

Developing an  
**outcomes** focus in  
the Voluntary  
Sector



# Developing an **outcomes** focus in the Voluntary Sector

## What is an outcomes focus?

Many voluntary sector organisations are familiar with describing what they do and whom they work with. What we may not be so good at doing is identifying the changes or other results of the work that we do. (Outcomes)

Identifying the outcomes you want to bring about will help you decide what work to do, and what services and activities you need funding for.

Outcome information will help you plan, develop and improve your work. It will also help you demonstrate to funders that their money is making a difference.

## Why focus on Outcomes?

Identifying outcomes helps people to specify and clarify the purpose of their work. It can help in agreeing a common or shared vision among volunteers, staff, management, trustees, funders, donors and clients.

Monitoring outcomes can be encouraging when change is achieved only slowly, and when change may not be obvious to workers or clients, because it produces information that gives a sense of progress.

Monitoring outcomes can provide organisations with more confidence in dealing with funders, as it can provide evidence of the value of your work.

## What are Outcomes?

Outcomes are the changes, benefits, learning or other effects that happen as a result of your activities. For example, outcomes for users of a homelessness prevention service might be:

- Clients enabled to find accommodation
- Clients enabled to sustain accommodation
- A reduction in debt
- Increased self confidence
- Improved relationships.
- Improved coping strategies
- Taking up meaningful occupation.

Outcomes are the changes that happen as a result of providing your services. Outcomes can be expected, or unexpected, welcome or unwelcome. Not all outcomes describe a change. Some outcomes may involve keeping a situation the same, or preventing harm from happening. These effects are still the outcomes of your project. If your project had not taken place, something else would have happened.



## Where do Outcomes occur?

Outcomes can occur in many places, depending on your project. These places can include:

- Individuals
- Families
- Communities
- Organisations
- Policy
- The environment

Outcomes for individuals often occur in the following areas:

- Skills or ability
- Knowledge
- Attitude
- Self-confidence
- Self-image
- Relationships
- Behaviour
- Circumstances
- Health

## How to identify your Outcomes

**Involve other people:** Consult with service users, staff, committee members and funders.

**Relate Outcomes to the funded project:** Think about what is being funded and why. Think about what outcomes you can achieve within the life of the Project.

**Identify Aims and Objectives:** **Aims** are the areas of change you hope to achieve as a result of your work. When writing aims, use words that describe a change, such as, *to increase, to improve, to reduce, to enable, to prevent.*

**Objectives** are the areas of activity you will undertake to make your aims happen. Use words that describe what you do, such as, *to run, to provide, to produce, to support, to offer.*

**Develop Outcomes:** Think about the changes you would like to see. What would make you think that you had been successful and had made a difference? Imagine a typical service user when they first come to the Project. What needs do they have? Now imagine that person leaving the Project, if your work with them had gone well, what are they like now? How might their circumstances or behaviour changed?

## Assessing Outcomes

Once you have identified your planned outcomes, you need to decide what information to collect, and how and when you are going to do this. You are more likely to succeed by starting with a simple system and making it more complex later. Make sure that you don't collect any more information than you need to.

There are many useful resources about collecting information, specifically:

*Ellis, J (2002) Practical Monitoring and Evaluation, Charities Evaluation Services*

## GLOSSARY

### **Aims:**

Describe the changes you plan to achieve, or the difference you want to make.

### **Baseline data:**

Information collected on outcomes at the start of the Project, against which you can compare any change.

### **Impact:**

The broad, longer-term effects of your work, related to the Projects overall aim or purpose. Impacts are often seen beyond your immediate user group, for example in the wider community.

### **Inputs:**

These are all the resources you put into the Project to enable you to deliver your outputs.

### **Intermediate outcomes:**

Are steps along the way to an outcome, they often describe short-term changes that must occur before the outcome is reached.

### **Monitoring:**

The routine, systematic collection and recording of information.

### **Outcomes:**

Are the changes, benefits, learning or other effects that happen as a result of your service or activities. Outcomes may be "hard" (they are easily counted) or "soft" (they are less easily measurable, as with improved confidence or reduced isolation). "Soft" outcomes are not the same as intermediate outcomes, which can be both soft and hard.

### **Outcome indicators:**

Are things you can measure to show whether your desired outcomes have occurred. This will show progress towards meeting your aims.

### **Outputs:**

Are all the detailed activities, services and products you do or provide.

### **Overall aim:**

A short statement of the purpose of the organisation; sometimes called a mission statement.

## Sources of help

Charities Evaluation Services (CES) offers training, consultancy and publishes information on monitoring, evaluation and quality systems. Training courses and publications specifically on outcomes are provided.

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