

Triangulation and alternative outcome-gathering methods

What is triangulation?

Most Age UKs/Age Concerns will be able to conduct a maximum of two or three interviews with clients each month. The information gathered by means of the questionnaires provides a great deal of insight into the individual experiences of the clients that have been interviewed. However, if you are only interviewing a very small number of your clients, they may not be a representative sample and their experiences may be significantly different to the majority of your clients. Given the challenges and time and resource commitments required to produce statistically valid results, it is highly unlikely that any Age UK/Age Concern could achieve this and also gather the richness of data that comes from the questionnaires.

But by adopting a triangulated approach, you can assure the validity of your outcome-monitoring without having to contact a large number of your clients. The term 'triangulation' comes from orienteering and navigation and refers to the practice of plotting your location from a number of different reference points to ensure that you more accurately know where you are. In research and evaluation, triangulation is used to indicate that more than two methods are used in a study to double- or triple-check results. The idea is that one can be more confident with a result if different methods lead to the same result. And if different methods lead to differing results, it will highlight biases, inaccuracies and other flaws in an approach or the results produced. So, in effect, by using a number of different approaches, i.e. triangulating your results, you will either prove the accuracy of your results or identify that they may not be representative. And it can be achieved with limited resource and time commitments.

Suggested alternative surveying approaches

In addition to conducting two or three monthly interviews with clients of your service, it is recommended that an Age UK/Age Concern conducts the following exercises with their clients from time to time to triangulate the results from the questionnaires.

These approaches could also be used without the questionnaires by Age UKs or Age Concerns that feel they are unable to commit to completing two or three interviews each month. But to ensure statistical validity of the results, an Age UK or Age Concern would need to significantly increase the size of the samples and the frequency of the exercises.

Templates relating to these approaches are available in Section 6a, 'Triangulation and alternative outcome-gathering methods templates'.

Pre- and post-service short questionnaire version 1

This short exercise consists of a single question that can be used to measure the impact of advice provided upon a client. The question should be asked of your client before they receive your service and then again once their enquiry is dealt with/their case is closed.

The question is: 'What effect does your problem have on your life?' and the options are:

- considerable effect
- some effect
- no effect.

By comparing the before and after (pre- and post-service) responses, you will be able to track whether your service is having a positive impact on your clients by reducing the effect their problems have on their lives. You may also want to ask them to comment on their answer to provide further explanation. These comments will help give context to your results and also possibly provide useful quotes/testimonies for case studies and reports as described in Section 5, 'Producing case studies'.

When reporting on the results from the short questionnaire you should probably report not only on the numbers of clients responding to each answer before and after receiving your service, but also the numbers moving from one answer to another. See the sample reporting template in Section 6a, 'Triangulation and alternative outcome-gathering methods templates'. You will be able to compare the results with those from the analysis of the face-to-face questionnaires and discover whether people are saying that their problems have been solved or reduced following the intervention of your information and advice service.

There are two ways in which an Age UK or Age Concern could use this question.

1. One-off exercise

You could ask the question of a sample of clients (e.g. all clients within a two-week period) when they initially contact your service and then you could contact them either by telephone or in writing a month or so later to ask the same question again (although you may wish to reword it slightly to 'What effect has your problem been having on your life since receiving advice/support from our service?').

2. Embedding into regular practice approach

You could make the question one of the things that you asked of all clients when diagnosing their problem and record their response in the case notes. You could then ask the question again when following up with the client when you are looking to close the case and capture the client's practical gains. Again you could record this in the case notes.

Pre- and post-service short questionnaire version 2

Another version of the short questionnaire exercise is to contact a sample of clients after they have received advice and ask them two versions of the question, one about their circumstances prior to receiving advice and the other following the advice. This could be done either over the telephone or in writing, with all clients receiving advice over a given period (for example, two weeks) or a percentage of all clients each month (for example 5 per cent of clients).

The two questions would be:

1) 'What effect did your problem have on your life before you used our service?' with the options:

- considerable effect
- some effect
- no effect

and

2) 'What effect does your problem have on your life since you used our service?' with the options:

- considerable effect
- some effect
- no effect.

