

Outcomes monitoring and IT - finding the best solution for your organisation

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Our Journey

We began looking at outcomes around 2000. We were fortunate enough to be supported by LHF to receive consultancy support to develop an outcomes framework looking at our refuge/outreach work. We developed basic tools, such as the forms that clients would complete to illicit the outcomes we wanted to monitor. It was clear, quite early on that this initial piece of work was too basic and that we needed to do much more work to develop the framework. We hadn't even considered the database question. As we progressed with the second stage, it became quite evident that we couldn't use some of the outcomes measurement systems that were already developed e.g. Star model because of the very specific nature of the work we were delivering. That meant that we needed to develop a unique outcome monitoring system and an IT system that would meet our particular needs. We were very fortunate, again, to be funded under the 2004-5 London Housing Foundation (LHF) *Impact Programme*. CES worked with Ashiana to help evaluate our outcomes work:

- Worked with the staff team to draw up an evaluation framework
- Designed monitoring tools for output and outcome (two for users, one for staff), in consultation with the staff team
- Produced a document on how to use these monitoring tools
- Designed an access database to store the data collected; this was an interim measure.
- Produced a document on how the database is used and briefly trained some staff on the database
- Helped Ashiana set up a pilot for the tools and database and conducted a review at the end of the pilot.
- Rolled out our outcomes system to the rest of our services; the community outreach, the counselling project and the education project.

At this point we had invested a lot of staff time into developing the most appropriate outcomes monitoring tools. This was not a process managed by just one or two people within the team. All the staff were involved in same

way, managers, front line workers, admin. Our Board members were aware of this work and supported us in developing it.

What we achieved with the help of CES and an expert in IT and systems identification:

- Staff attended a refresher session on the outcomes process and their responsibilities
- A manual was produced setting out how Ashiana can use the interim database
- CES delivered a training session for a select number of staff in enabling them to use the interim database
- We conducted a business analysis setting out the contextual issues involved in the implementation of a new database
- We drew up a systems requirement specification which enabled us to match Ashiana's needs with the systems available
- We short-listed possible systems and identified a specific system that was best placed to meet Ashiana's needs within acceptable cost. This also identified any training or support needs in relation to the system. We were faced with a choice; have a system designed specifically to meet our requirements (costs for which would have been well out of our reach) or find a system that met most of our requirements.
- The IT system would need funding and we considered a list of funders to approach and a fundraising proposal if further funding was necessary.

Resources

- As a small organisation with limited resources we faced a huge challenge in developing this work; we don't have IT departments or IT personnel so none of the expertise was in-house
- We couldn't have achieved this without the expert help and support of CES and IT consultants

Funding

- Funding was crucial; LHF funded the work in developing our outcomes framework and the process leading up to system identification.

IT Infra-structure

- IT infrastructure needed to be in place. As a small organisation that had gradually developed services over the years, our IT systems were in desperate need of upgrading. There was a point when we realised that none of this work was going to progress unless we had an adequate IT infrastructure. Again funding from LHF enabled us to upgrade our IT systems therefore making the development/implementation of a database much easier.

Ownership

- Ownership of the outcomes framework and system. For this system to work staff needed to be involved from the beginning and have a sense of ownership.
- Increasingly staff had become frustrated with the interim database, we were using an access database designed for us but which was only meant to be a short-term solution. It became hard for staff to stay motivated as, most were unable to do much more than enter data into our interim database. Data that staff couldn't access. So it became a struggle for managers to convince staff that this was a useful tool and of benefit to the staff, service users, the organisation and funders!

Capacity

- We were unable to maintain the database (check the quality of the data etc), make amendments to it or extract information from it. We desperately needed help in clarifying and addressing the need for a long-term outcomes data management solution. The system we were using was not a robust system for long-term, multi-user purposes, and there were design issues that need improving beyond the scope of the existing database. We needed a proper IT solution that we could use, adapt, maintain and extract information from.
- the access database system we were using meant that only a few staff could input data, we needed a system that enabled all staff to input data, make changes and record progress.
- Data protection and security levels

Reliance

- Heavy reliance on external support to analyse and produce reports. We just couldn't do it internally. Again capacity and resource issues
- A system that could meet all our needs – service users accessing more than one service from Ashiana, group work, not just individual clients

Where we are now

- We finally found a system that met most of our requirements; Lamplight. It's been in place since April 2008. It's not been a smooth process; we still came up with challenges but continue to manage and work through the problems we encounter.
- The system allows us to capture a range of data including demographics, presenting needs, outcomes, group work. We are able to produce our own report, have multiple users, remote access adequate security and access levels, and all at a reasonable cost for an agency such as Ashiana.

- Staff are familiar with database, they use it regularly. It has become a normal part of their work activities. It is most definitely embedded within the organization.
- We are sharing our work with other refuges providers.



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