Measuring outcomes: a beginner's guide

A partnership approach

Measuring client outcomes to improve services

Funding agencies are increasingly interested in hearing about service delivery outcomes. They want to understand what has changed for clients because of services they have received.

The Data Exchange streamlines outcomes reporting and shares information back with organisations to help them to continue to improve the way they deliver their services. This 'data exchange' plays an important role in developing new social policy initiatives for the future and in evaluating the impact of community programs.

1. What are outcomes?

Outcomes are the changes that happen because of the services you provided to your clients. Outcomes differ from the activities or actions of the service, which are known as 'outputs'.

An outcomes framework is a tool that helps you link what you are doing to what you want to achieve for your clients. It can help you work out how you will measure progress towards success.

Ask yourself:

- What is the problem/issue/situation that our service is seeking to address?
- What would success look like?
- What are the changes we are hoping to see in our clients?
- How can we measure that change?

This guide will explain these concepts and provide practical steps you can take to better measure outcomes in your own organisation's context.

2. Why is it important to measure outcomes?

Once you are clear on what change you are hoping to see in your clients, you need to focus on what you can measure. Measuring outcomes gives you the evidence of what has changed for your clients over time.

By focusing on what you can measure, and by recording outcomes data, you can:

- demonstrate the positive changes you are making to people's lives
- prioritise and allocate resources where they are most needed or can make the most difference, and modify your service delivery as needed
- know that you are making a difference to your clients and the community.

As a partner of the Data Exchange, you can:

- compare how client outcomes vary across outlets; identify outlets with different results for the same program; investigate the causes and, if needed, make changes to how you deliver your service
- compare how client outcomes vary across client groups, and use this improved understanding to better target your services
- identify particular areas or client categories in need of greater attention, or a different kind of support
- determine if client outcomes as a whole are getting better or worse over time by comparing client outcomes for one reporting period to previous reporting periods.

3. How to define outcomes

1. Start by looking at the problem (**issue**) you want to resolve, and the changes and results (**outcomes**) you want to see. Keep this goal in mind as you work through the other steps.

2. Consider what resources (**inputs**) you have to work with in your organisation – this can be your grant money, staff and volunteers, and other resources such as computers and equipment.

3. Work out what **actions** you need to take and how you will organise them – these are broadly outlined in your grant documents in accordance with program specific guidelines (Appendix B).

4. Complete these planned actions in sessions with your clients and record what you did (**outputs**).

5. In the 'partnership approach', measure any changes in your client's situation at appropriate times (short, medium and long term **outcomes**) using your own tools, or using the Data Exchange SCORE system (Standard Community/Client Outcomes Reporting).

Here is an example, adapted from "Making sense of evaluation: a handbook for everyone", published by the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit in New Zealand.

This is a deliberately simplified scenario for a situation where you are trying to help penguins in need. Using the concepts above, you can see the difference between an **output** (jumpers) and the **outcome** (warm penguins). This outcome is the change that your actions brought about. In real life, and in your organisation, things are likely to be more complex. This example, for instance, does not address any of the assumptions which have influenced your decisions, nor does it include any other external factors which you cannot influence.

What this model may help you with, is to be clear about **what** you are trying to achieve, **how** you're doing it, and **why** you're doing it in the first place.

4. Beginning with the end in mind

These sample questions might help you to work out what change you hope to see for your clients, and what factors you can measure and report in the Data Exchange using SCORE. (Standard Client Outcomes Reporting).

Table 1. Sample questions and explanation of outcomes thinking

Sample Questions	Explanation
Step 1 Why are we doing this? Who do we want to reach? What is the problem we are trying to solve? Why did we create this program?	This is the over-arching **purpose** for the program, setting out the **needs** and **objectives**.
Step 2 What is the big picture goal? What end outcome do we want for our clients? What are we working towards?	These are the **long-term outcomes** you hope to see in your clients' lives. You can also think of this as the **impact** you hope your service will have on the community.
Step 3 What resources do we need? What preparations will we need to do? Who do we work with? Who will participate or use this service?	These are the **inputs.** You may also involve support persons and **delivery partners** at this stage.
Step 4 What did we do? When and where? Who attended? How many? What were the service types delivered?	These are **outputs.** In other words, outputs are the services provided to your clients.
Step 5 Were there immediate changes for the client? Were some issues able to be resolved early? Did the client feel that you had listened and understood their issues?	You will want to record an initial **SCORE** to have a baseline circumstance usually at the start of your service delivery (e.g. if homeless, then SCORE 1 – Poor – in Housing Circumstance domain). Then you can record **short-term outcomes (**things that change quickly**)** in SCORE (e.g. client goal setting – Impact of immediate crisis – temporary housing found SCORE 2, and satisfaction – Client Response (SCORE) for Satisfaction).
Step 6 What progress is being made towards the client's long-term goals? What changes have there been so far in the client's knowledge, capability or situation?	These **medium-term outcomes (interim assessments)** can be recorded at regular intervals to demonstrate progress in one or more of the individual SCORE domains. E.g. Client is engaging with service and looking without success for suitable housing (Goal SCORE – Moderate).
Step 7 What was the reason this program was created? Did we achieve what we set out to do? What are the resulting changes in the client's circumstances?	**Long-term outcomes** are usually recorded towards the end of service delivery, where you assess changes in the client's circumstances compared to the reasons for seeking assistance, and the goals set out at the start. E.g. Client has found suitable housing Goal 5, Circumstance 5. **Don't worry if the client doesn't progress from 1 to 5. In reality it is always more complex. SCORE needs to reflect what really happened, so you can assess what, if anything, needs adjustment**.

