A Practical Guide to Outcomes Tools

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1. Introduction

Outcomes tools are becoming an ever more prominent feature of service provision in the supported housing sector and other areas. Central government departments, inspection bodies, commissioners and service providers themselves are increasingly recognising their value both in promoting and evidencing client change. There are a significant number of tools available but, as far as we are aware, little written material that describes outcomes tools, what they are and how they differ. Choosing the right tool for a particular project or agency can therefore be a difficult job.

The purpose of this document is to help service managers choose a tool that works for them by describing the different types of outcomes tool, their benefits, and what makes a good tool. There is a companion document which provides detailed descriptions of 18 outcomes tools of relevance to supported housing and homelessness. Whilst the focus is on tools that are relevant to supported housing services, we believe it will also be helpful to other sectors in which workers support clients in making changes in their lives. This guide and the review are part of a suite of resources published by the London Housing Foundation which are available at: www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk. Details of this and other resources are contained in Appendix 1.

1.1 What is an outcomes tool?

Outcomes tools make it possible to assess the extent to which a service user has changed during the time they have been receiving a service.

It is, of course, possible to assess or describe change without an outcomes tool, but outcomes tools do it in a consistent and standardised way. This makes it possible to draw together information on a number of clients and give an overview of the change being achieved for a whole project or group of projects.

In order to achieve this the tool usually consists of a number of questions about the client's feelings, attitudes, behaviour, skills and abilities, living situation and relationships, or any combination of these. The questions focus on the areas the service intends to help the client change – in other words the intended service outcomes. The questions can take a number of different forms which are described later.

The tool is used with the client at least twice, preferably close to the beginning of their time with the service and again later once it is reasonable to expect that some changes have taken place. The difference between the first and second points gives the outcomes for the client at that point in time. The tool can be used more than twice, in which case it provides a picture of the client's journey towards the intended outcomes.

Outcomes tools can be used with all clients as an integral part of the key-work process, or they can be used with a sample of clients, or for a limited period of time to provide a snapshot of the changes taking place.

1.2 Why use an outcomes tool?

Using outcomes tools can provide a range of benefits:

Within key-work

- It clarifies and makes explicit for the service user and key-worker what the intended outcomes of the service are and provides a focus on these during the key-work session
- It can provide the service user and key-worker with an overview of the client's situation and, when the tool is used again, a clear sense of where they have or have not made progress
- It offers managers a quick way of taking an overview of a worker's case load, looking at what kind of clients they have and what kind of progress is being made

Within the project or agency

- It enables managers to take an overview of the achievements of a project or group of projects – what is being achieved, what is not being achieved and for whom. This can provide a basis for service development and improvement.
- It can be used to demonstrate to funders and other stakeholders what outcomes are being achieved. It can also be used to evidence starting need and highlight particular issues, for example the need for specialist services.

Across the sector

- It offers the possibility of drawing together learning about what kinds of services work for what kinds of clients as a basis for moving towards an evidence-based approach to the delivery of services

1.3 The contents of this guide

This guide is organised into four chapters. Following this introduction, chapter two describes the main ways that outcomes tools differ. Although this material may seem somewhat technical, once mastered it provides a very helpful map of the terrain, enabling the reader to quickly grasp the core features of any tool.

Chapter three provides guidelines for choosing a tool that meets your needs. There are two aspects to this. The first is finding a tool with core features that fit with your needs. The second is finding a good quality tool. Finally, chapter four gives an overview of the things to think about when implementing an outcomes tool.

2. Differences between tools

This chapter looks at the main ways in which outcomes tools differ from each other. Its primary purpose is to provide a framework for thinking about outcomes tools and ways of comparing them meaningfully with each other.

Outcomes tools vary in a number of ways. The most important differences are:

- The intended purpose
- The form that the questions take
- Whether it is underpinned by an explicit journey of change
- The client group it was developed for and the outcome areas it assesses

These four areas are described in turn below.

