London Housing Foundation
IMPACT Programme briefing paper

Putting outcomes into practice: A guide to developing IT-based outcome data management

Contents

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Introduction

Many homelessness organisations are aware of the need to gather information on their clients' outcomes. However, although many organisations have begun gathering this kind of information, many are struggling with how to store and analyse the data. This is proving to be a major barrier to successfully implementing an outcomes focus. As one organisation said,

> *Outcomes management will not happen in the sector unless there's a simple way to do it. Everyone believes in it but the recording of it is a nightmare.*

During Phase Two of the London Housing Foundation's *Impact through Outcomes* programme (2004-5), research was carried out to investigate the different systems that homelessness organisations were developing for managing their outcome data. What emerged was that very few organisations actually had systems in place that were meeting their needs for outcome data management and many felt strongly that they needed to develop their IT capacity in order to respond to this. Organisations were taking a variety of approaches to tackling the problem and were keen to share experiences and learn from each other.

This guide brings together learning from organisations who have developed, or are in the process of developing, IT systems to help them manage their outcome data. It acknowledges that there is no single solution to this issue; organisations start this journey from different points and have different visions of where they are headed.

This guide begins by addressing the key questions that organisations need to ask themselves before developing an IT-based outcome data management system. It then examines three case studies, based on interviews with organisations who are at various stages of developing such a system for themselves. These case studies inform the final section of this paper, a practical action plan for organisations wishing to take forward this work.

The appendices provide information on the different types of software used in managing outcome data, as well as a list of some of the main systems currently in use, or under development. It also presents a flow chart for identifying the key points at which outcomes data can be collected and includes some sample spreadsheets that can be used for simple outcome data management.

Section one: The key questions

When your organisation first considers using IT to manage data on your clients' outcomes, there are likely to be some key questions that you face. These fundamental questions highlight issues you need to take account of in working towards an IT-based outcome data management system.

Why use an IT system for outcomes?

Some organisations, particularly smaller ones, may wonder if they actually need an IT system for managing their outcome data, or may have reservations about the impact this may have on their way of working:

- Many will be concerned about the impact of imposing new demands on their already over-stretched frontline staff and managers.
- Some may suspect that they will encounter resistance from staff, some of whom may be fearful of a 'big brother' approach.
- Staff may feel that computerising the process of assessing and reviewing clients' situations will get in the way of building relationships with clients.

However, there are a number of reasons why computerising the process can be useful:

- A well-designed system should help improve your work with clients, making staff more effective and work processes simpler.
- Like using paper-based monitoring tools, computer systems standardise data collection, but also offer opportunities to integrate this with your other data systems, such as rent or case management.
- Computerising the process can also mean that a system can be designed to allow clients to carry out self assessments directly onto the computer. This can help overcome literacy and language barriers and may appeal to younger clients.
- Computer systems can store far more data much faster and, given an appropriate back-up system, more securely. Information can also be indexed, sorted and analysed in far more sophisticated ways than are feasible in a manual system.
- Fundraisers and managers can obtain information easily without needing to ask staff to sort through files or count records manually. A computer system allows standard reports to be designed and then automatically updated. It makes it easier to report on the same data in a range of ways to satisfy multiple funders.
- Outcomes for specific groups of clients can be evaluated separately. This can allow you to produce aggregate data in different ways across outcomes. Although it is possible to do all this from paper records, it is very time-consuming and it would be difficult to provide regular updates.
- It can provide a means for sharing information with other, similar organisations, as well as benchmarking.

What are the options for taking this forward?

Some organisations have already invested heavily in developing their IT system and could not consider starting afresh. Others may have little in place or have an unsatisfactory system and may therefore be in a good position to start from scratch. You will need to consider whether to:

- modify or extend your existing system,
- build a bespoke system, or
- buy an off-the-shelf system for your outcome data management.

In addition, you will need to decide whether to have a web-based system.

Some of the main advantages and disadvantages of these different approaches are discussed below.

Modifying or extending your existing system

Many organisations already use IT systems to manage a large amount of data on their clients. This may already include some data on clients' outcomes. So, the first consideration is whether there is the potential to develop your existing system to meet your outcome management needs.

Clearly this has major advantages:

- reduced cost
- existing data is not lost
- avoiding a major organisational shift to adopt a new system, as staff can continue using a system with which they are already familiar
- you have a system that grows to meet your needs.

However, there are also a number of disadvantages to consider:

- There will be some costs to the organisation in terms of staff time. You may need to pay for consultants to make modifications to your system.
- Staff may need additional training, particularly if you are using internal resources to develop your system.
- It can be difficult to build a new process onto an existing system as you may not be able to make changes without affecting how other areas work. Or you may be working with an old system, perhaps based on outdated software which is no longer supported or is not compatible with other systems you are running.
- You may have difficulties finding someone to troubleshoot or enhance the system you currently have or who can provide follow-up support.
- Your system may struggle to cope with the increased amount of data you wish to store or provide features you need.

Building a bespoke system

Organisations wishing to start from scratch in acquiring an IT-based outcome data management system will need to consider whether they wish to design a bespoke system for themselves or purchase an existing off-the-shelf system.

