

Were we wrong to talk about outcomes? What else is there to talk about?

Report of discussion event - 2 February 2021 (on Zoom)

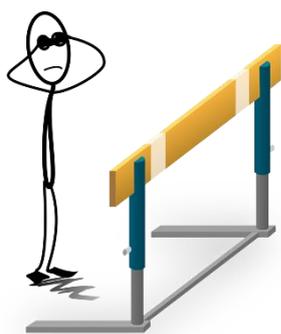
Evaluation Support Scotland (ESS) works with the third sector and funders so that they can measure and report on their impact and use learning to improve practice and inform policy.

ESS has been talking about outcomes since we came into existence in 2005. We brought together 21 friends (see annex) who mostly agree about outcomes to

- discuss what is getting in the way of an outcomes focus – the alternative narratives – and why
- identify what can be done to reduce the influence of the alternative narratives, where appropriate
- come up with some ideas for next steps.

Our suggested outcome for the session was that participants would have a greater understanding of how to improve a focus on outcomes.

This report gives a brief summary of our discussions and set out some suggested next steps.



Why ESS thinks outcomes matter

- ✓ Outcomes are why we **come to work**. We want to make a difference with and for others. A focus on outcome is a focus on what **matters**.
- ✓ A focus on outcomes helps our service users **understand** what to expect and helps us explain our impact to funders and stakeholders.
- ✓ A focus on outcomes helps us **learn and improve** – not just counting the number of things we did but making us think whether we made a difference, to whom and why (or not).

And indeed outcomes are everywhere! The National Performance Framework shows us outcomes are public policy. However **rhetoric is not always matched by reality**. A lot of attention is focused on other information.



Why?

What's stopping outcomes taking centre stage?

1. Outcomes are complicated:

- You **don't deliver** outcomes – you contribute to achieving them – often with others.
- They aren't (usually) **targets** – we hold them lightly; they are a route map for measurement and learning.
- You can't **commission** outcomes – you commission services that have the best possible chance of achieving a positive outcome.
- Outcomes should be about what matters to **people** – and people are complicated! It's tempting to focus on other things that are easier to measure.

2. There's a genuine need for different types of information

Data about need, service provision, service use, value for money etc help us make decisions or contribute towards understanding about outcomes. But they don't tell us **if** we are making a difference or on their own help us fully learn and improve. So these data may be necessary but they aren't sufficient.

But also ...

3. We stick with other information for less good reasons:

"just in case", "we've always collected this", "I prefer hard data"

Some scrutiny systems and national statistics drive action towards hitting non-outcome targets – *hit the target, miss the point*.

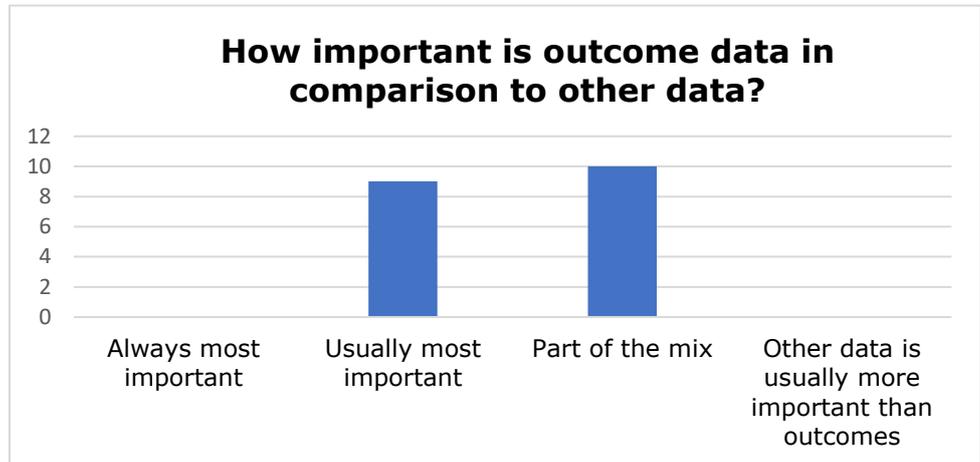
"People at every level of the system feel 'het' for outcomes, from front line workers to the most senior ministers. We need to shift this so understanding and capturing outcomes is an opportunity as opposed to a duty." Session participant

B: Outcomes are not the only fruit - good reasons for other data and evidence



Here is a brief summary of our discussions about **good reasons** for talking about non-outcome information, data and evidence.

There were (possibly) different views about what actually **IS** outcome data and what is not. But we agreed that data and evidence is needed for variety of reasons and outcome data does not sit alone (see quick poll):



1. So outcome data does not sit alone. We need data about:
 - Need – so we know which services to set up and where and what outcomes to work towards through our services.
 - Activity – so we know what we are doing and can plan / monitor provision.
 - Engagement (including equalities data) - so we know who we are reaching and who is using services.
 - Data about the context so we know what works in what contexts.
 - Cost data so we can assess value for money.
 - Service quality eg “customer experience” to ensure services are delivered in line with our values, ethically, adequately etc.
 - System efficiency measures: For example “delayed discharge” is useful efficiency data so long as it’s not to the exclusion of outcomes.