2.1 The intended purpose of the tool

Some outcomes tools are designed primarily to ***provide evidence of outcomes*** achieved by a service. The benefits they offer are:

- Enabling managers to take an overview of the achievements of a project or group of projects – what is being achieved, what is not being achieved and for whom. This can provide a basis for service development and improvement
- Demonstrating to funders and other stakeholders what outcomes are being achieved. It can also be used to evidence starting need and highlight particular issues, for example the need for specialist services
- Offering the possibility of drawing together learning about what kinds of services work for what kinds of clients as a basis for moving towards an evidence-based approach to the delivery of services

Some outcomes tools are designed both to ***provide evidence of outcomes and to support the key-work process***. In addition to those listed above, these tools offer the additional benefits of:

- Clarifying and making explicit for the service user and key-worker what the intended outcomes of the service are and providing a focus on these during the key-work session
- Providing the service user and key-worker with an overview of the client's situation and, when the tool is used again, a clear sense of where they have or have not made progress
- Offering managers a quick way of taking an overview of a worker's case load, looking at what kind of clients they have and what kind of progress is being made

2.2 The form that the questions take

The questions used in outcomes tools usually fall into one of these types:

Concrete questions about the client's situation at a particular moment in time. For example:

- Is the client registered with a GP?
- Does the client have a support need in relation to drugs and alcohol?
- How many times has the client visited an Accident and Emergency department in the last 6 months?

Subjective scales about how the client feels in relation to an area of their life. The different points on the scale are not precisely defined – it is more about how the client feels in relation to that area. For example:

- On a scale of 1-5, how satisfied are you with your housing situation, where one is very dissatisfied and five is very satisfied
- I feel confident and motivated: always, often, sometimes, infrequently, never

Defined Scales about where the client is on a journey of change towards an end outcome. The different points on the journey are defined so that if two clients are both said to be at point three on a scale of 1-10 it implies that they have achieved the same landmark(s) on the journey. The following example is taken from a tool called Measuring Change which was developed by Carr Gomm. The scale is called 'living with different types of people'.

I am happy being with people who are different to me. If they have different customs or ways of thinking and behaving, I respect this and try to understand the differences. I never use disrespectful language.
I am getting on pretty well with different people, although I still sometimes feel a little bit uncomfortable with them. I understand about their rights and that it's OK if people are different to me. I hardly ever use disrespectful language.
I am beginning to feel more comfortable with different people, but I still usually choose to be with people who are like me. I don't use disrespectful language as much as I used to.
I can sometimes be with people who are different to me, but I don't feel comfortable with them and I avoid them if I can. I understand the need to change the way I talk about people who are different to me.
I don't like having to be with people who are different to me. Other people have said they don't like the way I talk about people who are different to me. (The way I talk about them is not respectful.)

Most tools contain just one of these question types, but it is possible to include more than one.

2.3 Is there an explicit journey of change?

Tools using defined scales have to describe the different points on the journey towards the desired end outcome. Some tools base these descriptions on worker and client experience of what the steps tend to be. Other tools draw on worker and client experience to develop an explicit model of the steps involved in the change process. The definitions of different points on the journey are then based on this model of change.

This provides a consistency across scales and an overall coherence that is absent in tools which are not based on an explicit journey of change. It can also support clients in moving along their journey by drawing attention to the particular benefits and challenges of each stage of the journey and helping them have a sense of what to expect.

The journey of change underpinning the Outcomes Star is as follows:

Points 1 and 2: Client is not engaged with the issues they have in this area of their life. They are not interested in change in this area.

Points 3 and 4: Client now wants change, but is passive. They will go along with initiatives taken by others.

Points 5 and 6: Client now taking responsibility for change and recognising their role. They will start to take some initiative.

Points 7 and up: Client is starting to reap the rewards of the changes they have made and the new behaviours they are trying start to be self-reinforcing. They may still need support, especially when things go wrong, but as they progress up the final points of the scale they are more and more able to deal with difficulties on their own (or through their informal networks).

