

Outcomes Star Data Roundtable

Introduction

On 27th November 2013 Triangle convened a meeting of key organisations using the Outcomes Star to share lessons and challenges related to using Outcomes Star data for learning and service improvement. The organisations that were represented were: Childrens Society, Family Action, Buckinghamshire Council, St Mungos, Alabare Christian, and St Basil's. In addition the Roundtable was attended by two Australian academics from RMIT University and one service provider from the Salvation Army in Australia who are about to embark on a study of the use of Star data within the Salvation Army

The following is a summary of key themes that came out of the presentations and discussion.

1. Benefits of using Star data

1.1 Data to support operational management

Organisations found the data useful for operational management of services. It gave managers useful information about what was happening in their service. For example looking at the starting scores for clients they could check whether the right clients were coming into the service. Family Action found data from services working in the governments 'Troubled Families' programme showed low starting scores in line with expectations.

Alabare used the data to understand whether a client should be in the service. If the score were too low they should be accessing a different service.

1.2 Analysis of data at an organisational level

By carrying out the appropriate analysis the data could be used an organisational level to identify trends. For example through analysing data from 1,200 clients St Mungos were able to show that in their services women in relationships fare worse than women not in relationships, while men in relationships fare better. These findings could be used to support policy influencing.

The organisational data also enabled the identification of areas of the Star that showed the biggest changes. For example Family Action found that they were effective in supporting parents to 'set boundaries' with their children which Family Action described as the 'bread and butter' of their work.

1.3 Commissioners feedback on the data

All organisations reported positive feedback from commissioners who received Outcome Star data. They particularly liked the benchmarking data which compared average scores of that organisation against an average for all organisations using that Star (and are entering their data on the Star Online). The potential pitfalls of this are outlined in the challenges section of this report.

1.4 Shared approach

Using the Star promotes a shared approach to working with clients. The client's Star can be shared with all the agencies the client comes into contact with to enable this. This is a potential benefit which takes time to realise because it requires work across different agencies.

2. Challenges

2.1 Analysing the data:

Participants reported that taking the 'mean' average of Star scores across a number of clients can be problematic. For example one organisation showed a mean change of 0.8 which was lower than the organisation expected and may not be perceived positively by commissioners or internal senior managers.

To address this the organisations present were developing different approaches to analysing the data. For example identifying 'key outcome areas' focused on in the work (with each service user) and analysing the how these changed as compared to areas that were not focused on.

Another possible way of presenting the data that was suggested was to report for each outcome area on the number of clients that had started at one particular stage of the journey and moved up from there (and the number that had moved down or stayed the same). This approach helps to take account of the fact that the scales are 'non parametric' meaning that movement between some points on the scale can be more significant than movement from other points. For example movement from 2 (Stuck on many of the Star journeys) to 3 (Accepting Help) may be more significant than movement from 3 to 4.

Another possible development in the analysis of data would be to use the 'median' to aggregate Star scores rather than the 'mean'. This is the approach normally used for non-parametric data.

2.2 Quality of the data

A number of organisations were concerned that their data may not be accurate, and that the starting scores that workers were recording may be too high. This was linked to staff not having challenging conversations with clients and negotiating real starting scores. In some settings it was also linked to staff having insufficient information about a client's behaviour at the beginning of their engagement to be able to challenge them effectively. Organisations were developing quality assurance processes to address this. These included having additional training on motivational interviewing, systematically reviewing Star scores in supervision, and routinely checking Star data against other information. For example if there was evidence of child protection issues in a service but high scores in 'child safety' this would prompt a management investigation.

There was a particular challenge for organisations working with young people who were homeless to get realistic initial scores. The clients were often so focused on getting a roof over their heads and sometimes would downplay problems that they thought might hinder their chances.

A key factor in having useful data was said to be knowing when to take the first reading. If this was taken too early then workers may not have enough information to provide effective challenges where necessary. If it was taken too late it would not provide an accurate starting point.

2.3 Learning vs accountability

There was concern that the Star could be used by commissioners in a rigid way for accountability and that this could lead to ‘gaming’ of scores to achieve targets. This is particularly important with the current focus on Payment by Results by the government. The challenge identified was to get commissioners to engage with the Star data as a means of promoting learning rather than in a simplistic target-led manner.

3. Lessons learnt

3.1 Interpreting the data

The data can be very useful when triangulated with other types of data. For example Family Action has compared changes in the ‘supporting learning’ element of the Family Star and data on school attendance and shown a positive correlation.

Integrating case management data with Star data was needed to do this, and some organisations had included Star data in their case management systems to facilitate this.

When working with commissioners it is important for the data to be engaged with and not left to ‘speak for itself’, rather ‘speaking to the data’ was one way it was described. This means creating a narrative that explains the data. This may include explaining why average improvements in scores are less than hoped for by pointing to difficulties with getting accurate initial readings and/or breaking the data down to show that some clients are making a lot of progress whilst others are not. Triangulating Star data with other data is good practice when developing this narrative.

3.2 Implementation

Implementing the Star was described as a ‘change in how you do things’ – in terms of: the client experience; the way that workers carry out key work; and organisational processes for recording and reporting information. It should be approached as an organisational change process and requires buy in and leadership at a senior level and from the service delivery part of the organisation as well as the monitoring and evaluation part.