As with the previous version of this questionnaire, you may also wish to give your clients the opportunity to provide additional comments on their answer. You could also consider adding these two questions to any customer satisfaction questionnaires that you send out to clients of your advice service, which may save you from using additional resources to conduct triangulation of your results.

PLEASE NOTE that version 1 of this approach would be considered the more statistically reliable approach to measuring the change brought about by your service, as it measures the client's responses at two given moments in time rather than asking them to reflect back on how they felt. The process of reflecting back can lead to skewed results; for example, a client may feel that their original circumstances were more dire than they recognised at the time now that they understand their situation better, or they may be inclined to over-emphasise the difference as a way of showing support for your service.

Postal questionnaire

In Section 6a you will find a questionnaire which is designed to triangulate the results of the more detailed face-to-face questionnaires. While it will not enable triangulation of some of the detail of the face-to-face questionnaires, it will demonstrate whether the key issues/outcomes of:

- the client's original problems being solved
- your involvement in achieving this
- the impact that receiving advice or having their problem solved has had on them

have been achieved.

As this questionnaire will not be used by a staff member, who is able to interpret or expand on the questions, some of the questions have been phrased in more straightforward terms (see, for example, the questions relating to the difference contact with the service has made).

As with the face-to-face questionnaires, a section on the quality of service has been included. The questions asked in this section can be changed to reflect the nature of your service. And if you wish to shorten the postal questionnaire, this section could be removed.

The questions from the pre- and post-service short questionnaire have been included and can be triangulated with both the results of the pre- and post-service short questionnaire and the face-to-face questionnaires as described previously. These could be removed from the questionnaire if you feel it is too long.

If you are conducting two or three monthly face-to-face questionnaires, then it is advisable to also send out this postal questionnaire at least a couple of times during the year. To ensure that you receive a significant number of questionnaires back, you should:

- send it to approximately 100 clients (Age Concerns report that they generally get very high response rates to such questionnaires, so you should expect to receive between 40 per cent and 70 per cent back)
- send it to clients who as a minimum received face-to-face advice
- send it to clients within two to four weeks of their receiving advice or their case being closed
- include a self-addressed, prepaid envelope
- include a covering letter, explaining that their responses will help with improving the service and providing evidence to secure future funding

for the service (a sample covering letter is included with the template questionnaire).

The results from the postal survey correlate more directly to the face-to-face questionnaire than those of the pre- and post-service short questionnaire. The following highlights the specific areas of correlation.

Postal questionnaire	Face-to-face questionnaire
Question 1	Questionnaires 1 and 3 – question 4 Questionnaire 2 – question 6
Question 2	Questionnaires 1 and 3 – question 13 Questionnaire 2 – question 19
Questions 3 and 4	Questionnaires 1, 2 and 3 – the general direction of travel from responses Directly correlates to results of short pre- and post-service questionnaire
Question 5	Questionnaires 1 and 3 – questions 6 and 11 Questionnaire 2 – questions 8 and 15
Question 6	Questionnaires 1 and 3 – question 19 Questionnaire 2 – question 27
Question 7	Questionnaires 1 and 3 – question 20 onwards Questionnaire 2 – question 28 onwards

Other possible approaches

There are a number of other ways of engaging with your service users to gather information about their experience of your service and the outcomes that have been achieved for them. Three such approaches are described below.

Capturing the observations of staff

See if the observations and experiences of your paid staff and volunteers reflect the responses of your clients. Staff can also often provide anecdotal accounts from clients about the service or the impact it has had upon them.

Other correspondence from clients

Just as observations from staff can triangulate your findings so can other forms of correspondence from clients. For instance, thank-you letters, complaints, suggestion box ideas and client satisfaction surveys will all provide you with data that you can correlate against your advice outcome results.

Focus groups

If you regularly deliver an I&A service in a sheltered housing scheme, GP surgery, community centre or other location with a fixed or regular group of attendees, residents or clients, you could run a focus group to get their views on your service and the outcomes it has achieved.

For further guidance on other approaches look at *Involve, Engage, Empower – A Toolkit to Help Your Advice Agency Successfully Involve Your Users and Other Stakeholders*, produced by the User and Stakeholder Involvement workstream of the Working Together for Advice project. The guidance can be found in the Information and Advice section of Agenet.