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Event report 15/12/16

Outcomes focused
assessment workshop



Written by Shona MacGregor, Self-directed Support Development Manager
Social Work Scotland



Social Work Scotland
Floor 4 | Hayweight House | 23 Lauriston Street
EH3 9DQ

Email: shona.macgregor@socialworkscotland.org
Tel: 0131 281 0853

Outcomes focused assessment workshop, hosted by Social Work Scotland – event report

Assessment remains a core function of social work practice, it is key to the work we do with people. The Social Care (Self-directed Support) Act (2013) places in statute the need for assessments to be undertaken collaboratively with a clear focus on personal outcomes.

The purpose of this workshop was to support the continuing commitment to develop outcome focused assessment practice. It provided participants with the opportunity to consider recent evidence from the Meaningful and Measurable project, about the difference made by an outcomes approach including the implications for both practitioners and the people we support.

Intended outcomes

Participants will:

- have an opportunity to reflect on good assessment practice
- better understand new evidence about the benefits of outcomes focused, assets based conversations, as well as what outcomes focused recording looks like and the difference it can make
- have the opportunity to share best practice from across the county
- through capture of information on the day, contribute to a growing evidence base to support the positive changes in current practice and culture

The workshop took place in COSLA offices in Edinburgh on December 15th 2016. It was well attended with over 35 delegates with a wide range of roles within health and social care partnerships, including managers, commissioners and practitioners from both children and adult services. It was facilitated by Shona McGregor from SWS and Emma Miller from the University of Strathclyde.

Facilitation was light touch, with inputs from Emma on the findings of the Meaningful and Measurable project and presentations from Midlothian Council and East Renfrewshire who shared local learning on outcomes focused assessment and planning. The main part of the day was structured around table discussions and large group feedback.

This report provides a summary of the learning, links to the inputs including the two case studies, captures reflections from table discussions and flipchart notes, as well as a summary of the evaluation feedback on the day.

Meaningful and Measurable – Emma Miller

View presentation

Personal Outcomes Collaboration website

Participants had the opportunity to hear about learning from the Meaningful and Measurable research project which concluded in 2015. The PowerPoint slides are available to view and further resources on personal outcomes are available on a collaborative website. Some of the key points were as follows:

Conversations about what matters to people (their outcomes) provide an opportunity for individuals to reflect on their situation, improve involvement in decision-making and develop a shared sense of purpose. They can in themselves already improve outcomes such as being listened to and feeling valued, can help to reduce anxiety, engender hope and are enabling. The project produced evidence that the extra time required for good conversations is a worthwhile investment for these reasons, and because they improve the relevance and effective use of resources.

The conversation doesn't just change at the frontline. To shift the culture towards outcomes, the focus needs to be built into routine practice such as team meetings and supervision. Sharing examples of good practice and discussion about more challenging situations can help too.

Outcomes focused recording needs practice support in its own right as our systems have leaned towards needs and service led assessment. Outcomes focused plans which include assets as well as barriers to achieving outcomes can help to build a positive sense of self-identity and shape the way other professionals view the person. They acknowledge the role the person plays in achieving their outcomes, supporting enablement.

Ideally, information about outcomes should be collated and used by the organization. In the Meaningful and Measurable project, most organizations used examples of recording for practice improvement purposes. Some also linked review of outcomes records with quality assurance and supervision. There were also examples of outcomes focused commissioning. Rather than payment by results which tends towards money being tied to hard outcomes like 'being in employment', such approaches include steps towards employability, include qualitative as well as quantitative data and have a flexible rather than fixed attitude to outcomes. Further development work is required to predominant approaches to performance management, eligibility criteria and commissioning to better support outcomes.

Learning from Practice - Midlothian - Children's Services

Diane Brown/Graham Kilpatrick

View presentation

Participants had the opportunity to hear from Midlothian on their experiences of developing assessment practice and tools using the exchange model to support better outcomes focused assessments when working with children.

Graham described what was involved in setting up a pilot project to review the assessment process within children and families. This was underpinned by a desire to become more outcomes focused and to support creative solutions. The previous 16 page assessment was felt to be onerous for both families and staff. They tried out different assessment formats, involving workers from each team – there was some significant learning along the way and numerous changes but taking a bottom up, collaborative approach to development ensured that the new documentation worked better for all. The exchange model of assessment is key to the approach, in that it explores and recognizes the perspective of each party; the service user, the family, the practitioner(s) and the agency, and may involve negotiation in deciding on outcomes. It was acknowledge however that there were occasions where statutory responsibilities meant there were times where the Local Authority had to be more authoritative in setting outcomes.

