

## Measuring outcomes

*Measuring outcomes: Your work can change people's lives, but how do you prove it to your funders?*

By Nicola Hill / November 2007

Funders, quite rightly, want to see hard evidence of the impact of your work. This is easy if you have facts and figures, such as 80 per cent of young people achieving a qualification. But how do you show your organisation is worth funding if your work isn't easy to measure? For example, if your clients have dementia or drug dependency, they may not achieve easily quantifiable outcomes.

To overcome this, an increasing number of voluntary and community organisations are now trying to measure so-called soft outcomes to illustrate the importance of their work. These can range from improved self-esteem to changes in attitudes and behaviour. Funders are also beginning to realise that hard outcomes alone do not give a complete picture of a project's success.

### Tools to measure change

The Big Lottery's Community Fund has supported the development of the SOUL (Soft Outcomes Universal Learning) Project, led by a voluntary sector consortium in Norfolk. In 2006, they launched the SOUL Record, which assesses a client's progress on a number of soft outcomes over a period of time.

Clients work through a list of positive statements, looking at areas such as self-esteem, time management or interpersonal skills. They are asked to indicate their feelings on a six-point scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. This is then completed again after a certain period, for example, at the end of a session or a programme. The difference between the scores shows progress on soft outcomes.

The tool is used with clients in a non-threatening way to help diagnose where they might need more support as well as what they have achieved. Various worksheets have been developed and staff can select the most appropriate for the individual client. These cover areas such as developing potential, parenting, skills for life and economic well-being. There are also versions to use with children and young people based on the outcomes identified by the government's Every Child Matters report.

Organisations using the SOUL Record can collate this quantitative data and feed it into a spreadsheet results package to produce bar charts and summaries of data to present to funders.

So far, more than 450 organisations have been trained to use the SOUL Record and another 70 were trained in October. Lynne Shimell worked in the voluntary sector during the research stage of SOUL and took part in phase two of its

development. When she moved to the statutory sector she 'begged' to be able to use it with her clients in a behaviour and education support team, as she found it so useful.

'It was a great ice-breaker with children and adults. I can use it as a diagnostic tool, to share progress between practitioner and client and also to demonstrate our success to funders.'

She is now using it with children and parents. 'It has allowed me to forge relationships as well as target areas of concern.'

### **Assessing progress**

Other organisations are also working in this area. Triangle Consulting has designed tools for organisations working in fields such as homelessness, mental health or drug and alcohol use. It is currently working on a tool to measure changes in attitudes and behaviour to climate change.

Triangle Consulting partner Joy Mackeith says: 'It is likely that soft outcomes will be relevant to all organisations aiming to achieve change in the behaviour of individuals, organisations, or communities.'

She says the key is to be really clear about the outcomes you are trying to achieve. The next step is to identify the stages towards achieving these outcomes. 'Having done this we usually ask people to think about the observable signs that a change has taken place. For example, someone who was feeling depressed and has now become more motivated is likely to look different. They may talk in a more animated way, dress differently, get up earlier and do more things in their day. It is possible to develop systematic ways of measuring these changes.'

One tool that Triangle Consulting has developed is the Outcomes Star. London's largest homelessness charity, St Mungo's, commissioned this work after identifying a need to represent the impact of their work more accurately.

The Star measures outcomes in the homelessness field and was funded and published by the London Housing Foundation. It can be downloaded, free of charge, at: [www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk](http://www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk)

St Mungo's has used this tool to show that improvements in their services are having positive outcomes for beneficiaries.

Liz Harper, head of performance for St Mungo's, says: 'Work in the homelessness sector is often measured by hard out-comes, such as how many clients have been successfully rehoused, or how many have successfully given up drugs or alcohol. However, many of the vulnerable men and women that we work with make significant, incremental progress that has not been routinely measured and is not recognised in hard outcomes data.'

Data from the Outcomes Star shows that nearly 75 per cent of St Mungo's clients made positive progress over the course of the research. The charity has found that clients showed the most improvement in smaller, single-sex hostels where there were onsite facilities, such as healthcare and activities.

The research also showed that soft outcomes, such as motivation, fell when people had been in a hostel environment for more than six months. St Mungo's is using this research to call for more supported housing. And the London borough of Camden now stipulates that all providers of mental health day services use the Outcomes Star as part of their statutory reporting.

Some organisations have measured soft outcomes without using a specific tool. Claire Greenhill is operations manager at Rainbow Services, a small organisation in Essex which runs a recycled furniture programme, play sessions for children and infrastructure services. She says: 'Soft outcomes are important to an organisation such as ours as so much of what we do is based around people and their quality of life.'

You can measure soft outcomes by using observation, interviews, questionnaires and case notes. Always try to involve service users. Establish a baseline of aspects of behaviour or attitudes you want to measure and compare them over time.

She argues that, by measuring soft outcomes, an organisation also demonstrates that it recognises all the benefits that a project can offer. For example, a project may ostensibly be about recycling furniture. Outputs of this could easily be measured but the soft outcomes, for example volunteers gaining more confidence or interpersonal skills, are equally valid. 'Whilst a project is set up to achieve a specific purpose, there are often outcomes that are slightly more difficult to measure but equally important.'

### **Further info**

SOUL Record: contact Clayton Anderson at the Research Centre, City College Norwich on (01603) 773464, email: canderso@ccn.ac.uk or visit [www.theresearchcentre.co.uk/soul](http://www.theresearchcentre.co.uk/soul).

Triangle Consulting, tel: 01273 555 650 or visit: [www.triangleconsulting.co.uk](http://www.triangleconsulting.co.uk)

For Performance Hub resources on measuring soft outcomes, visit: [www.performancehub.org.uk/achievemore4](http://www.performancehub.org.uk/achievemore4)  
[www.performancehub.org.uk/trackprogress](http://www.performancehub.org.uk/trackprogress)