For more information about models/theories of change, have a look at www.theoryofchange.org

2.4 Client group and outcome areas

Most tools are developed with a particular client group (or groups) in mind, for example the Outcomes Star was developed for single homeless people. However, many tools are applicable to other client groups as well. In supported housing settings and other services which are working to help people change, the intended outcomes tend to fall into the following areas (not all tools include all these areas and they may be described differently in different tools):

Motivation
Self-esteem
Mental Health
Physical Health
Addiction
Offending
Personal Safety
Relationships/Social Networks

Use of time/training/employment/hobbies	Managing Accommodation
Managing Money	Literacy and Numeracy

3. Choosing a tool that is right for you

There are two things to consider when choosing an outcomes tool. The first is whether the tool meets your particular needs. The second is whether the tool is a good outcomes tool.

Section 3.1 below addresses the issue of whether the tool is suitable for your organisation. Section 3.2 addresses the question of what makes for a good outcomes tool.

3.1 Fit with your needs

There are four questions to consider when looking for an outcomes tool that fits the needs of your organisation or project:

- What your primary purpose in using an outcomes tool is
- Which outcome areas you need the tool to cover
- Whether to use a generalist tool that is applicable to a wide variety of client groups or a specialist tool that is specifically tailored to the needs of one client group
- Whether to use an off-the-shelf tool or develop your own bespoke tool

These are examined in turn below.

3.1.1 Purpose in using the tool

As described in section 2.1, outcomes tools can serve different purposes.

Some outcomes tools are designed primarily to ***provide evidence of outcomes*** achieved by a service. These tools are not designed to be used as an integral part of key-work and so are usually less helpful in this area. Some tools are designed to ***both provide evidence of outcomes and support the key-work process.*** The first thing to do when selecting a tool is to determine its purpose. Then you can select a tool that is suitable for this.

3.1.2 Outcome areas covered by the tool

The next thing to do is to identify what outcomes you want to measure. This is likely to be the same as the intended outcomes for the project. Then you can identify a tool which measures all of these outcomes.

3.1.3 Generalist or specialist tool

Having decided on your primary purpose in using the tool and the outcomes you need to measure, the next thing to decide is whether you want a generalist or a specialist tool. Generalist tools can be used with a wide range of client groups. Specialist tools have very specific questions that would only be relevant to the client group that they were developed for. In an organisation which works with a range of different client groups there are a number of different options:

1. Use a generic tool with all client groups
2. Use different tools for different client groups
3. Use one tool, but modify it where necessary to take account of differences between client groups.

In most cases we recommend the third option as it allows for consistency across services whilst taking into account important differences between client groups.

Different versions of the Outcomes Star are currently being developed for use in drug and alcohol services, domestic violence services, services for new parents and mental health services.

3.1.4 Off-the-shelf or bespoke tool

Finally, you need to consider whether you want to use an existing tool or develop your own. Although different service providers may offer different services and work in different ways with different clients, the outcomes they are aiming to achieve are often surprisingly similar. It is well worth reviewing the tools that are available already before developing your own. The advantages of using an off-the-shelf tool are:

- Developing a good tool takes considerable time and investment. The better tools have been tested, reviewed and tested again many times in order to achieve something that works well for clients and offers meaningful outcomes information.
- An existing tool may have guidelines, a training package and/or IT package to support it
- If you use a tried and tested tool it may have more credibility with funders. They may also prefer it because they are already familiar with it and therefore it is easier for them to understand the outcomes information you collect.
- If you use a tool that other agencies are using you may be able to share findings and learning more easily with other organisations.

The advantage of developing your own tool is that the process of engaging staff and clients in thinking about intended outcomes, and how they can be evidenced, helps to build an outcomes orientation within the agency that can be very energising. To make the most of the benefits both of using an existing tool and developing your own, we recommend using or adapting an existing tool where possible and engaging staff and clients in thinking about the outcomes of their service as part of the process of implementation.