Designing a bespoke system does not have to be difficult. Many organisations already have the basic software needed to track outcomes. With a spreadsheet or a database (see appendix I for a description of these different types of software), many organisations can create their own system. However, many organisations find that they lack in-house skills and they need to commission IT consultants to build the system for them. Again, there are advantages and disadvantages to choosing to build a bespoke system:

Advantages:

- It may be cheaper than buying an off-the-shelf product.
- You end up with a system that is customised to your organisation's specific needs. You can ensure that it gathers and reports on all the information you need and links it all together.
- You only create the features that you need.
- You can use a software application that your organisation is already familiar with.
- If the system is developed in a common application (eg, Access), you should be able to find assistance to develop and update it.
- You control the planning and design of the system so that it can grow with your organisation.
- Developing your own system is particularly useful if you need to track information which is not commonly used by other organisations, and cannot be readily added to a standard database.

Disadvantages:

- You may need to buy in external help for developing your system. This can be expensive.
- The cost to the organisation in terms of staff time can be high.
- It is likely to require a high level of staff involvement in the design and planning of the database.
- You need to allow enough time for consulting with staff, piloting the system and carrying out any subsequent redesign.
- The process is likely to be lengthy and you may find that the requirements for your system change during that time.
- It may be difficult to make further changes to the system in the future, particularly if you rely on one person to develop your system. And you may have difficulties finding someone to provide follow-up support with the system in the future.
- Your system is unlikely to be compatible with what others in the sector are using.

Buying an off-the-shelf system

Buying an off-the-shelf system may involve purchasing a system that you install on your own computer network or alternatively it may involve buying a system that you access via the internet. Some of these different systems are reviewed in appendix II.

Advantages:

- It is usually quick to install and start using within your organisation.
- It should be attractive and user-friendly.
- The cost is usually fixed and can therefore be planned in the budget.
- The system comes with a manual and, in some cases, training.
- The provider has experience of setting up systems and should be able to guide you through the implementation and start-up of your new system.
- It may be possible to customise the system to your organisation's needs.
- You should be able to get good support if there are any problems with the product.
- The system can be upgraded regularly.
- It may offer compatibility with systems used by other organisations.

Disadvantages:

- The product may be expensive and may provide more features than you actually need.
- It may be expensive to customise the product and it may not be easy to get it to suit your organisation's particular needs, such as generating reports that are specific to your organisation. This means you may end up having to fit your work to the system, not the other way round.
- There may be annual updates or an annual fee that you will need to pay. If you are a large organisation, you may need to obtain a large amount of licences in order to ensure sufficient staff access to the system.
- You may have to pay for ongoing support.
- There may be big financial consequences if it proves not to be the 'right' system for your organisation.
- Detailed or specific data analysis may require considerable internal expertise.
- It may not be possible to link an off-the-shelf system for managing your outcome data with your other existing IT systems.
- None of the various off-the-shelf systems for general client management appear to also meet the need for outcome data management.

Using a web-based system

Using a web-based system has some additional advantages and disadvantages. Some of the advantages are:

- Your data is held off-site, avoiding risks of data loss through fire, theft or computer crashes.
- It is easy to provide access to the system from different sites across your organisation.
- Changes can be made to the system without disrupting your organisation.

However:

- Staff must have online access to get onto the system.
- Optimal performance requires fairly high-speed internet access.
- You may have concerns about the security and confidentiality of data held off-site.

There is no single approach that can be recommended over others. What you choose to do will be informed by your own needs and resources. However, in the following section, you can read about what other homelessness organisations are doing and some of their experiences in developing IT-based outcome data management.

Section two: Research and case studies

What others are doing – the research

How far they have got

Previous research amongst twenty-five homelessness organisations[1] found that the majority had some IT systems in place for recording general information on their clients. Further, around two-thirds of these systems were collecting some data on clients' outcomes. However, in many cases this was only on hard outcomes, and 80% of the organisations did not feel that what they had was actually meeting their outcome reporting needs.

The approaches they have taken

There was considerable variety in the type of system being used and how this had been developed. The majority of the organisations interviewed had either developed their own system or were modifying an off-the-shelf system to meet their outcome data needs:

- Ten had developed, or were in the process of developing, their own bespoke system (either using IT consultants or in-house), generally in Microsoft Access. One of these organisations was supplementing this with a separate off-the-shelf system for gathering soft outcome data.
- Twelve were using off-the-shelf systems which they had, to varying extents, then customised. Six of these were using a pre-designed, web-based system which was then customised to their needs. Some organisations were supplementing their off-the-shelf systems with data gathered through other systems.
- Three did not have an IT system in place although one of these was using Excel to carry out some monitoring for its funders.

The research focused on the larger homelessness organisations who usually had financial and staff resources to enable them to develop their IT. Even so, it found that many of these organisations had faced enormous challenges in developing a system to manage their outcome data, that the process was lengthy and often difficult and that many felt they were still working towards this. However, they felt that this work was of great importance in enabling easier reporting to their funders', such as Supporting People, as well as enabling them to measure their clients' progress for their own benefit and that of their clients.

Case studies

The following case studies describe three organisations' journeys in developing an IT-based outcome data management system, and highlight what has helped and hindered them in the process.

[1] Parkinson, D. (2005) *Putting an outcomes focus into practice: The need for IT-based outcome data management systems.* London Housing Foundation.

Central and Cecil

- Central and Cecil is a housing association working across thirteen London boroughs and providing services to around 1600 tenants.
- These services include hostel accommodation and support to around 64 homeless women as well as a range of residential, sheltered and supported housing options for elderly people and people with mental health support needs.
- They have about 350 frontline staff and an IT department of three.

Central and Cecil are currently developing a 'hostel management information database' for their hostels for homeless women. They decided to focus on their services to homeless women as this area attracts the most interest in terms of tenants' outcomes. In future they hope to expand the database to other areas of their services.

