those frontline groups. Problems occur when there are unrealistic expectations to demonstrate impact, particularly where these expectations far exceed the resources and skills available to conduct such an evaluation. Infrastructure work has intended impacts that take many years to achieve, and this 'lag time' is an important consideration for both those requesting information about the difference IOs make, and the IOs themselves.

The CES report makes a number of recommendations that include:

- continued investment in strengthening sector skills to gather outcome information
- exchange of good practice and dissemination of case studies
- shared examples of infrastructure outcomes and indicators
- work with funders on outcomes and impact, and why the former is difficult for IOs.

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