3.2 What makes a good outcomes tool?

Once you have decided which type of tool you need, you can concentrate on how well it does the job. The material in this section is presented under three headings:

- Things to look for in all tools
- Special considerations for supporting key-work
- Special considerations for evidencing service outcomes

These sections provide guidance on things to look out for. The companion document **'Review of Outcomes Tools for the Homelessness Sector'** describes 5-point scales for a number of these aspects. These scales provide more detail on what, in our view, constitutes a good outcomes tool.

3.2.1 Things to look for in all tools

A thorough process of development and testing

Outcomes tools take time to develop and perfect. Even with the best background research, it is not until the tool is actually in use that it is possible to know how well it works with clients, and how useful the outcomes data it provides is for identifying the successes and failures within a service. Ideally the development should involve:

- Consultation with front-line workers and clients about the intended outcomes of the services in which the tool is to be used, landmarks in the journey towards these outcomes and the observable behaviours which indicate progress on the journey
- Consultation with managers and possibly funders regarding the information they require to assess and manage the services
- The development of a draft tool
- Piloting with all the types of service and client groups that the tool is intended to be used with, and modifications to the tool based on the feedback
- Research to demonstrate the reliability of the data
- Ideally the tool should also be validated by comparing its results to those of previously validated tools. However, where there is no existing tool this is not possible.
- At least two further years of use with further reviews and modifications taking place within that time.

Speed and ease of use

It is important that the outcomes tool does not take too long and is not onerous to complete for the worker or the client – otherwise it is not likely to be feasible to use as it will distract too much from the delivery of the service. What constitutes 'too long' will depend on the nature of the service. Those services which retain clients for longer and have higher levels of client-worker contact are likely to be able to invest more time in outcomes monitoring.

Support materials on implementation and use

For many tools the quality of the data and the level of improvement that can be expected through its use is very dependent on how well the tool is implemented and the level of skill of the workers using it. For this reason the availability of back-up resources is an important consideration. Tools vary considerably in the amount of support available. The main resources that can be provided are:

- Training: some agencies offer training for key-worker/researchers in using their tool and/or for managers in implementing the tool throughout the organisation
- Manuals: written guides on how to use the tool, analyse and interpret the data
- IT: some tools come with IT packages. Some just analyse data across clients and give the overall results for a project or group of projects. In addition to this some enable clients or workers to complete the tool online and give an instant summary of the score – often in a graphic form.
- Other: some tools include modifications for different client groups. These may be changes to the outcome areas measured or to the way the tool is used – for example a Braille version for clients with visual impairment. Some tools come with benchmark data from other users which can help managers to interpret their own results.

Affordability

Some tools are available entirely free of charge. Others charge for use in a variety of ways:

- By requiring that staff attend a training course (though they may supply the tool itself for free)
- By charging a one-off fee for the tool
- By charging a fee per client using the tool.

3.2.2 Special considerations relating to supporting key-work

As well as the general considerations described above, it is also necessary to consider the following if it is important that the tool is effective in supporting key-work.

Client-friendly language and presentation

Is the material presented in a way that is accessible to your client group? In general the tool should have clear and straightforward instructions and the language should be in plain English, avoiding professional jargon. There may also be special considerations for your particular client group – e.g. if they have learning disabilities or visual impairment. Some tools can be completed online which can offer benefits such as spoken instruction and more engaging visual presentation, which can be important for some client groups.

Visual summary of results

When the client has completed the tool, is there a visual summary which provides an at-a-glance overview of where the client is in relation to all the different outcome areas covered by the tool? This can help both client and key-worker to pinpoint areas of strength and issues to be addressed. It can also be very helpful when the tool is used a second time in giving a clear picture of change. When there is an IT package which enables this summary to be produced on screen it can make using the tool even more engaging for the client.