This work has been led by the fundraising team, who found they needed more information for funders on their tenants' outcomes, and wanted to be able to demonstrate more clearly the difference their services were making. However, they were also led by the belief that the process was essential for the organisation for its own learning and development and have sought to ensure others have taken this on board.

The system is a based on a Microsoft Access database and was developed in-house by the fundraising team. The database provides a user-friendly series of forms, which staff use to input the following:

- Core tenant information (eg, age, ethnic origin, tenancy start and end dates, referral source)
- Information on tenants' issues and needs (eg, mental health, physical health, drug and/or alcohol problems as well as support needs such as literacy, numeracy, confidence, motivation), which can be periodically reviewed
- Activity/output recording (ie, services received, date and session time)
- Hard outcomes (eg, attended job interview, took up employment, started training, gained qualification, moved into own accommodation).

This enables Central and Cecil to report on:

- the background of their tenants
- the types and amount of services they receive
- soft outcomes, for example improvements in confidence or motivation
- hard outcomes, for example the numbers gaining employment or moving into independent accommodation.

The design of the database followed an extensive consultation process which involved meetings with all the key workers, personal development officers and managers who would be using the database. It also took account of the Housing Corporation, Single Regeneration Budget and Supporting People's reporting requirements. The development of the database was also discussed by local working groups that fed into a steering group, led by a senior member of the board of trustees. This ensured that the process was open to all but also elevated its status and ensured it was subject to close scrutiny from senior staff.

Although they found it relatively straightforward to specify the data to be collected and the range of reports that would be needed, the main difficulty they encountered was in building the Access database. This was largely because the fundraising team did not have up-to-date skills on Access design.

Nonetheless, the database has now been finished and is ready to be piloted across two hostels from April 2005. It has been demonstrated to all future users and a simple user guide distributed. After six months, when a full review of the database will be carried out, the organisation will be in a better position to comment on how the database is working.

Borderline

- Borderline is a housing advice, advocacy and support centre in London which assists homeless and insecurely housed Scots.
- They run a drop-in centre and a helpline and provide practical support. They have around 1000 clients and have contact with about 300 new clients each year.
- They have a staff of five, of whom three provide direct support to clients.

Over the last three years, Borderline has been developing a client information database. Their previous database was not working well and they decided to start from scratch. They talked to a range of IT providers but found that they were too small to be of interest to these companies. As a result, they commissioned the company who currently also provided their general IT maintenance. They also negotiated a discount by paying in full upfront.

They drew up the specification for their new system by talking to staff and looking at the information they needed for reporting to funders and for their annual report. At the time, Borderline felt they had arrived at a comprehensive brief for the work but looking back on it, they now feel they should have invested more time at this stage in getting the specification as detailed as possible. In particular, they felt they should have been clearer about the reporting expectations they had of the database as this is the area with which they are now least satisfied. The developers met with them periodically during the development phase but Borderline generally felt that communication with them was very poor.

The system was finally installed in April 2003. Some basic training of staff was provided but, with hindsight, this is another area in which Borderline wished they had asked for more support. The system provides a means to record:

- Their contact with clients (who they see, when, why and who they are seen by)
- The actions taken
- Changes in clients' circumstances (a narrative section accompanied by tick boxes).

Since its installation, the system has had numerous technical problems which have meant that staff are not keen on using the system to input data and managers do not have the data available from which to produce reports. They are currently negotiating with the IT company to amend and develop the system so that it meets their needs.

The main lessons that Borderline would like others to draw from their experiences are:

- To draw up a detailed specification, covering even the most basic questions, especially around reporting.
- To talk to others in the sector.
- To invest in staff training and support.
- To avoid paying upfront as this reduces the amount of leverage you then have over the work.

The Croydon Association for Young Single Homeless

- The Croydon Association for Young Single Homeless (CAYSH) provides housing advice and supported accommodation for homeless young people.
- They work with around 120 young people in their supported housing services and provide advice to around 1000 young people per year.
- Around 22 staff are involved in providing frontline housing support.

Over the last year and a half, CAYSH have been developing a computer system for monitoring and client recording. Their initial interest in adopting an outcomes focus was inspired by the London Housing Foundation's work in this area. It also came about as a response to the changes in Supporting People funding.

CAYSH spent considerable time researching and talking to other organisations about what systems they were using and how well these were working for them. Through this process, CAYSH came to the conclusion that they did not wish to develop a bespoke system, feeling that this brought with it a risk of being stranded with a static product. They also realised that none of the bespoke systems that other organisations were using could be easily transferred to their own organisation. They concluded that a customised off-the-shelf product was the best way forward.

Prior to installing the new system, CAYSH had relied solely on paper-based records and Excel spreadsheets for record keeping and monitoring. As a result, one of the key elements of successfully moving the organisation to IT-based client monitoring was heavy investment in staff training. CAYSH's Trustees were also brought on board and allocated a 'healthy' budget for the development of the organisation's IT. This had been identified as a key service improvement in their business plan and was also seen as a major factor in securing a good review from Supporting People.

Having researched the market, CAYSH found two or three products that met their criteria. They selected a new system whose development they felt they could, to some extent, influence to suit their needs. They then spent several months 'just talking with the system developers'. They also acquired various demonstration versions of the system, which they installed on computers accessible to a crosssection of staff, and encouraged staff to try it out. Through this, they carried out both formal and informal evaluation of the system and ensured staff were involved in the process.

