



'User-focused'

Joy Mckeith of Triangle Consulting continues our "Outcomes" theme



The new Strategy for Supporting People commits CLG to "capture and share best practice about what an effective, user-focused model of support looks like". But what does 'user-focused' really mean? In this article, I describe how working on outcomes has led the London Housing Foundation and its delivery partner Triangle Consulting to a new understanding of the term. More than simply user involvement and satisfaction surveys, it's a paradigm shift which ripples right through every aspect of an organisation and what it does.

When the London Housing Foundation launched the Impact through Outcomes Programme in 2001, to help homelessness organisations in London take an outcomes approach to their work, the focus was on getting evidence for the outcomes of service delivery, both for accountability to funders and for organisational learning. However, as the programme has developed, we have learnt that genuinely engaging in an 'outcomes approach' has wider impacts. When an organisation focuses less on measuring what it does and puts the emphasis instead on what changes as a result, there is a fundamental change in organisational orientation – a paradigm shift from being a service focused organisation to a user-focused one.

Most organisations are service focussed

What does it mean to be service-focussed? It means that the focus of management attention is on the activities of the organisation. Projects are described in terms of what is delivered – for example 'housing support' or 'drop in facilities' and performance monitoring focuses on the amount and quality of the delivery.

Most organisations are service oriented – this is the dominant paradigm. But although it comes naturally to focus on what we are doing, this takes the attention

away from the ultimate goal of service user change and how best to achieve it.

It is a bit like servicing a car, ensuring that everything is working exactly as it should, counting the number of passengers and miles travelled, but not making sure the car is on the right road, heading to the right destination.

This has lots of knock-on effects. It is difficult to learn and improve if you don't know when you are succeeding and when you are not. It can be de-motivating to always be travelling (i.e. focussed on delivery) and never arriving (i.e. recognising that a goal has been achieved). The case to funders relies on assertions of effectiveness rather than real evidence - on faith rather than fact. At its worst, service users may start to seem peripheral or an inconvenience in an organisation that is highly focussed on itself and what it does.

User-focus means more than user satisfaction surveys

In a user-focused organisation, in contrast, management attention is focussed on service users and how they and their circumstances are changing. This isn't the same as user satisfaction surveys or user involvement. These can be important tools for listening to service users' perspectives,

but they don't on their own ensure that an organisation is user-focussed.

In a user-focussed organisation, projects are specified in terms of the client group and the changes the project aims to help them achieve. Performance monitoring and targets focus on the outcomes achieved by service users, rather than the quality of the service delivered. But it isn't just about monitoring and forms....

Staff and service users are clear why they are there – and what is expected of them

A service user orientation means being very clear within staff teams and with service users what changes the project is there to achieve and being focussed on this all the time. This changes the actual work with service users. There is a much greater clarity and purposefulness, and tools like the Outcomes Star enable client and worker to monitor progress towards their end goals on a regular basis. These tools also provide data that can be used to assess success. When different projects are compared, the data can provide valuable information about what works.

For example, in a study of St Mungos hostels for homeless people, it emerged that women made less progress in mixed hostels than in single sex ones and that the most important predictor of positive outcomes was the level of individual service user engagement in hostel activities and outings. The practical implications for improving hostel effectiveness are clear.

Focusing on results has a significant impact on the motivation of staff and service users. Martin Kinsella, Chief Executive of social inclusion charity P3, feels that a focus on outcomes helped to turn P3 around from a failing organisation to a multi award-winning one:

"The development of the P3 outcomes tool played a major part in the positive transformation of our organisational culture. Staff stopped thinking about what they were going to have for lunch and started being motivated about the work they were doing with service users"

what does it really mean?

The table below summarises the way in which a user-focused organisation differs from a service focused one

Service-focused	User focused
Focus on service deliverer	Focus on service user
Focus on how you deliver services	Focus on how service user 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 (and so staff get de-motivated)	Clients achieve goals (which is motivating for staff and service users)
Service specified in terms of what is offered and intended outcome	Service specified in terms of service user need

What are the implications of all this for organisations in the homelessness field and beyond?

Client focused organisations are tomorrow's sector leaders

Because this paradigm shift requires such wide-ranging changes - in culture, key-work, monitoring, IT and negotiations with funders, it requires sustained effort and leadership from Chief Executives and their Management Teams. Organisations

that adopt outcomes superficially by adding another monitoring form but remaining service focussed, may be able to tick the outcomes box but won't achieve the benefits of increased focus and motivation and ultimately greater effectiveness.

Central government is becoming more interested in the outcomes and impact of services and less interested in process and quality information. Many others are

too. The sector-leaders of the future will be those organisations that embrace this change early and fully.

For more information about The London Housing Foundation, the Impact through Outcomes Programme and Triangle Consulting see:-

www.lhf.org.uk

www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk

www.triangleconsulting.co.uk

