

VALIDATING THE OUTCOMES STAR AS A DATA COLLECTION TOOL: FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH PROJECT

SUMMARY PAPER

WHAT WAS THE PROJECT?

Homeless Link is the national membership organisation for frontline homelessness agencies in England. In April 2009 we commissioned University of Wales Institute, Cardiff to validate, through research, the effectiveness of the Outcomes Star¹ as a data collection tool. This was to determine:

- a) whether the tool is used consistently across different workers, projects and organisations
- b) whether progress in 'soft' outcomes, as measured by the Star, correlates to the achievement of 'hard' outcomes.

This work was funded by the Big Lottery.

METHODOLOGY

Consistency:

Organisations who regularly use the Outcomes Star were asked to take part in an on-line survey. This comprised of two case-study scenarios, based upon which front-line staff completed an Outcomes Star Chart. They also answered a small number of questions on factors such as training they had received and the length of time they had been using the Star. This survey was then followed up with focus groups to discuss any variance.

Correlation to hard outcomes:

The researchers looked for tangible positive outcomes for service users that were evidenced by both soft and hard data. A number of organisations that have been using the Outcomes Star since April 2007 as part of the Link client recording system were asked to participate in the research, and data was extracted and analysed for all those service users who have moved on and for whom at least two Outcomes Stars have been completed. This data was analysed using the statistical analysis package SPSS, to establish whether there was a statistically reliable relationship between the data as measured by the two tools.

WHAT DOES THIS PAPER TELL US?

This paper gives a summary of the key findings from the research project. The data collected through this research was not enough to give results that have statistical validity. This should be borne in mind when reading this paper and the information within it should not be used out of context or to draw definite conclusions. However, the collected data does help us begin to identify trends and indicates issues that could benefit from further exploration.

WHY IS CONSISTENCY IMPORTANT?

Consistency of scoring on the Star is important because without it no meaningful analysis can take place of the data from different workers, projects and organisations on anything other than an

¹ The Outcomes Star is a comprehensive tool for measuring the outcomes of work with homeless people. It was developed by Triangle Consulting, originally for the homelessness charity, St Mungo's, and has subsequently been widely tested and revised with funding from the London Housing Foundation. Homeless Link is now managing the development and dissemination of the Outcomes Star tools and resources and last year republished the Outcomes Star guidance manuals.

individual basis. When scoring is recorded consistently, the data can be examined and compared to form the basis of service evaluation and improvement, as well as to provide meaningful evidence of the difference that services are making in people's lives.

HOW CONSISTENTLY IS THE TOOL USED?

The research showed that the variance in scoring between workers within a project is currently between 1 and 3 points on the Star. This can be reduced further still by the factors discussed below. However, between organisations the variance can be as much as 3 to 6 points on the Star.

WHAT FACTORS AFFECT ITS CONSISTENCY?

There appears to be a number of key factors which affect the consistency of use of the tool. These are:

- Formal training – this may help to improve consistency and is likely to make staff more confident to use their scoring (rather than compromise or use the clients').
- Length of time using the Star – as workers become more familiar with the tool through use, they begin to record scores more consistently.
- More conservative scores appear to tend to be more consistent, and formal training might result in more conservative scores.
- Using the ladders as provided in the guidance results in more consistent scoring.
- The variance in scoring is greater on some scales of the Star than on others – this could be down to interpretation of wording on particular scales.

DO THE SCORES CORRELATE TO HARD OUTCOMES?

The analysis produced a result that is counter-intuitive, and consequently, it might be useful to revisit the Link data when there has been an opportunity to disseminate good practice in completing the Outcomes Star. However, there is currently no evidence that there is a statistical linkage between the progress recorded by the Outcomes Star (the 'soft' outcomes) and that recorded by the Link database (the 'hard' outcomes).

WHAT CAN ORGANISATIONS DO TO BE MORE CONSISTENT?

There are several steps that can be taken by organisations to ensure that the data you collect is more consistent. These are as follows:

- Discuss the Star at team meetings to develop a shared understanding across teams.
- Enable formal training to take place wherever possible.
- Allow time for implementation of the tool and discuss its use frequently during early months.
- Encourage staff to use the ladders as part of their key-working to help with scoring, or regularly revisit them to refresh their knowledge.

WHAT CAN COMMISSIONERS LEARN FROM THIS?

Commissioners need to be aware that there can be a variation in scores between organisations of between 3 and 6 points. You should bear this in mind if using Outcomes Star data to compare different services.

You should also be aware that the tool has two different purposes – one is to improve key-working² and the other is to improve data collection. You should therefore be very clear on why you want organisations to use the tool, as focussing on one of these aims will have implications for the other.

You can also support the organisations you commission to record data more consistently using the Outcomes Star by sharing the good practice recommendations above.

² See Impact and Good Practice Research Report at <http://www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk/starimpact.aspx>



WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Homeless Link will disseminate these findings to those using the Outcomes Star and to organisations that could benefit from the tool. We will also disseminate good practice in using the tool consistently to ensure an improvement in its use³.

Homeless Link will continue to work with Triangle Consulting to review the ladders where interpretation of wording may be an issue to make this clearer, as well as to link organisations to other specialist Stars where appropriate.

Finally, Homeless Link will develop proposals to undertake more detailed research on the correlation of the soft outcomes as recorded by the Star and harder outcomes.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For further information on this project contact Joanne Crellen in Homeless Link's Innovation and Good Practice Team on:

T: 0207 960 3014

E: joanne.crellen@homelesslink.org.uk

Or visit www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk to view the full report.

³ To see good practice, refer to the User Guide at http://www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk/resources/1/Outcomes%20Manuals%202nd%20Ed/Star_organisation_guide_2ndEd.pdf