They also took care to ensure that staff were kept informed and were clear about the benefits that adopting the system would bring. Initially, the majority of their staff were somewhat resistant to the idea of using an IT-based system to record their work. However, this resistance has now been overcome and staff are largely very positive about the system. Some staff are even keen to take it beyond what it can currently deliver, which CAYSH sees as a real sign that the staff have adopted the system fully.

CAYSH are very satisfied with the company who developed the system and are satisfied with the system itself. The system allows them to:

- Record services accessed
- Monitor key review stages and milestones, identifying the progress clients are making in training and employment
- Track people's movements on from the projects.

The system is already allowing them to meet all their external reporting needs and is beginning to provide them with information that they could not produce before. However, it does not yet have a mechanism to incorporate clients' own assessments of their progress, which is something CAYSH feel is missing from their work. They feel this is still a very new area of work and want to develop it further.

The main learning points they feel others should consider are:

- To allow enough time for the whole process
- To be really clear why you are doing it and to have a healthy disregard for IT as the solution to all your problems
- Not to try and reinvent the wheel
- To involve staff and keep them informed.

These case studies illustrate some of the different approaches taken by organisations in working towards IT-based outcome data management. Whilst one organisation developed its own bespoke system using internal resources, another chose to employ external system developers and, in the final example, another chose to use an off-the-shelf product. These approaches were not straightforward and, clearly, only serve as examples of different organisations' experiences. However, all three case studies highlight some key issues that inform the following section of this guide, a practical guide for organisations working towards IT-based outcome data management.

Section three: Moving forwards – an action plan

The final section of this guide sets out an action plan for organisations wishing to develop IT-based outcome data management. It discusses the internal and external factors that organisations should take into account during this process and gives ideas of possible solutions to these different issues. However, it does not aim to provide a prescriptive guide, nor can it provide a linear model for developing IT-based outcome data management.

Preparatory work

Clarify your reporting needs

Your funders' reporting requirements will affect the type of information you want your system to manage. However, you are also likely to have internal requirements for management information, such as for annual reports and reports to your management committee. You may also need additional information for organisational development as well as in your individual work with clients.

Furthermore, it is important to look ahead and think about any developments that might affect your information needs. It is likely that your system will take months, sometimes years, to develop and anticipating what may arise in that time will help reduce the amount of further change needed during the development of your system. It is important to design something that will be flexible enough to adapt to changing external standards. For example, some organisations are thinking ahead to anticipated changes in Supporting People funding requirements.

Being clear on what data you want your system to store

Outcomes data

Measuring outcomes is about gathering data on the changes that occur in clients' lives. These are either personal changes (eg, attitudes, behaviour), often referred to as 'soft outcomes', or in changed circumstance (eg, gaining employment, moving into independent accommodation), generally referred to as 'hard' outcomes.

You need to decide upon the type of outcomes you wish to measure and the level of detail you wish to gather. You may only wish to focus on clients' hard outcomes. Or, you may want to gain a deeper understanding of the changes taking place in your clients' lives through measuring soft outcomes. This approach is particularly valuable when hard outcomes are not always likely to be achieved for all your clients or where your achievement may be beyond a funding or reporting deadline.

The type of outcome data your system will gather will be also be determined by the nature of your clients and the contact your staff have with them. For example:

- For organisations with only minimal, perhaps one-off contact with clients, tracking change over time is very difficult.
- Short-term, emergency services to anonymous, highly mobile clients are inherently difficult to track.
- Outreach staff may have little access to computers.

- For organisations with limited contact with clients or with a particularly wide user group (as in the case of campaigning or helpline organisations), it may be impossible to track every user and the service they receive and then link this in with the effect on them.

In cases like these, the organisation might consider a system that focuses on monitoring outputs and only carrying out limited, periodic assessment of outcomes.

At the very outset, ensuring that your organisation is clear on what outcomes it wants to measure is critical, as this will inform the basis of the system you develop. The guide, *Managing Outcomes: A Guide for Homelessness Organisations*[2] provides a useful overview of the process of identifying and measuring your outcomes. The London Housing Foundation's website also provides a range of other tools to help organisations identify their outcomes. The process of identifying and agreeing organisational outcomes can be a lengthy one but is also extremely valuable in ensuring clarity and focus for the organisation.

Other data

You will also need to think about being able to make the link between your clients' outcomes and other relevant information such as:

- Clients' presenting needs
- Their demographic profile
- The services they receive from you.

Only by linking these three pieces of information together with the data on your clients' outcomes can a real picture be formed of how your organisation is helping your clients. Too often, organisations have begun gathering information on their outcomes when they have not yet established a sound system for gathering data on their outputs or on their clients' demographic profile and presenting needs.

Ensuring you have tools to collect data on these outcomes

Once your organisation has identified its outcomes, you are likely to find that you are already gathering information on some of these. However, you may need to revise or develop tools to gather other outcome data that is not currently being collected. These tools may be paper-based (eg, assessment forms) or they may be computer-based. In both cases, ensuring that staff are using them well, through providing good training and ongoing support, is crucial.

The briefing paper, *Putting an Outcomes Focus into Practice: Sharing Lessons from the Homelessness Sector*[3] includes a description of some of the tools other organisations are using for this, many of which are available for sharing or adapting. *Managing Outcomes* will also help you develop your own tools.

[2] Burns, S. and Cupitt, S. (2003) *Managing Outcomes: A Guide for Homelessness Organisations.* London Housing Foundation.

