

## Are voluntary sector organisations getting better at using outcomes approaches?

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### Introduction

This paper introduces the panel session: 'Are voluntary sector organisations getting better at using outcomes approaches?' It draws on findings from three studies:

- Research by Charities Evaluation Services (CES) into the development of monitoring and evaluation in the third sector (Ellis and Gregory, 2008). Field work for this study was carried out in 2007 and 2008, and included two large scale surveys of third sector organisations and funders and over 100 interviews.
- Two independent evaluations of the National Outcomes Programme, 2003-2009 – an innovative cascade programme, funded by the Big Lottery Fund, aiming ultimately to spread outcomes thinking to frontline voluntary and community organisations (The Open University, 2006; Tribal, 2009).

### Drivers of outcomes approaches

#### Pioneers

The CES research tracked the pioneering work on outcomes done in some sectors. Specifically, in 1993, the Department of Health decided to trial an outcomes approach with grant-funded organisations and Alcohol Concern piloted work with alcohol agencies on how outcomes monitoring could be used. Housing and homelessness organisations have been exploring the use of outcomes measurements systems since the late 1990s, driven in large part by the introduction of the Supporting People framework,<sup>1</sup> but also by the London Housing Foundation's IMPACT capacity building programme.<sup>2</sup> The government more recently sponsored pilot projects in homelessness advice<sup>3</sup> and community development.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Supporting People was launched in April 2003, ensuring that vulnerable people have help and support to live independently. Around two-thirds of the programme is delivered by third sector organisations.

<sup>2</sup> See [www.lhf.org.uk/](http://www.lhf.org.uk/)

<sup>3</sup> A pilot project set up in 2004/05 in response to a request from the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister proposed four higher-level outcomes for agencies covered by the Homelessness Advice Service (National Homelessness Advice Service, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> The Community Development Challenge Report recommended that government and community development organisations work together to establish a community development outcomes and

### **Commissioning frameworks**

Voluntary sector organisations delivering public services operate within policy and regulatory requirements which over recent years have increasingly incorporated an outcomes focus. Although the CES research found that output targets continued to be dominant in some commissioning, successive key guidance and procedural documents – and in 2007 the Office of the Third Sector Action Plan – all encouraged commissioners to place outcomes at the centre of their strategic planning. National Service Frameworks, such as the Every Child Matters framework, the Supporting People framework, and local priorities framed within Local Area Agreements have all required organisations to focus on the end results of their projects and the benefits for users, sometimes even when in receipt of small funding amounts.

### **Funder initiatives**

While the Big Lottery Fund has been a high profile leader in developing an outcomes approach in its grant making, the CES research found a number of independent grant makers, as well as statutory funders – such as London Councils – grant funding projects likely to have outcomes that would relate to their own specified grant programme outcomes, and expecting to receive monitoring information on their achievement.

In CES' online survey to funders, 60 per cent of the total number of respondents (n=77) reported a greater emphasis on outcomes or impact information than they had done five years previously. Indeed, evaluation of the National Outcomes Programme evaluation found that the most commonly cited driver for organisations wanting to move towards an outcomes-focused approach was funder and commissioner requirements.

### **Voluntary sector-led initiatives**

Councils for voluntary service and volunteer bureaux paid an early attention to outcomes,<sup>5</sup> although the follow-through was not necessarily sufficient to drive forward change convincingly throughout the sector. The PERFORM framework was developed to provide an overarching framework of higher-level outcomes for infrastructure organisations, and more recently NAVCA's outcomes-focused quality award has strengthened the outcomes focus for local infrastructure organisations.<sup>6</sup>

The CES research found a number of national organisations – such as Action for Children, the NSPCC, the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Citizens Advice and the Prince's Trust – developing outcomes systems and frameworks, cascading down information requirements to local bodies and to local projects and offices. Some research participants described establishing a new link between outcome reporting and business planning.

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evidence base (Community Development Exchange, Community Development Foundation and Federation for Community Development Learning, 2006))

<sup>5</sup> CES worked with the National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service (now NAVCA) and the National Association of Volunteer Bureau to develop monitoring and evaluation guidance, including core outcomes and indicators in 2001 and 2002.

<sup>6</sup> See [www.navca.org.uk/services/quality](http://www.navca.org.uk/services/quality)

The dissemination of the Outcomes Star tool has been particularly influential. This is an outcomes tool developed by Triangle Consulting in the context of the IMPACT programme, which has allowed soft outcomes to be assessed and used jointly by key workers and clients.<sup>7</sup>

One 'outcomes champion', who had been carrying out CES training on outcomes since 2004, reported the change that has occurred over a three- to four-year period, and the 'profound effect' of outcomes training and support on the sector: '*Outcomes have become part of the common language. It is not something alien to them.*' (Ellis and Gregory, 2008:39)

## Changes on the ground

### National Outcomes Programme 2003-2009

The National Outcomes Programme, developed and run by CES with funding from the Big Lottery Fund, had at its core a two-day training course, delivered first to 'outcomes champions', then cascaded throughout the nine England regions to frontline organisations. Over the period 2003 to 2009, training was delivered to 169 outcomes champions and approximately 1,500 voluntary and community organisations.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Successful across different types of voluntary and community organisations*

In the first programme, which ran from 2003 to 2006, outcomes champions specifically targeted BME voluntary organisations, volunteer development support organisations and rural development infrastructure organisations and the evaluation of the first programme found good signs that an outcomes approach could be successfully adopted in a wide range of settings (The Open University, 2006).

