

Bringing outcomes into focus in quality

**Presentation to Charities Evaluation Services Quality Conference
25 June 2009**

Dr Jean Ellis, Charities Evaluation Services

The workshop

What we are going to cover in this workshop is the extent to which outcomes play a part in different quality standards. And if they do, how exactly do they feature, and what are the implications for an organisation that wants to meet the standards featuring outcomes?

We are also going to look at how you can develop your organisation's quality framework, whether it is an off-the-shelf system or a home-grown one, to make the assessment of user outcomes an integral part of it. In doing that, it will be important to look at the connection between quality and monitoring and evaluation.

Finally, we will be looking at the connection or relationship between implementing quality assurance and improving the outcomes or benefits for your organisation's users.

Outcomes

Let's just check that we are on the same page in terms of what we mean by outcomes. We are talking about:

The changes, benefits, learning and other effects resulting from an organisation's services and activities.

So these are not the activities, or outputs of an organisation, but the results of those outputs – the changes that might occur for an organisation's users, or for an organisation, or the environment.

Some of the reasons for focusing on outcomes that you have identified relate to the fact that funders and commissioners are increasingly asking organisations to report on the achievement of outcomes. It is true that since around 2001 government targets have increasingly involved achievement against outcome indicators and these are translated down into reporting requirements from those public and third sector services receiving public funding. Even when delivering smaller grants, local authorities are looking for evidence against government targets and National Service Frameworks.

The shift towards an outcomes focus has also been promoted by non-statutory funders. Independent grant makers now frequently grant fund projects likely to achieve their own specified grant programme outcomes, and they expect to receive monitoring information on their achievement.

However, there is another strong drive towards focusing on the achievement of outcomes. Getting positive change for users, or indeed for the environment, or other target for activities is at the heart of why we as public sector and third sector organisations exist. This has always been the case. However, more than this, getting information as we go along about how effective we are in achieving those changes, is also important in improving those results – and getting this evidence is something that we have been less good at doing.

The connection between quality standards and outcomes

So what is the connection to quality assurance and how will a quality system help?

- Will a quality system ensure that we gather information on our outcomes? No, it can't do that.
- Will a quality system provide a way for us to gather information on outcomes. No, it can't do that either.
- Will a quality system provide a prompt or steer for us to gather outcomes information? Well, it might do that.
- Will we be able to meet agreed quality standards without having information on our outcomes? Possibly not.

The reason that I say it may do is that quality systems differ. I have reviewed 12 different quality systems. Some of them are issue specific, some of them are generic quality systems and some are sub-sector systems.

Quality standards that don't require you to provide information on service user outcomes in order to meet their standards:

- **Customer First** is a standard focusing on customer service
- **ISO 9001** is a generic internal standard that focuses on an organisation's procedures and on the quality of a product or output rather than its results or outcomes.
- **The CLS Quality Mark** is the quality standard that underpins the Community Legal Service and the Criminal Defence Service, and it focuses on how legal and advice services are delivered.
- **The Matrix Standard** is a certification standard for organisations delivering information and advice
- **The Investing in Volunteers Standard** is Volunteering England's UK quality standard for all organisations involving volunteers.
- **Supporting People Quality Assessment Framework (QAF)** is for organisations receiving Supporting People funding.

So the common feature of the standards in this group is that they focus on how things are done, dealing with management, procedures and the quality of delivery, but these standards do not require evidence about the results of your activities.

Quality standards asking for an ability to demonstrate outcomes

We then move to a second group of quality standards which **require information about effective monitoring and evaluation systems, but not about the outcomes achieved.**

Volunteering England's **Volunteer Centre Quality Accreditation** is a quality framework for Volunteer Centres, addressing the delivery of six different functions. These standards require a volunteer centre to have in place processes to monitor the outcomes of delivery.

Let me illustrate for the **Reach Quality Framework for Youth Action Agencies**, which asks the organisation to record the benefits of volunteering for young people but also in:

Indicator 11.5 *We are able to evaluate the impact of young people's voluntary action.*

PQASSO, which is the leading quality assurance system in the voluntary sector, does of course have a complete quality area dealing with monitoring and evaluation, and asks in level 2 for information to be collected on a range of outcome indicators. However, PQASSO really belongs in our next group of standards.