[3] Parkinson, D. (2005) *Putting an outcomes focus into practice: The need for IT-based outcome data management systems.* London Housing Foundation.

Getting buy in

It is important to think about your organisation's emotional capacity for taking on a new system. You may have to overcome resistance if you are to make changes to your way of working, perhaps a reluctance to use IT or a more fundamental lack of understanding about the value of an outcomes-based approach. Managers will need to oversee the implementation of the new system in their teams and so will need to be clear about the benefits that the new system will bring.

Many organisations who are in the process of developing their IT-based outcome data management have emphasised the importance of involving their stakeholders – staff, clients, management committee – right from the start. Some organisations also felt that they had underestimated the extent to which they would have to overcome concerns and difficulties that staff had in adapting to a new system.

Leadership of the project at a high level should provide direction and impetus but also ensure that staff at all different levels are involved. It is crucial that all your staff, including your director and management committee must understand the value that the new system will bring. Otherwise, the task is likely to be overtaken by other demands.

Talking to other organisations

Looking at how other organisations have taken forward their outcome data management is also extremely valuable. Other organisations may have a designed a system that you can use as a model, or even purchase or share. Simply by visiting other organisations, you may get ideas for how to refine your own system or get suggestions for other systems or IT suppliers. Others' experiences will also help you decide which features are most relevant and important for your own system.

Allowing enough time

Be prepared for the fact that developing a sound outcome data management system takes time. It can easily take an organisation six months or more of preparation before embarking on the design phase, and it can take as long as three to five years before your system will generate findings that really reflect your organisation's effectiveness. Rushing the process decreases the likelihood that the findings will be meaningful.

Moving into action

Setting up a group to lead the process

It is fundamental to the successful design and implementation of the system to identify a team to lead the development of your outcome data management system, and to allocate time and resources to them. This team needs to:

- Include individuals from a senior level in order to ensure they can keep driving the process forwards.
- Involve individuals who have a good grasp of IT.
- Have a thorough understanding of which outcomes your organisation wishes to measure and why.

- Have a good understanding of the practicalities of service delivery in order to take account of the way you work (eg, at what point staff sit down with clients, or whether certain people are likely to be resistant to using computers).

The team needs to agree a timescale for the work, meet regularly and consult thoroughly with others throughout the process. This team should take the lead in the rest of the steps described in this section.

Assessing your capacity

The size of your organisation, the way you work and your resources are fundamental to developing a system that fits your organisation. Practical issues to think about include:

- The number of staff who need access to computers, the amount of access they need and what level of access can realistically be achieved.
- Levels of staff skills and confidence in using computers. Different types of staff will need different skills. Frontline staff will generally only need to input data, managers are likely to need to analyse and produce reports from that data.
- Whether staff need access to the system from different locations. In which case you will need to consider how your system will be networked or whether it will be accessed remotely (eg, via a web-based system).
- Whether you have internal resources for providing IT support and training for staff or whether you will need to outsource this.
- Your overall budget for IT development.

Drawing up a detailed specification

A detailed specification is a comprehensive description of every piece of information you wish your system to collect, and how it all links together. This is crucial in enabling your system developer to understand the demands you will have of the system.

You will need to consult widely on your specification to ensure it reflects all the needs of your organisation. Decide who will be responsible for collecting, entering, and analysing outcomes data and involve them in the design. This will ensure that all the future system users have a picture of what the new system will provide for them.

What information it needs to record

You will want to consider whether you want your system to record:

- Demographic information (eg, age, gender, ethnic background of your clients)
- Referral information (eg, the agencies who refer your clients, when they were referred and why)
- Data on clients' presenting needs and circumstances (eg, offending history, health, employment, housing)

- Services received (eg, accommodation provided, career guidance, grants, support activities)
- Inputs (eg, time spent providing services, resources utilised, staffing)
- Hard outcomes (eg, employment gained, qualifications achieved)
- Changes in soft outcomes (eg, changes in clients' attitudes, behaviour or lifestyles)
- Qualitative information (eg, workers' comments).

To help you devise your specification you might track the different journeys that clients take through your services and log every piece of information that you are likely to want to record on them at each step of the way (see appendix III).

As you identify the key requirements of your new system, it is important to consider the balance between hard and soft data. Many organisations currently find that their funders want numerical data, yet also realise that this data does not fully describe their clients' outcomes. By designing a system to capture data on clients' soft outcomes as well as by allowing staff to record qualitative data, you will be able to present a more thorough and balanced report of your outcomes.

What it needs to be able to do

You may also wish to consider whether you want your system to:

- Provide a casework tool (eg, a place for key workers to record their contact with clients and perhaps reminders for future activities)
- Enable clients to carry out self assessments
- Provide a means for workers to record how they feel their clients are progressing
- Provide different types of records for different services
- Share data on clients between services across the organisation and perhaps even with other organisations
- Store sensitive information, for example, by limiting access to certain fields or tables of information or by setting up password and user management features to restrict access
- Deal with multiple measurements over time, recording regular client reviews and demonstrating progress
- Produce visual data that could be used with clients or other stakeholders.

You should also collect and attach to your specification everything that you want your system to take account of, including:

- All the data gathering forms you currently use (eg, client assessments, reviews, exit interviews)
- A summary of the information required in the various reports that you need to be able to produce, for example for your funders or management committee
- Any other tools that staff currently use to collect and store information (eg, Excel spreadsheets, diaries, notes) that your system may need to encompass or link to.