5. Accessing your outcomes data via Data Exchange reports

The better the quality of the data you record, the more insights you can gain into the outcomes of your clients. Data and insights are valuable tools that you can use to make changes or adjustments to improve the service you provide to your clients and their communities.

To help you check your data quality, as well as analyse and interpret this information, you can access a number of interactive reports via the 'MyDEX Reports' button in the Data Exchange portal.

- All organisations can access the Data Exchange **'standard reports'**, which reflect the 'priority requirement data' collected.
- The expanded '**partnership reporting' suite** is available to those organisations that provide additional data focused on their clients' outcomes.
- Go to the Data Exchange Training web page for step-by-step instructions on how to navigate the reports.

6. How this links to SCORE

Once you have identified the changes you want to measure in your client's circumstances, you are ready to select which SCORE categories you want to use, and record your initial assessment of your client's situation on a scale from one to five. As time goes by, you can record changes at regular intervals, as well as towards the end of your client receiving a service from you.

In the example given above about penguins, you would likely record the initial assessment of the cold penguins as a one or two in the 'physical health' domain (within the Circumstances category in SCORE). While jumpers are being knitted there may not be any improvement, but by the end of the process, the now warm penguins may score a four, or even a five.

The different SCORE domains you can use to measure client outcomes in the Data Exchange are:

Table 4 - SCORE outcome domains

Circumstances	Goals	Satisfaction	Community
• Physical Health • Mental health, wellbeing and self-care • Personal & family safety • Age-appropriate development • Community participation & networks • Family Functioning • Financial Resilience • Material well-being • Employment • Education & training • Housing	• Knowledge and access to information • Skills • Behaviours • Empowerment, choice and control to make own decision • Engagement with support services • Impact of immediate crisis	• The service listened to me and understood my issues • I am satisfied with the services I have received • I am better able to deal with issues that I sought help with	• Group/Community knowledge, skills , attitudes, behaviours • Organisation knowledge skills and practices • Community infrastructure and networks • Social cohesion

7. Further reading

Please discuss any questions around measuring outcomes with your funding arrangement manager. You can also seek technical assistance from the Data Exchange Helpdesk.

Data Exchange resources

- **Data Exchange Protocols**: A practical guide outlining reporting requirements for each program. Of particular interest in relation to outcomes are:
  - Section 6: Collecting 'partnership Approach' data;
  - Section 7: Recording client and community SCOREs.

- **Protocols Program Specific Guidance**: policy guidance on entering data into the Data Exchange in a consistent way that best reflects the program activity being delivered; assistance on SCORE outcomes and partnership data collection; support for consistency in reporting within program activities, and in the interpretation of the Protocols across funded organisations.

- **Fact sheets** related to measuring outcomes and providing high quality data:
  - A partnership approach to reporting outcomes
  - SCORE – at a glance
  - How to use SCORE with clients
  - The importance of data quality
  - Measuring outcomes a beginners guide
  - SCORE Translation matrix, for common clinical tools
  - Information for organisations about consent

- **Practical step-by-step instructions**:
  - Task cards and e-Learning modules on the Data Exchange website
  - Recorded webinars, via the Webinar library on the training page

Other useful resources

There are also many interesting and expert materials online, if you are looking to learn more about outcomes measurement and evaluation.

A good place to start might be the following booklet, referenced above, which provides a wealth of information in plain language: "Making sense of evaluation: a handbook for everyone" was published in 2017 by the Social Policy Evaluation and Research Unit (Superu) in New Zealand.

The Australian Institute of Family Studies has an information hub for evidence, resources and support for professionals working in the child, family and community welfare sector.

8. Glossary of terms and Data exchange examples

Terms	Examples
Inputs	The resources (including funding, people, time and infrastructure) invested by your organisation in the program, activity or initiative.
Actions	In terms of outcomes measurement, the ‘action’ is what you do so that you can provide a service, not the service itself (for example, it can be the action of training of volunteers or the setting-up of a workshop).
Outputs	The measurable products or services the organisation delivers to its clients and the community. In the Data Exchange, these are recorded as ‘session’ and ‘service type’ details.
Outcomes	The changes or benefits to the clients and/or community because of the service delivered by your organisation. The intention is usually to achieve a positive long-term outcome; however, it is important to remember that an outcome may also need to be recorded as ‘no change’, or even a ‘negative change’, depending on the type of service and the individual client’s situation.
- Short term outcomes	Immediate changes or benefits for your client as a result of you providing initial assistance. The first SCORE is recorded as close as possible to the start of a client accessing a service.
- Medium term outcomes	The changes along the way while the client is accessing your services. This is often where you can start to see changes in behaviour, practice or decisions. SCORE can be recorded at intervals throughout a client’s access to a service.
- Long-term outcomes	The changes and differences in client circumstances towards the end of receiving services from your organisation. This can be due to well-established changes in knowledge, capability and behaviours. SCORE is recorded towards the end of a client receiving a service.
Impact	The overall change at the end of the program or activity. This term is sometimes used to describe long-term outcomes, but can also be a broader measure, such as changes to a community or society as a whole. There is no specific way to record this in the Data Exchange.
Evaluation	A systematic process to make an evidence-based assessment of an activity, a service delivery program or initiative. For grant recipients, evaluation milestones and criteria are set out in their funding agreement. Please note that data reported via the Data Exchange is only one of the components of such an evaluation.
Program logic	A diagram that describes the causal chain between the activities you deliver and the intended client outcomes (see Section 3 for more details).
Evidence	Facts that can be measured or demonstrated. Examples in the Data Exchange include client details, outlet information, session dates, service types, demographic information etc. Through the ‘partnership approach’ evidence can be collated on client outcomes in terms of goals, circumstances and satisfaction, as well as on the meeting of community needs.