Standards that require an organisation not just to be able to monitor and evaluate outcomes, but to show **evidence that positive outcomes have been achieved.**

This difference can be illustrated really well in the first example in this group, which is the **EFQM Excellence Model**, which is a self-assessment framework. It describes itself as a **9 box model** – that is, it's divided into 9 sections, each of which falls into one of two parts, enablers (how an organisation does things) and results (what an organisation achieves).

The concepts underpinning this framework is, first, that if you get those processes, or enablers right, you will get excellent organisational results and, second, getting excellent results is as important a marker of a quality organisation as doing things in the right way.

There are four sections in results. User outcomes lie in customer results and key performance results.

PQASSO 3rd edition: When CES first developed PQASSO in 1997, the standards related purely to processes, but later editions have reflected the same logic as the Excellence Model. The standards cover on the one hand quality areas relating to how things are done, but on the other hand, the important quality area 12 covers the organisation's results, which of course will include outcomes for users.

PQASSO standards have three levels of achievement. Reflecting the increased emphasis on outcomes since PQASSO was first developed, the second edition, which was developed in 2000 asked organisations at level 2 to show that:

'Desired outcomes have been achieved for a range of outcomes'

In PQASSO 3rd edition, which was published last year, 2008, evidence that planned outcomes have been achieved is now required at even at level 1, reflecting that, in the current funding context, even small organisations receiving small grants have to have some evidence of the change they are achieving for beneficiaries.

At level 2, the requirement is strengthened, with the indicator being:
'achievement of a range of planned outcomes can be demonstrated through quantitative and qualitative information.'

Let me just look at two other standards here.

Investors in People is focused on staff management and development. Standard 9: **Investment in People improves the performance of the organisation** is expressed inclusively to cover both outcomes and outputs, as well as financial performance.

Customer Service Excellence was formerly the Charter Mark and is the government's national standard for customer service. It covers five areas, one of which is about **delivery**. And it is in this area that there is a relevant element: **Achieved delivery and outcomes**.

Let's just look at some the indicators in these quality standards a bit more carefully.

- Excellent organisations comprehensively measure and achieve outstanding results with respect to their customers (Excellence Model)
- Achievement of a range of planned outcomes can be demonstrated (PQASSO)
- We can demonstrate that....outcomes are positive for the majority of our customers (Customer Service Excellence)
- Top Managers can explain and quantify...how learning and development has improved the performance of the organisation.(IIP)

There is a real issue about what is good evidence. It should be more than just anecdotal evidence. Is information collected on a regular basis and is it reliable? Change should ideally be evidenced by data collected before and after a project intervention. Has the data been collated in a way that can be reported?

Identifying key performance indicators

What you may be able to do is to provide the necessary evidence for one or two projects, because you need to be able to do this to report against project-

specific funding, but of course here we are talking about outcomes across the organisation.

Sometimes the mistake is made of believing that if an organisation has a quality system such as PQASSO in place, it will by virtue of this necessarily be able to report on outcomes. But in fact indicators about outcomes in any generic quality assurance systems can only be a starting point, because it can't talk to the particularity of your organisation.

From quality indicators to outcomes evidence

Each organisation or possibly a group or network of organisations with similar core functions and core outcomes needs to identify and make their key user outcomes specific and explicit, either as an integral part of the quality assurance system, or set out in a related framework to which the quality system will refer.

Let's look at the **NAVCA performance standards** for local infrastructure organisations, which focus on outcomes throughout.

Five Performance Standards cover the five core functions of a local infrastructure organisation, and for each of the five standards, there is a statement or standard and a series of outcomes for the local voluntary and community sector.

Let's just have a look at an example of a standard.

Standard 3 is that the organisation **facilitates effective communication or networking and collaboration**. The outcomes are the following:

- 3.1 Meets and communicates better
- 3.2 Works more collaboratively....
- 3.3 Makes better use of scarce resources....