Using external IT consultants

Using external consultants can bring both expertise and a fresh perspective to an organisation. It also means that you are not relying on your own staff resources for the actual development of your system. However, as the experience of Borderline has shown, it can also prove to be difficult and does not necessarily deliver the product you had envisaged. Moreover, external consultants may not have a good understanding of the way you work.

It is likely that your consultants will be working with you for many months, even years and that you will need to turn to them in the future for further modifications to your system. Therefore, it is worth investing time and resources in selecting the right consultants and talking to other organisations about their experiences of consultants. In choosing your consultants, bear in mind that:

- Consultants who have experience in working with similar organisations are more likely to have a good understanding of what you want to achieve.
- They need sound IT development skills as well as the ability to translate technical language into something that everyone can understand.
- You need to ensure they share your understanding of outcome measurement.

Once selected, your consultants must be partners with you and your staff in developing your IT-based outcome data management system. Good, regular communication and agreed timescales are crucial. A contract setting out your expectations of each other is vital as is clarity about ongoing support options and costs.

Consider interim solutions

Since the process of developing an IT-based outcome data management system may well be a lengthy one, you may like to consider using interim solutions so that data that is being gathered during this time is not lost. An Excel spreadsheet or even a simple database can be developed to capture this data and you may well find that this data can them be imported into your new system later (for example, an Excel spreadsheet can be imported into Access and vice versa). The spreadsheets in appendices IV and V can be adapted and used in this way. Adopting an interim system also means that you can refine and review your outcome data gathering process before you spend time and money committing to the whole system.

Piloting in one area first

Some organisations, like the Central and Cecil Housing Trust, choose to begin implementing a new system in one specific area or service and then expand outwards from there. This has the advantage of allowing the organisation to focus on one area, and see the process through in that area before attempting a wider-scale operation. Typically, the area chosen will be one that is of particular interest to funders as this means that the organisation can benefit from improved information gathering processes as early as possible.

Bringing staff and resources up to speed

All the staff who will use the new system will need to be trained so that they will know how to use it properly. Even staff who will not be inputting data will need training so that they know what new data is accessible and can use the information in their work. It will also need to take account of staff leaving and new staff arriving at different points in the process.

You may also need to replace old computers or set up internet access in different locations. You may need to update your software. It is important that, along with investing in the system itself, you invest in the people and the mechanisms they will use so that technical hitches do not frustrate and undermine people when they start using the new system.

Consider Data Protection issues

The Data Protection Act (DPA) 1998 has significant consequences for homelessness organisations collecting personal data on their clients. All computerised processing of personal data and many structured manual records are subject to the provisions of the Act. For further information, you can obtain a fact sheet from http://www.informationcommissioner.gov.uk.

Implementing your system

Piloting the system

As your system emerges from the design stage, it is crucial that you ensure it is as user-friendly and bug-free as possible before you launch it. Ensure it has been thoroughly checked even before piloting it.

The trial run must last long enough to encompass all the different data collection events. It must involve both a representative group of staff that will use the system as well as measurements from a representative group of your clients. This is really important in ensuring you can assess the adequacy of your new system from the perspective of different system users and clients at different points in time. Often this means you will need to pilot the system for several months.

Everyone should be clear that the purpose of the trial run is to identify problems. Throughout the pilot, you should ensure that you actively seek feedback from staff and other users where relevant. You will then need to allow time to implement the necessary changes.

Being open to change as you go along

It is likely that as you evolve and implement your system, you will find that some processes will need to be reorganised in order to collect data more efficiently. Reorganisation will probably evolve over time rather than all at once, making flexibility throughout the process important.

After implementation

Monitoring quality

Having piloted and then rolled out the system, you will need to monitor the quality of the data that it generates. Bear in mind that poor quality data may be due to poor data entry or data gathering. It may be that the client assessment skills of your staff need reviewing. You will need to ensure that your staff are consistent in their approach to assessing clients and accurate in recording this data. Often, organisations find that with the pressure of work, the data generated from client assessments tends to deteriorate. Alternatively, it may be that the data analysis processes need adjustment to ensure they are producing accurate reports of your work.

Ongoing staff training and support

You will also need to ensure that you plan how new staff will be taught how to use the system. As time goes by, people often forget about using certain functions or the importance of entering certain pieces of information. It is therefore important to provide high-quality initial training to all staff as well as ongoing support to existing staff in using the system.

Reviewing your system

Finally, it is crucial to build in regular reviews of your system, both from users' perspectives and from that of your organisation as a whole. If an outcome data management system is truly effective, services will change and new services will develop as older ones are phased out. Change will be continuous.

Conclusion

A computerised outcome data management system should bring benefits to staff in their day-to-day work, by reducing the amount of paperwork they need to complete and streamlining work practices. Organisationally, it should also bring greater effectiveness as staff at different levels and in different teams can access the information they need. It will provide new information for management and staff that will enable organisations to assess and improve their effectiveness, and keep up with funders' increasing requirements for outcome data.

However, the process of developing and implementing an IT system to manage outcome data requires considerable commitment and investment. The development of an IT-based system to manage outcome data cannot be undertaken before the organisation is clear on the outcomes it wishes to measure. Working through the process of identifying outcomes also serves to create buy-in from all levels of the organisation, which is a key element of the process. Consulting staff and involving them in the design of the new system will help ensure that staff are keen to use the system and can see that it will improve their ability to do their jobs effectively.

