ANNEX 9

Outcomes

Introduction

There is no widely used reporting framework for advice outcomes across the social welfare law sector, and advice providers often have different reporting requirements for different funding streams. Most reporting schemes focus on the number of cases seen rather than the longer term outcomes for clients, with no recognition of preventative work that agencies do. This Annex briefly sets out some of the reasons why monitoring of agencies has developed in the way it has, and some of the challenges of measuring outcomes in advice. It finishes with some recommendations on how to reduce the reporting load on advice agencies.

What are outcomes?

A distinction is often made in impact reporting between:

- *outcomes*: real changes in something or someone – for example, a person is prevented from losing his or her home; reduced stress; and
- *outputs*: something that has happened without knowing what the impact is, or indeed if it is good or bad – for example, a person had an advice appointment; a training course was delivered.

In recent years there has been greater use of outcomes measurement for public services. In some areas, bespoke outcomes data collection are commonly used; in others, commissioning has been framed around outcomes; and in a few cases contracts have actually paid-out for outcomes achieved. The Ministry of Justice is currently piloting social impact bonds (see para 8.29 of main report) for prevention of reoffending, where investors will get payments based on the results achieved by the project. There has also been reversion to a focus on outputs in some areas, caused by a combination of public sector cuts and the simplicity of output reporting.

How and why are outcomes measured in advice?

There is no standard outcomes framework in advice. Many advice providers have to report on multiple reporting schemes for different funders and many of these schemes focus on the number of cases delivered rather than longer term outcomes. Some of the most commonly used outcome reporting frameworks are outlined at the end of this Annex.

Some within the sector have felt that there would be significant advantages to moving towards more outcomes measurement, for the following reasons:

- Outcomes give a clearer picture of where the benefits of advice cross across different government departments and where there are savings to the state.
- Done well, outcomes can be a valuable step in delivering advice being as a useful way to 'check in' with clients to see if a problem has been resolved, as well as giving positive feedback to staff.
- Measuring outcomes can help providers focus on doing what will really make people's lives better, rather than just delivering more of a particular activity. For example, in a debt case, if only the short-term outcome of the matter itself is reported (eg debt reduced, payment plan rearranged) this may discourage providers from doing other activities such as looking for other problems, eg making a referral for domestic violence (if appropriate), which may resolve the underlying cause of the debt problem and prevent the client getting into further debt in the future.
- Outcomes can help funders to see which providers are having the most impact compared to those who are seeing the most people.
- It may be possible to develop a funding mechanism which pays providers for delivering on social impact. For example, a social bond could be developed if users stay out of debt, maintain their tenancy etc.

At the same time, many in the sector have felt there are major challenges to developing robust reporting of outcomes in advice. Some of these challenges are set out below:

- Many advice agencies see clients on a 'one off' basis, so it is difficult to follow up with people and track changes over time.
- Advice often works by preventing a bad outcome happening – this can be hard to measure.
- Some of the outcomes of advice accrue to wider society, which can be difficult to attribute to particular providers; for example, if advice agencies take on test cases by making use of strategic litigation, this can have outcomes such as changing the culture of decision-making by public bodies or raising awareness of a particular issue.
- Many users of advice agencies have language barriers or literacy problems, so may need assistance filling in outcomes questionnaires.

Moving forward – towards a common outcomes framework

As set out in the main report, we recommend that the Big Lottery Fund works with the national umbrella organisations to develop a common outcomes framework which clearly articulates the value and impact of advice (see para 5.37 and R43). This needs to include outcomes from different types of advice including prevention, early intervention and strategic use of the law. We would see this outcomes framework having a role in better communicating the value of the advice sector, and may service as the basis for commissioning advice services including joint commissioning with other government departments.

A common outcomes framework does not mean that all providers will be reporting on common indicators in the short term, although we do see the benefit of greater standardisation of reporting measures across providers and funders. We would also like to see outcomes tools that have been developed shared across the sector. We would expect to see funders and commissioners of advice focusing on the outcomes in the framework that they are most interested in and enabling advice partnership to innovate to deliver them, agreeing appropriate indicators to report on that can be collected in a way that adds value to service delivery.

