Outcomes for Disabled Service Users

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Social service provision to younger disabled people is rarely at the forefront of policy debate. Often, younger disabled people require support that is more flexible, or of a different type, than that which social services can offer. For example, people may require assistance with making decisions concerning work, both paid and voluntary, or in parenting. The main aim of the study was to see whether these areas of assistance could be incorporated into assessments and reviews. These areas were named ‘outcomes’, which meant goals that service users wished to achieve. Before the research began, the researchers synthesised findings from previous work with disabled service users into the outcomes framework (see Box 1). This was incorporated into assessment and review practices and used by a multi-disciplinary team of professionals from one Social Services Department in England. The researchers evaluated the processes of change and their impact on professionals and service users. The main findings were:

- The majority of professionals found the new outcome-focused approach and documents to be useful, workable and an improvement on the original needs-based system.
- Service users valued the outcomes approach because it was clear and because they had greater choice and control in the assessment process.
- Using outcome-focused documents meant assessments were far broader than was possible with a needs-based system. However, professionals needed to tailor the depth and detail of their assessments to suit service users’ circumstances.
- Using the outcomes approach involved some professionals talking to service users about areas of their lives where they were unfamiliar with provision and services (particularly, education / training and employment). Some professionals thought they needed further training in these areas.
- Professionals valued the outcomes-oriented approach because it put service users’ views first and allowed them to be creative and imaginative in their work.

Background

The Social Policy Research Unit (SPRU) developed a framework for understanding social care outcomes (Qureshi et al., 2000). This framework identified key aspects of quality of life that service users thought important (see Box 1). This project built directly upon these foundations. The outcomes documents and practice approach developed for the project also used key ideas from the social model of disability. The importance of confronting social and environmental barriers and discrimination was central in developing the outcomes approach and associated documentation.

Objectives of the study

The project aimed to develop and test ways of incorporating an outcome focus into assessment and review practices with disabled people between the ages of 18 and 65. The focus of the project was specifically upon disabled adults experiencing physical or sensory impairments and / or chronic illness. The project was the first attempt to test out the outcomes approach in direct work with disabled people undertaken by social services staff.

Findings

The majority of staff from all professional groups found the outcome-focused approach and documents to be useful, workable and an improvement on the original system. Most believed that the outcomes approach and documents were applicable and appropriate to their work and suited their professional role.

Box 1:
The Outcomes Framework

AUTONOMY OUTCOMES

- Access to all areas of the home
- Access to locality and wider environment
- Communicative access
- Financial security

PERSONAL COMFORT OUTCOMES

- Personal Hygiene
- Safety/Security
- Desired level of cleanliness of home
- Emotional well-being
- Physical health

ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION OUTCOMES

- Access to paid employment as desired
- Access to training
- Access to further/higher education/ employment
- Access to appropriate training for new skills (e.g. lip reading)

SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OUTCOMES

- Access to mainstream leisure activities
- Access to support in parenting role
- Access to support for personal secure relationships
- Access to advocacy/peer support
- Citizenship

The outcomes approach and documentation was successfully routinised into the practice of the multi-disciplinary team. This was achieved through extensive consultation and a collaborative approach across the service. An extensive development period would appear to be necessary for the introduction of an outcomes approach in order to include all stakeholders and ensure that any new procedures and documentation achieves local ownership.

Service users valued the greater clarity in both the overall approach and the documents, and the enhanced choice and control they could exercise over the assessment process, and they viewed the introduction of the outcomes approach positively. They had no difficulty identifying and discussing a broad range of outcomes that they desired for themselves and others.

Professional satisfaction levels were high in every profession except the community care workers. These professionals have a primarily practical role, undertaking straightforward assessments for technical aids and providing advice. The majority of these professionals viewed the outcomes approach as too broad and time-consuming for their work.

Use of the outcome-focused tools offers a far broader assessment than was possible under the original system. Some professionals found it challenging moving from provider to a ‘broker’ and adopting the role of facilitator or assistant rather than expert or assessor. Nevertheless, the move towards acting as a facilitator rather than assessor appeared to pay benefits in increasing service users’ receptiveness towards using social services and in reducing any stigma. However, increasing the breadth of assessments had implications for professional assessment practice, such as the need to tailor the scope and depth of the assessment to the service user’s circumstances.

Utilising the approach also involved some professionals moving into areas of work that they were not previously familiar with (particularly, education, training and employment). Professionals expressed a need for further training on those outcomes that they were less familiar with (particularly employment and training opportunities). They needed to feel confident in their knowledge of community resources in order to act in the facilitative style required by the outcomes approach.

Professionals valued the user-centred nature of the outcomes approach, which allowed them to be creative and imaginative in their work. There was evidence that some professionals had also adapted their practice to reflect the social model of disability, taking an approach that centred upon removing barriers and gaining access to mainstream services and facilities, within a context of service user rights.

Policy implications

The outcomes framework as utilised in the project has many direct resonances with current policy. The Green Paper on Adult Social Care (Department of Health, 2005) challenges the traditional role of professionals in enabling disabled people to access social care services. This challenge is consistent with the primary importance within the outcomes approach of the user’s perspective. The Green Paper’s proposals for making social care more preventive, personalised, pro-active and seamless are intrinsic principles underpinning the outcomes framework that was developed and tested in this project.

The importance of employment, housing and transport, which were key domains within the outcomes framework, are also highlighted in the report *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People* (Cabinet Office, 2005). This report also calls for an explicit focus upon outcomes as a means of driving up standards. Both policy documents propose the introduction of individual budgets that can provide increased choice and control for disabled service users. The outcomes framework and approach that was developed and tested in this project offer important tools for guiding the changes in social care practice that will be necessary to implement these new approaches.

Methods

The project design was primarily qualitative, incorporating development work at the outset to introduce the idea of outcomes to the professionals and service users and to train professionals in using newly-devised outcome-focused documents. In addition, an extensive period of consultation ensured that the views of all stakeholders were incorporated into the development of outcomes documents.

The project was carried out between January 2002 and December 2004. The project had three phases, each lasting approximately one year. The methodological principles of 'researched development' involved developing assessment tools in collaboration with all stakeholders in the setting (phase 1); trialling the tools with a selected group of professionals (phase 2); and finally testing the tools against those used originally in the setting (phase 3).

The outcomes approach and documents were devised in collaboration with, trialled and utilised by, all professionals and service users in the multi-disciplinary Disability Service. Staff in the service comprised the disability service manager, care managers, specialist sensory impairment social workers, occupational therapists and community care workers. These professionals are responsible for all assessment and review processes involving disabled people aged 18–65 years. Over the course of the project, 52 staff participated in the consultation, development and testing of the outcomes approach and documents.

References

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Further information

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Copies of the full report – Harris, J., Foster, M., Jackson, K. and Morgan, H (2005) *Outcomes for Disabled Service Users*, Report to Department of Health – can be downloaded from the SPRU website: http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/spru/pubs/pdf/service.pdf

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