You can see that what we need to do to make the outcomes section of our quality assurance come to life, whether it is a bespoke system or off the shelf, is to do something similar - that is:

- Identify core service areas or areas of activity
- Identify a limited number of key outcomes for each area.

Once you have done this, there is another step, and that is to identify the indicators against each outcome, that is those things that will be assessed or measured to show that the outcome has been achieved.

Several years ago, CES developed a bespoke quality assurance system for Prison Visitors' Centres, commissioned by the Prison Advice and Care Trust. They wanted to integrate a results section into the heart of their quality system. We developed four results quality areas, and the one which looked at user outcomes was **quality area 4: What difference is the centre making?**

We then identified a range of stakeholder groups for which outcomes were desired. These included visitors, prisoners, the prison itself and other

agencies. We then worked together with stakeholders to identify **examples** of outcomes.

- Visitors have an improved quality of visit
- There is a greater take up of appropriate services by visitors
- Family issues are included in prison plans and services.

Each visitors' centre would be able to adapt these outcomes according to their own services.

We also attached some sample indicators – the things that would be measured.

Example indicators for outcomes

Outcomes for visitors	Outcome indicators
Fewer visitors are turned away	Number of refused visits
Visitors make more visits	Number of visits
Quality of visits is improved	Extent to which visitors feel: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More welcome • Safer

We also included within the quality system some guidance on methods of data collection and some examples of interview and questionnaire tools.

Of course it's not necessary to have all this within the quality system itself, but you need first of all an outcomes framework.

This clearly defines a limited number of key outcomes and their indicators and you probably want to do this for outputs as well.

Monitoring and evaluation framework

It is also very useful to have a clear monitoring and evaluation framework, which will clarify what information will be collected, when and by whom. This is about making sure that you are getting a routine and systematic collection of information.

The other element to be factored in is the question of ensuring that you have an IT system in place that is going to help you to manage your data, and that all the relevant people in the organisation are trained and at ease with using your IT resources to make the best use of it.

The importance of a results focus

When talking to groups that are implementing PQASSO and to PQASSO mentors and trainers, they report that often the focus is on quality areas 1-10, and that organisations often stop short of looking at quality areas 11 and 12, which concern monitoring and evaluation and results.

However, if you are going for the PQASSO quality mark, you need to address these quality areas. You are going to need good monitoring and evaluation systems and good quality evidence on the results of the organisation's activities, and this includes information on outcomes for users. And remember what we said earlier about good quality outcome evidence needing reliable information about change.

And evidence of outcomes is important – not just to get a quality mark, or to report to funders, but that outcomes information in itself will help us to reflect on how far our organisations are achieving what we have planned or intend.

And PQASSO standards not only require information about results, but they also require evidence that changes are made as a result of monitoring and evaluation information.

This takes us back to the logic of improving processes/enablers in order to improve the results that we get for our organisations and for our users. So quality improvements should improve user outcomes, and we should be able to evidence those outcomes.

In implementing PQASSO At CES issues have been raised to do with how we work in collaboration and partnership, how effectively we reach different parts of the third sector, and how we market ourselves, and addressing these issues has undoubtedly helped us to get better outcomes.

In the research which we reported in CES' *Accountability and Learning* report, published in September last year, several organisations reported on monitoring and evaluation carried out under an umbrella of a quality assurance system which resulted in positive changes affecting user outcomes.

Action for Blind People, for example, described annual self-assessment within the framework of the Excellence Model, a process which identified a lack of provision for young people in leisure services and resulted ultimately in the provision of 29 'Actionnaires' clubs.

Linking quality assurance to outcomes monitoring

To sum up, what you should have is a **cycle of quality assessment** which is able to get information about outcomes from a complementary regular cycle of monitoring and evaluation.

What we can see in this diagram is that the routine monitoring of outcomes will allow the organisation to reflect and make adjustments if necessary to how things are done.

What we are aiming for is a quality assurance cycle that will allow you to put this information **together with the information** you are getting on how things are done, and this will help you make important adjustments to make strategic decisions that will help you to get better results.