2. Outcome evidence has to be set in context. We need to know:
 - How our practice contributes towards outcomes (incl. outcomes for staff).
 - “What works” in achieving outcomes or what enables outcomes to happen.
 - Who is achieving outcomes (and who isn’t).
 - Outcome indicators or steps along the way.

3. All **data and evidence** (whether about outcomes or not) should satisfy the following tests:
 - It should be about what **matters** to people.
 - It should tell us something **useful** and **meaningful**.
 - It should actually be **used** for **improvement**.

C: False seductions – bad reasons that divert us from outcomes

Here is a brief summary of our discussions about **assumptions** we think many people make that take us all away from outcomes.

Assumption: Numbers are more objective / robust than qualitative data

Reality:

- All data is a construct of how we think about and organise things. It is not just sitting there 'waiting to be collected'.
- We present our data in different ways for our own advantages. e.g. to persuade a funder of our value.
- Economic data gets more of a hearing because it is quantified but it is based on assumptions.
- Randomised control trials have their place but don't tell us "how", "why" or "what matters". And are impractical or unethical in many settings.
- Qualitative is seen as "anecdotal" and inferior but it is someone's truth.

Assumption: the more numbers the better

Reality:

- Some numbers are meaningless. Number of visits to a vulnerable person doesn't tell you if that visit was done well or made a difference.
- Lots of outcome targets are not about outcomes but about inputs or risks.
- National stats may not be the measures that people actually care about.
- Aggregating outcome data isn't always helpful; we may learn what we need to at the individual level.

Assumption: waiting time targets make services more efficient

Reality:

- Linear targets are not evidence-based and don't lead to positive change. In fact they drive the wrong actions e.g. people in beds in corridors.
- The public don't even believe the stats; what matters to me is how long I've waited, not how long everyone else has.
- Frontline staff know the target is meaningless and hold two competing demands (other is what's best for people) - an unkind tension to put on staff.

Assumption: we have control over outcomes

Reality:

- We can't deliver outcomes, we can't take sole credit for them.
- Improving should be more important than proving (but it is usually the other way around).
- Outcomes for aspiration can be helpful too for imagining the change we want to create. "if you can't imagine it then you can't have it".

D: What supports a focus on outcomes

Everyone if they can be, although communities and service users should be given more leeway

Those who espouse **system change** to integrate learning as an essential part of the 'work'

Who needs to be on board?

- Policy & decision makers
- Funders & commissioners
- Local & national govt
- Trustees & board members

Audit and scrutiny

- The sceptics
- People focused on quality improvement
- Those not interested in qualitative data

Ways of working

- ✓ Reflective practice - time to reflect & learn
- ✓ Having outcomes for **staff** to reflect relational practices
- ✓ Focus on learning rather than outcomes as such
- ✓ System Dynamic modelling - useful process
- ✓ Understand impact of not taking (appropriate) action

Citizen engagement

- Better engagement (citizen assembly on waiting times?)
- Support people to tell their journey / story
- Start with what matters to citizens - rethink our jobs!

Talking to each other

- ✓ Trust and autonomy for those closest to supporting people & communities
- ✓ Conversations about what we all want to see happen – followed by action
- ✓ Space for conversations across professional boundaries to build shared aims, understanding & values
- ✓ Peer support amongst projects

What helps us fly?

Support about outcomes

- To help everyone understand & measure outcomes
- Simple plain English guides
- Outcome tools

Funding

- Strategic partners & funders who are committed to outcomes
- Flexible funding to respond to local need
- Funders joining up to agree outcomes & data

Performance management

- Finance procedures leading the culture rather than supporting outcomes
- New Public Management approaches
- Accountability structures divorced from those doing the work
- Hourly rates, output based inspection & procurement

Focus on time

- Focus on short term not long term understanding of impact
- Deadlines that have no bearing on people's actual lives

Data diversion

- Collecting data we don't use
- Overreliance on trend data - we measure it because we've always measured it
- Reporting to multiple funders against different measures for same work
- Data sharing challenges

What holds us back?

Fear

- Risk based paralysis
- Fear of losing funding
- People not confident to make the changes they know are needed

Misunderstandings

- Myth that competition leads to better outcomes (not evidence-based)
- Politicisation of targets
- Thinking we are talking same language - when we're not
- Taking "counting outcomes" approach

E: Key messages

We asked all our participants to send a **message to themselves**. I've (very) roughly themed the messages

I'll keep talking

Keep talking about outcomes - in our own areas of work and importantly as a collective set of voices

Keep going! There are loads of us on the right side!

Keep progressing the outcomes focus in my own work

Keep going, there are so many important elements to still understand

Continue conversation with peeps today. Tell the story of what matters and giving time for the so what(s).