As a practitioner Diane shared a powerful example of the impact of the new approach and how it helped her worked differently with one particular family, with the exchange model to the fore. She described how work with the family using this approach sharpened thinking, and resulted in significant improvements.

Family Story

The family involved had two decades of social work involvement. The children had always had social workers involved in their lives and were very suspicious and reluctant to engage. There was a history of domestic violence, periods of severe poverty, substance misuse by both parents and teenage children and involvement in organised crime. Initial responses included support to tackle the poor living conditions, reduce risk etc. but it was felt that there was a need to do more than continue to firefight.

Diane shared a key reflection about using an outcomes focused approach

“That’s when it clicked, we had to focus on what mattered to this family, if not we were just adding another sticking plaster”.

The approach involved working weekly with each child and mum on a one to one basis, really getting to understand what was important to and for each of them and as a family as a whole, and identifying what difference they wanted to see.

“We have found that it’s about stick-ability, about staying with people, building relationships, and having a significant person who listens and understands, rather than telling them how to live”.

The time to build a relationship was key to supporting the changes needed. The outcomes approach helped identify what mattered but also supported good

conversations about what people were worried about. Collaboration with the school, health and the police was vital.

Conversations focused on each individual's strengths, as well as what mattered to them. One of the boys identified that what mattered most to him was that he wanted his mum to be happy. Through exploring the use of drugs in the family, they discovered that the older boys were self-medicating with drugs so they didn't need to hear the domestic violence. They were selling drugs because at times there was no food or furniture in the house.

Through focused conversations the family recognised they needed time out of the community, space to think and to be a family. With a £300 grant from the Kilbrandon fund the family arranged a caravan holiday. The short break helped the family come together, create some positive memories and have space to consider how they could make the changes they wanted. This proved to be a real catalyst for change.

Outcomes for the family have included the oldest boy choosing to go back to school, he wants a better life for himself and to be a good role model for his younger siblings. His choices also had a positive impact on his peer group, as he was seen as the leader of the group his influence resulted in the group engaging with support team to redirect anti-social behaviours. This young man has gone on to secure qualifications and he has been accepted onto an apprenticeship scheme.

Mum's self-esteem and confidence grew and she recognised "I can do this on my own, my boys are great" It was the first time she had a sense of control. Dad is no longer living with the family, there are now routines at home and the children are doing well at school, Mum has a part time job and is managing the finances better and, relationships with the family support team are viewed positively and social work support is no longer needed.

Key Learning

- Both Diane and Graham highlighted that the approach to working with the family was supported by a whole systems approach. Good supervision was available from the team manager, who knows the strengths of each team member and modelled an outcomes approach through valuing her staff and recognising their skills.
- Midlothian are embedding this approach throughout the system with job descriptions now being outcomes focused too.
- The ability to articulate clearly to other stakeholders including school, police and housing as to how and why they were working like this was a challenge, but necessary to help achieve the outcomes.
- The approach to working with the family involved a lot of discussion and debate within the organisation because of the risks involved but this helped clarify the understanding of risks and shared decision making around it.
- There were concerns about the amount of time involved, as this work was time and staff intensive but the costs were a fraction of the alternative which may have involved accommodating the children.

East Renfrewshire HSCP – Learning from practice – Adult Services

Innes Turner

View presentation

Innes shared some learning around East Renfrewshire testing of new assessment approaches, starting again with how we engage with families. The partnership recognised that although they have been trying to work as close to people as possible, the current systems and processes don't always support self-directed support and outcomes approaches. They decided to take a group of 8 or 9 social workers from across all teams and worked with them to identify approaches to assessment that they found most helpful.

Starting with a blank sheet, staff were encouraged to think more broadly than the current assessment and finance systems would normally restrict them to. There was agreement to set up a small test of change. This involved permission to test new ways of engaging with people and recording assessment and outcomes that did not involve using the existing assessment documentation. Practitioners were also given permission to sign off the resource themselves up to a limited amount.

Innes shared a story to help illustrate the impact of using the new approach to assessment.

Family Story

Anna and Jimmy came to be involved with social work after their son made a referral when the family became increasingly worried about how they were managing. Anna had dementia, and Jimmy who had become her main carer appeared to be struggling. The impact of living with dementia for both Anna and Jimmy was significant. Jimmy's weight was dropping, his mental health deteriorating and he was becoming increasingly isolated. There were growing challenges around family visits, with their children using this time to undertake household tasks and Jimmy and Anna getting distressed about not being able to maintain this themselves. This was becoming a source of family tension.