Direct link with action-planning

Does the tool link easily with action-planning within key-work? Ideally the outcome areas measured by the tool would be the same areas that the key-worker and client will be focusing on in action-planning. Having used the tool to identify the client's current position in relation to each area, key-worker and client could then identify priorities for action. This could include agreeing where the client would like to be on the scale in a few weeks' or months' time and agreeing the actions needed to get them there.

Explicit journey of change

If the tool uses defined scales then are the scale point definitions underpinned by an explicit journey of change which is consistently applied to all the outcome areas? Defined scales are those on which the client or worker is invited to place the client on a scale (e.g. 1-10) and the different positions on that scale are defined in terms of the attitudes and behaviours the client would show at that point.

Tools based on an explicit journey of change are more likely to have scales which identify key landmarks on the client journey in a clear and consistent way. This has two advantages. Firstly it makes them more powerful as key-work tools because they help clients to understand the change process they are engaged in and the particular challenges and rewards of different stages in the journey. Secondly, it can make the tool more reliable in terms of the outcomes information provided because when it is difficult to identify where the client should be placed on a scale, the journey of change helps to pinpoint where the client is in relation to that aspect of their life.

3.2.3 Special considerations relating to evidencing service outcomes

The considerations here all relate to the quality of the data that the tool will produce.

Meaningfulness of data
If the tool tells us that a client has a particular score for a particular outcome (e.g. they score three on self-care and living skills), do we know what this means in terms of the behaviour and attitudes and skills the client shows? If the tool is based on a set of subjective scales the answer will be no. If the tool is based on a defined scale or a set of concrete questions, then the answer will be yes.

Reliability of data
If the tool was used by a number of different members of staff, would it give the same results? Tools based on concrete questions are likely to be the most reliable. Defined scales which are underpinned by a theory of change are likely to be more reliable than those which are not.

Sensitivity of data
If a client makes an important change will it register on the tool? Scales of 1-3 or even 1-5 are not very sensitive. Scales of 1-10 are reasonably sensitive, yet it is still possible for clients to take a step forward that would not register on the scale. Scales developed specifically for a particular type of project are likely to be more sensitive than scales developed to cover a wide range of projects.

4. Implementing an outcomes tool

If you are planning to use an outcomes tool as a regular part of your key-work process, it is important that the tool is integrated with your agency's systems and ways of working. The agencies that have participated in the London Housing Foundation's 'Impact through Outcomes' programme have found that using an outcomes tool has had a bigger impact on service delivery than originally imagined, both in terms of the changes to practice and the benefits received.

The key areas that require attention are:

- Creating an outcomes orientation within the agency
- Integration with key-working (and training)
- Integration with IT systems
- Integration with performance management systems

Many tools will include guidelines on these issues and may come with training packages, IT systems and report formats. The following are general guidelines which apply to all tools designed to be used as an integral part of key-work.

4.1 Creating an outcomes orientation within the agency

Measuring the outcomes of a service should, ideally, be part of a wider shift of focus away from the service and how it is delivered, and onto the client and what is being achieved for them. The shift from service focus to client focus is summarised in the table below.

Service focused	Client focused
focus on service deliverer	focus on client
focus on how you deliver service	focus on how client changes
focus on quality of services	focus on effectiveness of services
emphasis on improving quality	emphasis on improving effectiveness
measure amount of what you do	measure benefit of what you do
evidence of activities (weak case with funders)	evidence of results (strong case with funders)
the task is never finished (demotivating for staff)	clients achieve goals (motivating for staff and clients)
service specified in terms of what is offered	service specified in terms of client need and intended outcome

Without this shift of focus, the outcomes tool may be just another form that is filled in mechanically because it is required. If implemented in this mechanistic way the many potential benefits of using an outcomes tool (described in sections 1.2 and 2.1) will not be realised. To achieve this change of emphasis, a number of elements need to be in place:

- The explicit intention to make this change of orientation happens at chief executive and senior management level
- A clear plan of action to create this change including the introduction of an outcomes tool and regular updates to the plan as actions are carried out and reviewed
- A managed process of implementation of the tool in which it is introduced, piloted, reviewed and changes to the tool or the way it is used made in light of the findings of the pilot.