Other organisations' experiences point to the fact that the time, cost and complexity of the whole project will probably be far greater than you anticipate. Programming errors often hamper software design. Then, as the system begins to operate, new sections may need to be added or modified. Hardware and software will need to be replaced. Staff training will be an ongoing process. The process is likely to entail significant changes in the way your organisation functions. Thorough planning, flexibility in the implementation process and a clear strategy from the start will guide the process towards a successful conclusion.

Outcome monitoring should measure the progress of clients and, ideally, it should also link to other systems used by the organisation, such as case management and financial administration. However, such integration may not always be feasible and each organisation will need to decide to what level it wishes to take its outcome monitoring. Even a very simple computer-based system to collect outcome data will radically improve an organisation's capacity to report on and develop its services.

As the homelessness sector moves towards IT-based outcome data management, organisations are likely to discover new uses for the information. They may find, for example, that such information may also be useful in efforts to advocate for changes in public policy. When the homelessness sector as a whole can show evidence of its work, it will be in a stronger position to influence the direction that the government takes in responding to the needs of homeless people and in providing the services that will make a difference in their lives.

Appendices

Appendix I: Types of software

Spreadsheet applications (sometimes referred to simply as *spreadsheets*) are computer programmes that simulate a paper spreadsheet or worksheet. They are documents which help you organise data in rows and columns of cells. Each cell can contain words, a number, or a formula. A formula does calculations with the numbers in other cells. A spreadsheet can also make charts and graphs automatically.

Spreadsheet applications are 'flat' meaning that you can only store data in rows and columns and therefore cannot create complex filing systems such as databases do. They are therefore mainly used for carrying out calculations, data analysis and for managing financial information. They can only be used by one user at a time. *Examples: Lotus 123, Excel, Quattro Pro.*

Statistical packages are designed exclusively to analyse data, using complicated mathematical operations on many variables at a time. Some systems can only use numeric data. Typically, data is exported from a database to a statistical package for analysis. *Examples: Stata, SAS, SPSS.*

Databases are the most common software used to track outcomes. Data can be recorded as text or numbers and is then linked together to create a sort of electronic filing system. Today, most databases are relational databases that link together several tables of information based on common variables. Data is accessed though forms or queries that can search for and assemble information from different sources within the database. There is great variation among systems, from those that are extremely user-friendly to those that only a programming expert can design. Databases can be accessed by multiple users at any one time and different levels of access can be set. *Examples: Dbase, Access, Approach, Oracle, FoxPro, Filemaker Pro.*

Appendix II: An overview of some of the systems available

The London Housing Foundation **has not evaluated, and does not endorse, any of these products**. If you believe any of these products may be helpful for your organisation, please contact them direct for further information. Further information on the systems and some of the tools mentioned below can also be found in the briefing paper, *Putting an Outcomes Focus into Practice: Sharing Lessons from the Homelessness Sector*[4].

Off-the-shelf systems

Name	**Spiritlevel**
Organisation	Philantech Ltd is a commercial company jointly owned by the Foyer Federation and Fairbridge, which distributes and supports the use of Spiritlevel.
Description	Spiritlevel is a CD-rom based system, developed by Fairbridge and the Foyer Federation, providing a self assessment tool for measuring changes in young people's attitudes to their quality of life. It is designed to be completed by the client, sometimes assisted by a worker.
[5]	It does not currently link into any system.
£[6]	Available as a CD-Rom on a twelve month licence basis. This can then be networked or used on individual computers/laptops. The cost is dependent on the amount of users per organisation. There is also additional cost for training, which at least one person should attend, at a cost of £75.00 per person.
Contact	Kate Stobbs, tel: 07956 130349, email: info@philantech.co.uk Website:http://www.spiritlevel.org.uk/

Name	**QUAD Street and Youth Work Recording System**
Organisation	QME Systems is a commercial organisation providing a range of monitoring and evaluation software systems, training, bespoke development and consultancy.
Description	These are monitoring and evaluation software systems that allow organisations to keep detailed records of their projects, clients, groups and progress. Organisations set their own indicators with each client, but the system allows the capture of both soft and hard outcome data through a series of forms. The data it generates can

[4] Parkinson, D. (2005) *Putting an outcomes focus into practice: The need for IT-based outcome data management systems.* London Housing Foundation.
[5] = System implications
[6] £ = Cost

be aggregated and analysed simply and at intervals chosen by the user.

QUAD Street can be set up to record scales and responses.

£ The cost depends on the number of users / sort of network in use. A single system is likely to be roughly £350 and a networked system about £150 per user and £500 for the server files. The stand-alone Youth Work Recording System is currently £50.

Contact QME Systems Ltd, tel: (0131) 660 6256
Email: enquiries@qmesystems.com; website: www.qmesystems.com

Name **MAP (Mungo's Action Planning)**

Organisation St Mungo's

Description This software system is currently being piloted. The system will record outcomes but will also look at interventions and client work in the light of scores on the Star.

It is being programmed using Cold Fusion and Java Applets, and generates reports using Crystal reports.

[7] The Outcomes Star

£ St Mungo's are happy to share it when it is completed in 2005 but have not yet decided on what basis this will be.

Contact The Performance Support Unit
Tel: 0208 740 9968, email: PerfomanceSupportUnit@mungos.org

Web-based options

Name **LINK**

Organisation Resource Information Service (RIS) is a specialist information charity providing directories, websites and information systems about services for people in need.

