Outcomes Star™

Making change visible:

The Outcomes Star™ captures important achievements
that could be missed by focusing on hard outcomes

Triangle

Measuring 'soft' and 'hard' outcomes

Programme evaluations, contracts, and provider performance criteria have tended to focus on clear-cut distal outcomes such as entry into employment, being housed, or coming off benefits. While these outcomes are clearly important, the emphasis of national policy on achieving hard, tangible outcomes is obviating the measurement of a broad range of softer, intangible outcomes capturing the personal progress of service users (Hearne, 2010). Fortunately, there is increasing recognition of the need for more proximal outcomes to be 'accepted, respected and integrated into service delivery, both by practitioners and their managers at different levels' (Bimrose & Barnes, 2008, p.58).

The term 'distance travelled' highlights the essential role of changes in areas such as self-confidence and empowerment that happen on the journey towards sustainable changes in behaviour and circumstances such as gaining qualifications and employment (McGivney, 2002). We agree with others who have argued that delineation between proximal or 'soft outcomes' and distal 'hard outcomes' is not straightforward (e.g. McGivney, 2002), because distal outcomes that affect wider society (e.g. participation and parenting) are often contingent on achieving the proximal outcomes valued by individuals. This principle is at the core of McNeil and colleagues' evidence-based Catalyst Outcomes Framework for youth development work (McNeil, Reeder, & Rich, 2012). Youth Development Charity, Brathay is aligned with this approach- they state that they 'are often commissioned to deliver distal outcomes, but remain resolute in our message to commissioners that these are only achieved through proximal outcomes and that these should be the focus of our work' (Stuart & Maynard, 2015, p.243).

A large body of psychological literature supports the role of factors such as help-seeking, attitudes and self-efficacy as predictors of behaviour change (e.g. Armitage & Conner, 2001). The Young Foundation's Framework of Outcomes showed how interim outcomes can be linked to long term impact by drawing on the evidence base (Aylott, McNeil & Hibbert, 2013). There is also evidence that change in behaviour and circumstances is more likely to be maintained over time if internal changes or changes in skills have occurred. It makes sense, for example, that an individual is more likely to return to offending or unemployment if that employment is gained or offending has stopped without coping resources, resilience or attitude change. For example, research shows that addressing mental illness can produce significant reductions in recidivism (Morgan et al., 2012). Our development report for the Justice Star includes a review of the evidence linking the outcome areas with the likelihood of offending and reoffending.

The role of the Outcomes Star™

In order to fully understand important achievements made through service provision, outcomes measurement must include the whole continuum from realising the need for change and accepting help, trying things out, learning what works through to being able to sustain observable changes in situation, behaviour and hard outcomes. The popularity of the Outcomes Star is in part down to its ability to capture the full journey of change, with the latter stages of the Journey of Change indicating self-reliance or enablement and change in the outcomes commissioners have traditionally required. In the Supporting Families Programme for example, many local authorities use reaching an eight on the Outcomes Star scales (when change in behaviour or circumstances is likely) in payment by results submissions. They are able to evidence these changes, as well as gaining valuable insights into the transitions leading up to them.

Our research using data from Staffordshire County Council's Building Resilient Families and Communities project showed that positive movement on the Journey of Change is likely to be associated with cost savings even when service users remain below the payment by results threshold (Good, Randles & MacKeith, 2020).

Using Family Star Plus data from another County Council, we also demonstrated a continuous relationship between Star readings and system recorded school absence, such that the higher parents were on the Journey of Change in the Boundaries and behaviour and Education and learning areas, the lower the rate of unauthorised absence recorded at a later date. This finding is presented in our recent journal article (Good & MacKeith, 2021). We have also reported associations between Homelessness Star readings and hard outcomes in another journal article published in the same year (Good & MacKeith, 2021). In this

research, higher initial Homelessness Star readings were associated with later accommodation and employment status as well as a greater likelihood of attending education and training. Greater change in the Managing tenancy and accommodation outcome area was also associated with being more likely to transition from being homeless to having housing.

Valuing each step in the journey towards change

Capturing distance travelled is particularly important when service users have entrenched or complex needs, as is often the case in the homelessness, justice or employment sectors. In these cases, 'the acquisition of certain soft outcomes may seem insignificant, but for certain individuals the leap forward in achieving these outcomes is immense' (Dewson, Eccles, Tackey & Jackson, 2000, p.2). Echoing this, in a recent roundtable we heard from organisations using the Homelessness Star, who valued the ability to recognise and record critical transitions such as beginning to seek help when in crisis. These organisations also emphasised that greater value should be given to the absence of change, noting that at some stages of a person's journey 'it is an achievement simply to keep service users alive'. Indeed, when judging success, it is important to consider the counterfactual – what is likely to have happened without the input of the service.

The outcomes sought by commissioners and funders need to be based on evidence of what is achievable. Long term outcomes such as stable employment cannot always be realised following a short-term intervention, but interim outcomes can be made visible using measures such as the Star. Celebrating each step in the journey of change is also important because focusing purely on whether a particular hard outcome has changed disincentives supporting those most in need in favour of working with those closest to achieving these milestones.

There will always be a demand for evidencing whether outcomes such as employment, housing and offending have been achieved. Focusing only on these outcomes, however, is short-sighted and fails to recognise that progress in areas such as understanding, attitude, help-seeking are often a necessary part of the journey towards these outcomes as well as whether they will be maintained over time.

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The social enterprise behind the Outcomes Star™

Triangle Consulting Social Enterprise is an innovative, mission-led organisation that exists to help people reach their highest potential and live meaningful and fulfilling lives, often in the context of social disadvantage, trauma, disability or illness.

We do this by creating and supporting the Outcomes Star and other tools to unlock the potential of both individuals and the workers and organisations who support them. We believe that by balancing clear thinking, human connection and action – using the head, heart and hands – we can make a real difference in the world.

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