It will not always be realistic to expect agencies to report on all of the outcomes in the framework, and we see the potential for more research into the benefits of advice over the longer term, particularly impacts on health and families. There is still a gap in credible evidence that shows the contribution of advice agencies towards such longer term outcomes. We think there is scope for more partnerships of advice agencies with universities to follow-up users of advice over time, particularly in measuring health outcomes. We also see other public service delivery agencies having a role in helping track the outcomes of advice for service users they refer to advice providers.

Finally, most of the outcomes data collection tools have been paper-based and focused on advice case work. We see the potential for new outcomes measurements to develop alongside new models of service provision. Many people access advice services online and relatively little is known about this group. There is also likely to be a growing number of users accessing services by Skype and in more interactive ways online, and we see that this has potential to capture outcomes data (and delivery services) in a much less resource-intensive way. At a minimum, there could be better use of the information collected through websites to assess demand by developing outcomes tools that help users navigate around interactive web portals including following users over time.

Overview of advice outcomes reporting frameworks

Legal Services Commission

As part of the implementation of the unified contract, the (then) Legal Services Commission developed a reporting framework for contract-holders which requires providers to report on the outcome for the client at the end of the case. The outcome codes are unique to the type of social welfare law, so there are different codes for debt, housing and all other categories. The outcomes are also grouped into those which are seen to be of ‘substantive benefit’ to clients and those which are not. This framework has the advantage that a lot of providers will be familiar with the outcome codes. For some types of case it does give an idea of benefits to client – for example, in debt it can show debts written off, for housing it can show a client retains his or her home. However, it doesn’t say anything about how sustainable the outcomes are – for example, if a client had a debt written off or a repayment plan made, did the client stick to this or get into more debt? It also doesn't include any scope for prevention or wider strategic use of the law. When used in the context of the fixed fee system there is pressure to close case, so some have questioned whether outcomes will be coded consistently or accurately.

The Big Lottery funded Working Together for Advice project

Advice Services Alliance (ASA), in partnership with a range of advice agencies, developed and trialled data collection tools for different types of advice and different client groups. In general, where these tools were trialled, agencies found them to be useful, if resource-intensive. Feedback from agencies showed that collecting outcomes data helped them evidence their contribution to key strategic priorities and was rewarding to staff to get feedback. All of the surveys, in paper format, before and after, are available online from the ASA website.[1] These tools are designed for use on small samples of users and are quite time-intensive to complete and collate the results. They are also only suitable for advice casework and not for preventative or policy work.

Citizens Advice outcomes monitoring

Citizens Advice have been doing ongoing work to enable their Petra case management system to capture basic outcomes. They have also developed tools to follow up with a small number of users to get qualitative outcomes data. This means individual bureau also have access to paper-based questionnaires for clients which are done with a small number of clients to look at the wider impacts of advice on outcomes such as health, relationships and confidence.

Small pilots developing new tools

There have also been a number of projects that have developed outcomes monitoring toolkits for work they are doing. Some examples that have been brought to the Low Commission's attention include:

- *Law for Life: Public Legal Education Evaluation Framework*: In partnership with the University of Bristol, Law for Life developed and published a framework for evaluating public legal education training including a series of indicators and paper-based questionnaires for evaluating outcomes for participants attending training. While this work does enable the short-term outcomes of attending the legal education to be captured, it does not make any attempt to measure the longer term outcomes.
- *Community Links*: Community Links are currently collecting outcomes information on most people who access advice at both their main site and community outreach hubs. They plan to follow up all users six months after

1 See: http://asauk.org.uk.

the advice intervention to collect further outcomes information and also to be able to keep in contact with their users and refer on to other projects and programmes organised by Community Links. This project was motivated in part by the need to evidence the impact of their service, and they have designed the survey so it will be possible to benchmark the information collected against data collected by the local authority (London Borough of Newham) in their household panel survey.