#### *Significant increases in understanding and confidence*

The Open University also found that, by the end of the programme, confidence was high, with over 90 per cent of over 1,100 participants agreeing or strongly agreeing that they had the tools and understanding to introduce an outcomes approach. By the end of the programme nearly all participants said that they had a better understanding of outcomes. The majority of outcomes champions had started to implement the approach in their own organisations, and majority of frontline voluntary and community organisations receiving training were seeking to shift towards, develop, or improve an outcomes focus in their organisations. The signs were that those trained earlier in the programme were maintaining and integrating ideas from the programme into their ways of working.

The evaluation of the second phase, 2006-09, showed significant increases in understanding of outcomes and how to express outcomes in a way that stakeholders and partners understood, and in how to collect outcomes data.

<sup>7</sup> See [www.outcomesstarsystem.org.uk/](http://www.outcomesstarsystem.org.uk/) and <http://outcomesstar.org.uk/>

<sup>8</sup> Building on the first six years of the programme, CES has received seed funding from Capacitybuilders to turn this previously grant-funded programme into one that is self-sustaining. The programme is being managed by the National Performance Programme, and currently has about 100 outcomes champions.

There was a significant shift in the number of champions using an outcomes approach in their own organisation, from 48.9 per cent before the training to 79.5 per cent afterwards (Tribal, 2009).

*Raised broader awareness of importance of outcomes monitoring*

Champions reported that learning from the programme had helped to develop relationships with their funders. For example, one champion was advising a funding body on how to incorporate the outcomes approach into its tender documents. The evaluation also found that, although it was difficult to separate out the contribution of National Outcomes Programme activities from the increasing awareness of outcomes more generally, the programme had raised awareness of the role and importance of outcomes monitoring, contributing to establishing this as part of the mainstream agenda.

The Tribal evaluation also found significant indications of the sustainability of this initiative, through codification in an outcomes manual and training materials and through the development of outcomes infrastructure as host organisations for outcomes champions developed as specialist hubs. One host organisation had adopted a strategic approach to ensuring each regional co-ordinator had access to a champion.

## Key facilitators

The Open University found that the outcomes approach was most readily adopted in organisations which:

- were clear about the aims of their organisation
- were already doing work on evaluation and monitoring
- were working in areas where it is easier to identify measurable outcomes
- already had a good management structures in place.

It also worked in other settings, but took longer and required greater effort. Other issues were also raised as important in both evaluations, such as available time and resources, staff training and appropriate IT requirements. These were all issues that were raised by the CES research findings as facilitating or inhibiting factors.

## Challenges

The CES research found that despite the range of monitoring and evaluation initiatives in the sector, some organisations were still struggling to come to terms with an outcomes approach.

*Data limited, incomplete, or not convincing*

Funders frequently found the quality of outcomes reporting unsatisfactory. Nearly one-third of funders in the online survey found outcomes data 'frequently' limited or incomplete, and one-third found that it was 'frequently' not convincing.

### *Inappropriate outcomes set*

From the point of view of voluntary and community organisations, an outcomes approach became more problematic when funders and commissioners used the term with no clear understanding of outcomes, and where inappropriate outcomes were set. One respondent reported: *'They use the word outcomes but they don't know what they mean.'* (Ellis and Gregory, 2008:43)

### *Difficulty in collating and aggregating data*

The research found organisations sometimes struggling to aggregate and report effectively on data arising from an overload of collection methods, such as client assessments, and difficulties of collating and analysing data from distance travelled models. In larger organisations staff found that the lack of similarity between projects could militate against pulling information together to report against higher level outcomes or targets.

### *Insufficient staff skills and resources*

Organisations frequently did not have the time, staff skills, or systems required to collect and process data. While there are a considerable number of outcome measurement tools available, organisations were not necessarily aware of them or of how to access them.

### *Difficulties in finding adequate measures*

Organisations experienced difficulties in finding measures to provide data against funder-led frameworks in some areas of work, for example, preventative work.

### *Establishing a fit with higher level outcomes*

Many organisations indicated that they were having difficulty in establishing a fit between what was within the remit of organisations to achieve at the local level and the information required to be set against higher-level outcomes and government targets. Many individual projects do not serve a sufficiently large target group to affect community-wide statistics, regardless of how successful they are, or they may be working with clients with outcomes at the very beginning of a cycle of change.

## **Potential risks**

The research also found evidence of potential risk.

### *Potential exclusion of organisations with less conceptual grasp*

Some funders participating in the research reported excluding funding applications less likely to demonstrate outcomes. Some also recognised that a more proactive funding policy, and one requiring organisations to have a conceptual grasp of the project and its outcomes at the application stage was resulting in more sophisticated, larger organisations being funded. There was a real danger of excluding organisations capable of delivering good work but less able to express or deliver 'tidy' or measurable outcomes.

### *Simplistic monitoring information may miss important context information*

Some concern was expressed by funders about an over-emphasis on quantitative data and over-simplistic interpretations and measurements that did not recognise the complexity giving rise to outcomes. A focus on outcomes results could mean that information about the processes and the context that encouraged or inhibited good outcomes had been overlooked.

*Evidence – getting the balance right*

Issues were also raised about rigour and methodology, and what was seen as an inherent encouragement to ‘claiming’ of outcomes without real evidence. On the other hand, there was also some concern about a drive from funders to prove causality and a ‘pseudo-scientific’ approach to measuring outcomes.

Many voluntary and community organisations were concerned about the amount of time and effort required to collect and report on outcomes information. It was important to strike a balance between the need to demonstrate achievement convincingly and the need to keep information gathering as simple and unobtrusive as possible.

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