Engage more in conversations around this - contributing to shared meaning making... and keep pushing for greater citizen engagement in outcomes

Keep going, find more allies

I'll think more / differently about outcomes

Think how outcomes may be better thought of as aspirational - not delivered

Systems change (the context) and outcomes (the change made by/with the person) are part of the same picture

Don't throw the baby out with bathwater - outcomes data important for learning

Understand better the culture/history around outcomes in my new role

Developing my understanding of the motivation towards outcomes and where/how this fits into wider data

Outcomes are really important, but they're not the full picture. We need to have outcomes that matter to people! Also, the NPF is too many outcomes, we need a sharper focus on what our key priorities are that help coalesce action.

Testing if/how to reframe an outcomes-based approach so its starting point is people and communities, rather than NPF or specific outcome

Consider different needs/perspectives in determining outcomes

Why the outcome is important

I'll get others on board

We need to get better at talking about how outcomes can be usefully put into practice to the non-converts as well as the outcome enthusiasts.

Need to define what we mean by outcome info, not just proof of outcome, but outcomes for who, when best achieved etc what works for who

Be more challenging/focussed about whether the data will make a difference to the people that matter

Keep constant focus on learning partnership

We asked participants to provide **a message to others - again** roughly themed

Trust each other

Funding and commissioning for outcomes requires trust and flexibility. It is not an excuse for payment by results!

We need to trust people, make our work person focused and keep measurement light, only collect if used! mindful of used by who, for what and what level, stop meaningless aggregation.

We need to remember that it comes back to relationships.

Work together

Working together in trusting spaces will help us better progress outcomes.

Doing something on linking outcomes and activities/reach & outputs could be good for Scotland, so we should do something about this together - possibly via a group like this.

We need to convert the sceptics as well as supporting the converted...so to economists and finance folk 'get on board' don't be the reason we didn't grasp the opportunity of change from this crisis.

The collective voice and our values are powerful and can change things. We have agency.

Create space - across professional boundaries - to have conversations to develop a shared understanding of what we mean by outcomes.

Respect and understand that we have different pressures.

We need to work together across the sectors to change the culture, listen.

Focus on what matters / is possible

Focus on what matters, on the point ... focus on the people, places and communities for whom we work ultimately! And remember to work backwards from there :) Not the other way around.

Stop imagining you can control the delivery of outcomes, and understand (and help others to), where you have influence and how your role can help to create an environment for genuine and useful learning.

We are human beings...outcomes matter to (all of) us.

If you can make a positive difference, do it - don't wait for the system to be perfect.

Consider whether language of outcomes can be confusing to people we are working with and how to overcome this challenge.

Focus on learning and improvement

How you focus on outcomes matters. Focus on improvement not proving.

We need a fruit salad. And the purpose of the fruit salad should be learning (which we need to help enable).

Don't swamp organisations with requests for data that can't be used to improve things for people we support and employ-be outcome focussed rather than performance management focused.

F: What now?

ESS is not wrong to talk about outcomes. But ...

- There are some other things to talk about
- We might need to talk about them in slightly different ways.

ESS will develop four areas of work:

1. “Keeping outcomes at the centre”: we’ll explore how to talk about outcomes in a way that takes account of the context. We could promote the value of information that helps plan and improve services that best help people achieve outcomes that matter to them. We’ll look at the value in approaches e.g. Principles Focused Evaluation and systems thinking.
2. We’ll integrate key messages we can integrate into our support for third sector and funders on evidence use, particularly qualitative evidence.
3. Continue to create spaces for people to support each other on outcomes and evidence for learning so long as ESS doesn’t duplicate existing networks.
4. Possibly use the 10th anniversary of Christie as an opportunity for focused conversations about measurement, improvement and learning.

Report compiled by
Steven Marwick
Director, Evaluation Support Scotland
steven@evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk

Evaluation Support Scotland 5 Rose Street, Edinburgh, EH2 2PR
www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk
Company No. SC284843 | Charity No. SC036529

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Annex A – participants

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Jane Russell | Aberdeen Council of Voluntary Organisations |
| Richard Robinson | Audit Scotland |
| Jennifer Wallace | Carnegie UK Trust |
| Emma Donnelly | Coalition of Care and Support Providers in Scotland |
| Elaine Wilson | Corra Foundation |
| Diane Kennedy | Evaluation Support Scotland |
| Mandy Andrew | Health and Social Care ALLIANCE |
| Des McCart | Healthcare Improvement Scotland |
| Karen Carrick | Improvement Service |
| Dee Fraser | Iriss |
| Andrea Wood | Key Housing |
| Ailsa Cook | Matter of Focus |
| Colleen Souness | National Lottery Community Fund |
| Helen Alexander | NHS Lanarkshire |
| Stephen Finlayson | Penumbra |
| Cathy Sharp | Research for Real |
| Andrew Paterson | Scottish Community Development Centre |
| Paul Bradley | Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations |
| David Milne | Scottish Government |
| Laura Turney | Scottish Government |
| Emma Miller | University of Strathclyde / Personal Outcomes Network |
| Rowan Boase | William Grant Foundation |

Facilitated by Steven Marwick, Evaluation Support Scotland

Annex B

Quick feedback on the day (from 20 participants)