By using an outcome focused approach the worker was able to help them identify what was important to them. Some of the things that were important to Anna including her links with the church and support from the AA. What was important to Jimmy was getting some time to still take part in his own routine which involved the local well-known 'triangle' of the church, the pub and the bookies.

Sharon was a social work assistant who became involved with the family. She knew she had permission to do something differently. Sharon was able to take time with the family, getting to know Anna and Jimmy. An important reflection of the building of this relationship was her willingness to share some information about herself with the couple which helped build trust with them.

The outcomes focused conversation about what was important helped identify that Jimmy needed some rest and some time out. By working together they helped reconnect Jimmy with a family friend who he could socialise with.

To reduce the tension around the condition of the house, the family chose to employ a cleaner. It was important to Anna and Jim that they could keep high standards in their own home and family visits were no longer a source of conflict. The cleaner

was someone local who also became a natural support to Anna and a friend who spent time helping Anna engage in activities she enjoyed. Sharon has remained a key support to the family. Although intervention is minimal she remains the key contact person.

The family highlight that the relationship built with Sharon has been hugely important, Anna and Jimmy share things with her that they wouldn't share with the family which has included Jimmy being able to talk to her about his fears after a recent cancer diagnosis. Jimmy is coping well with this as his main concern was the potential impact on Anna but he is confident that with Sharon's help they can make sure Anna gets the right support and that is huge weight off his shoulders.

Key Learning

- Practitioners have welcomed the flexibility, autonomy and permission to work in different ways to help people achieve their outcomes.
- The experience of the individuals and families involved has been much more positive with people valuing the different approach and feeling empowered.
- The learning from this test of change has helped inform a redesign of the assessment tool which has now been dramatically reduced in length, is much more focused on outcomes and developing a support plan that is right for people.
- Time to build positive relationships with individuals and families results in a clearer understanding of the outcomes to be achieved and helps support better conversations about risks and solutions.

Emerging Themes and Key reflections from the presentations and table discussions.

The presentations were welcome as they confirm there is good practice going on.

The stories highlight that investing time in complex situations often costs less in the long term and crucially for the individuals and families their experiences are more empowering and result in better outcomes.

These stories evidence key social work skills including relationship building and collaboration skills. Opportunities to focus on these key elements need to be supported effectively by the system.

Time constraints for completing assessments can prove challenging, with greater flexibility around timescales required to reflect the complexity.

There was a sense, through the presentations and the table discussions that many areas are still on a journey of change and that while there is greater understanding and commitment to working with a focus on outcomes, systems still need further development to support practice.

There was a concern that the importance of assessment should not be lost, as people have a statutory right to assessment. However, some areas work with lengthy assessment tools which are taking up too much time to complete (repeated across tables).

Participants felt that there was a real opportunity to design more outcomes focused assessment tools and were encouraged by the learning shared from the presentations and from the group discussions. More opportunities to share tools and learning about them would be welcome.

Whilst it was recognised that integration with health was still in its infancy there was some uncertainty about the longer-term impact. Hospital discharge was identified as a particular pressure which can become the main focus, often detracting from outcomes. While that focus can challenge this way of working, it was acknowledged that within new integrated arrangements there could also be opportunities.

Responding to crisis can be a regular feature of the work of social workers, with many situations requiring immediate responses to minimise risk, but that doesn't mean that conversations about personal outcomes should not be pursued, particularly once the crisis is over.

Organisational culture was viewed as key, with a need for effective leadership, adaptability and being prepared to take risks, which in turn needs to be supported by scrutiny bodies. Supervision is a key opportunity to model and help embed an outcomes focused approach.

Direct payments were viewed positively. Having a sense of the budget and the cost of services can be an eye opener for both practitioners and individuals and a reality check for people. There is evidence that many people become much more astute at managing their own budget, and can be very creative in making best use of the available resources.

There was concern that the Resource Allocation System risked putting the focus 'back to front' in that when upfront budget allocation becomes the focus – the purpose or driver becomes getting the resource – which limits looking at what else is out there, including personal and community assets, with the potential to stifle creativity and limit independence.

As with assessment tools, there was a sense across tables that some local authorities are struggling with the Resource Allocation System (RAS) separately and it would be helpful to share learning with each other around this.

One table noted that services are not the golden ticket and that the focus should be on outcomes, and that outcomes can be met in many different ways.

Some participants highlighted that some IT systems were still not fit for purpose, and absorb too much staff time.

More multi-agency training is essential, especially with health colleagues.

In the afternoon session the groups were invited to reflect on the presentations and discussions from the morning and asked to consider what supports and what challenges there are in using an outcomes focus to assessments.