4.2 Integration into key-working

As well as the wider shift in orientation within the agency, it is important that use of the tool is integrated within the key-work process. This involves a number of different elements:

Training: it is important that workers understand why an outcomes tool is being introduced and how it fits within the wider context of taking a client focused approach. This includes understanding what the benefits will be and how the information collected will be used so that they are motivated to use the tool well. Many outcomes tools require that workers are trained before using it with clients. As the tool will be used as an integral part of key-work, it is desirable that training in its use is incorporated into other aspects of key-work training. However, it is likely that in the short-term separate training will be required.

Paperwork: the outcomes tool may overlap with some of the existing paperwork which key-workers complete – for example key-work recording sheets, review sheets and action plans. When introducing an outcomes tool it is important to review paperwork and amalgamate forms where possible to avoid duplication.

Supervision: outcomes tools can play a useful role in supervision and team meetings in a number of ways:

- Managers can get a quick overview of a worker's caseload by reviewing clients' scores on the tool
- The tool can provide an easy reference point when discussing client needs and progress
- Managers can ensure consistent and reliable use of tools by reviewing how clients have been scored during supervision.

4.3 Integration with IT systems

In order to draw together the data from individual outcomes tools to build a picture of the achievements of a project or group of projects, it is essential that the data is entered on a spreadsheet or database. Ideally this would be a database which also records other information about clients' characteristics and the services clients are receiving. Many agencies have found establishing IT systems to support the use of outcomes tools challenging and we therefore recommend that you give this aspect of implementation consideration at an early stage in the process and draw on the learning and experience of other agencies before deciding how to proceed.

4.4 Integration with performance management systems

We recommend that standard reports are designed for the IT system so that project managers and senior managers can receive regular updates on the outcomes that their project or group of projects are achieving. This data can be invaluable for learning about how well different aspects of an agency's work are doing and can then be used as a basis for service improvement. Once the data has been collected and analysed on a regular basis for some time, it may be possible to establish benchmarks for performance in some areas.

We also recommend that the data is analysed in a more comprehensive way on a less regular basis (e.g. once every 1-3 years) in order to identify links between client characteristics or interventions and outcomes and to compare performance between different projects.

The London Housing Foundation is currently developing good practice in this area which will be published on www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk in 2008.

Appendix 1: Resources

Homelessness

The London Housing Foundation has a grant-making programme called 'Impact through Outcomes' which is focused on supporting homelessness organisations in London to take an outcomes approach. The programme has led to the development of a range of resources which are available on www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk. From autumn 2007 this website will also contain detailed information about a range of tools that may be useful in supported housing settings.

The material on this site is relevant to those seeking to measure outcomes in many other settings, particularly those in which services are provided directly to clients.

Advice settings

Citizens Advice Bureau has put together a toolkit for advice services on outcomes. This is a very comprehensive resource which includes questionnaires for use in the evaluation of advice services and guidelines on how to prepare a report to demonstrate the cost benefits of a particular service. The toolkit is available on CD Rom. For more information contact tamsin.lawson@citizensadvice.org.uk

Social enterprise

The New Economics Foundation has put together an extensive resource on the measurement of outcomes within social enterprises. The resource includes a compendium of the various tools that are available in this area.
www.proveandimprove.org

Mental Health

The Mental Health Providers Forum is in the process of developing a version of the Outcomes Star specifically designed for use in mental health projects. This tool – The Recovery Star – will be available on their website in 2008.
www.mhpf.org.uk

The National Social Inclusion Programme has developed a Day Services Outcomes Framework for mental health day services which is available on their website.
www.socialinclusion.org.uk