Description This is an online client recording system developed by RIS. It can be adapted to the needs of individual organisations. It provides a means to record clients' profile, action taken and where clients move on to. It can also demonstrate clients' movement across services within an organisation or across organisations who

[7] = link to data-gathering tool

agree to share data. It is compliant with Supporting People and CORE (housing association and local authority lettings and sales monitoring).

LINK allows organisations to record simple outcomes and can be set up to collect data on soft indicators. It has not been designed as an outcome data management system, but RIS are currently developing some of their clients' systems for this purpose.

Online forms and reports can be built on LINK and these can be used for outcome management. For example, a form and reports are currently being designed for Off the Streets and into Work (OSW) LINK which will record and report on client data from OSW's Employability Map.

Data from client assessments is entered into the individual organisation's LINK systems. The system calculates a percentage score for each domain/outcome area in the form (eg, communication skills, confidence, motivation) and produces an onscreen or downloadable report. This report provides a picture of the client's progress by comparing the scores from their questionnaires over time.

£ There is a charge for organisations who wish to have a LINK client recording system. Organisations in London may be able to benefit from a current Bridge House Trust/RIS initiative to provide subsidised versions of the Link system for smaller agencies.

Contact Jane Finucane, LINK Project Manager, Resource Information Service, Bramah House, 65-71 Bermondsey Street, London SE1 3XF Tel: 020 7939 0669/0651
Email: jane.finucane@ris.org.uk Website: www.ris.org.uk

Name	**Bizweb**
Organisation	Centrepoint
Description	The Bizweb system connects with ‘Centrepoint LINK’ through a data download function. On a monthly basis, client records will be uploaded from ‘Centrepoint LINK’ and this will provide a means to run progress reports. The system will allow Centrepoint to produce reports and numerical tables based on clients’ outcomes and these can also be linked to actions and interventions. Although there is no causal link between intervention and outcomes, the system will give some indication of the progress young people are making in relation to the support they receive.
	Development Wheel and Life-Web
£	The site is currently in the design and implementation phase one stage. It will be evaluated and continuously improved through a development phase two stage. Centrepoint is keen to share and disseminate their learning experiences of developing the site and are considering ways in which other organisations could use or adapt the web-based assessment tools through partnership working.
Contact	Jo Milne, Head of Service Improvement & Development, Tel. 020 7426 5300, email: jmilne@centrepoint.org

Appendix III: Data gathering opportunities

Tracking a client's journey through your organisation can help you to identify information collection points that should inform the way you develop your system.

Client's journey	Information recorded
Client makes first contact with your organisation	• Client's name • Referral source • Date of contact • Type of contact • Action taken
Client is registered/accepted as a client	• Data from initial needs assessment data, for example, background of client (demographic profile) • Client's presenting needs (ie, baseline outcomes data)
Client meets with a key worker on a regular basis	• Dates of sessions • Actions taken by keyworker eg, referrals made, training provided, support sessions offered • Progress made by client (eg, reviews of the initial assessment which provides the means to obtain data for outcome monitoring).
Client leaves the organisation	• Date client leaves • Reason for departure • Client's situation on departure – final outcomes
Follow-up of client after six months	• Tracking of ex-clients over time, when possible, allows data for long-term outcomes to be gathered.

Appendix IV: A sample spreadsheet for monitoring hard outcomes

The following example provides a very basic spreadsheet which could be created in Excel and used to gather some basic data on client outcomes.

Basic info (identification and demographic)	First name	John	Marie
	Surname	James	Fernandez
	Gender	M	F
	Ethnic origin	White British	S. American
	Date of Birth	25/08/87	04/11/1971
	ID number	1	2
	Date of first contact	03/02/2004	08/05/2004
	Number of contacts to date	5	22
	Date of last contact	08/10/2004	06/01/2005
Presenting issues (baseline outcome data)	Homeless	yes	yes
	Drug problems	no	no
	Physical health problems	yes	yes
	Mental health problems	yes	no
Services accessed	Counselling	yes	no
	Nightshelter	yes	no
	Outreach	no	yes
Outcomes	Hostel accommodation found	yes	no
	Independent accommodation found	no	yes
	Registered with GP*	yes	yes
	Referred to Community Mental Health Team*	yes	no

* the use of GP/CMHT indicates improvements in physical health/mental health.

Appendix V: A sample spreadsheet for monitoring soft outcomes

The spreadsheet below could be used to enter numerical data from clients' assessments, where scales have been used. For example, an organisation may be using a process of initial assessments with clients, which are then repeated every three months. Clients may be asked to rate their situation, behaviour and feelings on a whole range of things on a scale of 1 – 10 (where 1 = extremely poor and 10 = excellent). A comparison of the difference between the two sets of figures allows a sense of progress to be ascertained.

	Client 1		Client 2		Client 3	
	First Assessment	Assessment after 3 months	First Assessment	Assessment after 3 months	First Assessment	Assessment after 3 months
Personal responsibility	3	6	6	7	7	10
Change	*+3*		*+1*		*+3*	
Living skills	2	8	5	5	6	8
Change	*+2*		*0*		*+2*	
Social networks	4	4	5	2	4	7
Change	*0*		*-3*		*3*	
Substance misuse	0	0	2	7	6	3
Change	*0*		*5*		*-3*	
Mental health	6	7	4	4	5	8
Change	*1*		*0*		*3*	
Physical health	3	3	7	5	4	6
Change	*0*		*-2*		*2*	
Use of time	5	5	9	10	2	8
Change	*0*		*1*		*6*	
Accomm-odation	4	8	2	2	4	6
Change	*4*		*0*		*2*	