Table: Participants feedback on challenges and supports

| Theme | Support | Challenge |
|--|---------|------------|
| Legislation and policy | iii | ii |
| Organisational culture | iiii | iiii |
| Structure/system/IT systems | i | iiiiiii |
| Public expectations /understanding | i | i |
| Interagency involvement (including work on risk) | iiii | i |
| Committed & skilled practitioners as a resource | iiii | |
| Supportive team management | iiii | |
| Relational practice | iii | |
| The child/person/family | i | |
| Early intervention | i | |
| Opportunities to share and learn | iiii | |
| Allowing creativity | iii | |
| Working agreements with families to clarify expectations | i | |
| Less cumbersome assessments | i | |
| Sense check plan with person/family (SMART) | iii | |
| Risk aversion | | i |
| Focus on RAS, eligibility and budgets | | iiii |
| Data demands | | i |
| Inspections | | i |
| Time (mainly to build relationships and talk) | | iiiiiiiiii |
| Acknowledge outcomes can be hard to achieve | | i |
| Benchmarking/data demands | | iii |
| Outcomes work with person with severe dementia | | i |
| Defensive practice | | ii |
| Lack of resources | | iii |
| Skills needed to manage qualitative data | | i |

Participants were encouraged to consider what would help support the desire to embed outcomes focused assessment practice.

What needs to happen next?

1. Further discussion about a national framework for eligibility
2. Share the 4 page outcome focused principles paper
3. Promote more shared practice across partnerships- stop re-inventing similar wheels
4. Share learning and evidence about commissioning for outcomes
5. More reflective space/forums for shared practice, moral support
6. Promote a show and tell of resources/products

Key messages from today

1. Participants were clear that this approach is about key social work values including empowerment
2. We need to make time for the right conversations
3. This session helped to join the dots and provide a reflective space

Evaluation: What people said

What has been the most useful aspect of today?

1. Very useful to see what else is going on pan-Scotland
2. Useful to hear knowledge and experience x 3
3. Examples of direct work and sharing good practice x 4
4. Well structured, good discussions
5. Value in relationship based practice
6. Discussion about eligibility
7. Positive to re-focus on outcomes as this becomes lost in day to day work
8. This training should be compulsory
9. Sharing of SDS experiences in different local authorities

Anything we could have changed, done differently?

1. Share more outcome focused cases as good to have examples from practice
2. Nothing much to add

What are you taking away from today's session?

1. The course/training was about right
2. Better understanding
3. Refreshing and positive-would have been good to have views from service users
4. Good to get time to network and reflect, very useful
5. Thinking about outcomes and commissioning
6. Meeting people at all different levels from other local authorities
7. It was encouraging to see colleagues in other areas have worked on having quality conversations
8. That we are all on the same journey, sharing experiences x 6
9. Better understanding of social work and what it involves
10. What matters to me (family), what matters to us (social work) - balancing risk positively within outcome focused planning

Conclusion

There was a strong sense in the discussions and feedback that the opportunity to hear about the positive impact of outcomes focused and good practice had been well received by participants who were able to add their own examples to the table discussions. Sharing challenges was also identified as helpful in supporting morale and having a sense of not being alone with these.

Interestingly, at the macro level there were divisions as to whether policy and organisational culture were viewed as challenges or support, possibly signaling that the outcomes focus is a work in progress. One of the policy challenges was identified as the need to join policy up more, linked to change fatigue.

Key concerns focused on the fact that systems were not yet ready to support this way of working in its entirety. Within this, particular concerns were identified around the challenges of being outcomes focused in face of tightening eligibility criteria

which focus on deficits and the RAS which leads towards a focus on financial resource.

There was a strong appetite for further opportunities for colleagues from different areas to collaborate to improve this situation. Participants also wanted further opportunities to share learning about tools, and to see examples from other areas which were working well. The most commonly identified challenge of all was time. In almost all cases this was linked to the time needed to have good conversations with people and build relationships. This related mainly to working with individuals and families but also to space for talking and building relationships with colleagues within and between organisations.

Despite the challenges, a range of supports were identified. Although hospital discharge was identified as a challenge at various points throughout the day, interagency work was viewed positively overall.

There was a sense that good, creative practice is taking place and that there are skilled and committed social workers who are managing to work well with individuals and families even in the context of current financial challenges, and a climate of constant change.

Several comments identified good team management as supporting this work. The evaluation feedback emphasised the value of reflective space and opportunities to network. Most of all, the sense that people were on a shared journey with similar experiences was emphasised and points towards the need for similar opportunities to be provided to help address the challenges identified, that by coming together there is a real opportunity to better understand the challenges and seek and share solutions.