

The Age UK Advice Outcomes Approach – an overview

This section provides an overview of the Age UK approach to advice outcome monitoring, describes the evidence, and explains the rationale behind the decisions made in adopting this approach.

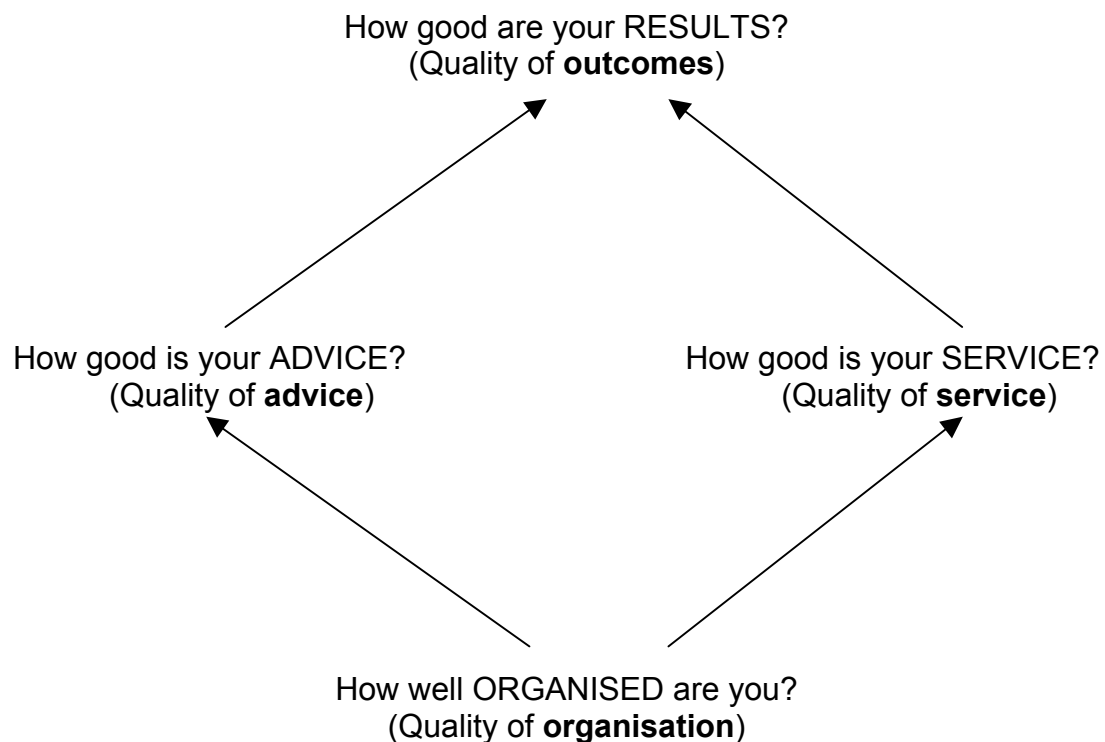
The Age UK Advice Outcomes Approach has been developed from an approach used by Citizens Advice through piloting with local Age Concerns. During the piloting a number of different approaches and tools were tested. The approach and tools that are described in the following section are those which were identified as the most appropriate for local Age Concern I&A services. However, clearly not all local Age UK/Age Concern I&A services are the same and therefore the approach and tools may not be suitable for all organisations or groups. The approach described requires an Age UK/Age Concern to have both a minimum level of staffing and a minimum level of service. The approach may not be appropriate for Age UKs/Age Concerns that have a very small I&A service; that don't have a distinct separate I&A service; that only provide information or telephone advice; or that do not provide an element of face-to-face advice. However, some of the approaches discussed in Section 6, 'Triangulation and alternative outcome-gathering methods', may well be of interest to such organisations or groups.

The Age UK Advice Outcomes Approach is designed to gather information on a number of specific issues relating to the provision of I&A services:

- Do clients get their problems solved and, if so, how much of it is due to the involvement of the Age UK/Age Concern?
- What are the practical and consequential gains experienced by clients of Age UK/Age Concern I&A services?
- Do Age UK/Age Concern I&A services deliver their service in a way that meets the needs and wishes of their clients?

Gathering this information helps Age UKs and Age Concerns to better understand what their service is achieving and whether it is actually working as intended (are the gains those expected? Do clients have problems with the service?). Client advice outcomes should be seen as a barometer of how well a service is doing things, giving an overall picture of the success of the service. This idea has previously been discussed in the *Good Advice Good Results* report produced by Age Concern England (the report can be requested from the Quality and Partners Team of the Information and Advice Department of Age UK). The following diagram is taken from *Good Advice*

Good Results and helps to demonstrate how advice outcome monitoring fits into reviewing an I&A service:



The diagram demonstrates the four key elements of assessing the quality of an I&A service and how they relate to each other. As can be seen from the diagram, assessing advice outcomes on their own will not provide an thorough assessment of the quality of a service, but when looked at in conjunction with the other three elements managers should be able to fully understand the quality of their service. Following are brief explanations of the other three elements:

Quality of organisation relates to how well an I&A service is run and in particular is focused on I&A specific quality practices, such as staff training and development, assessment of professional competency, maintenance of I&A resources, understanding of advice need and planning to meet it, case recording practice, etc. External quality marks, such as CLS Quality Mark, Quality Counts and the new advice sector quality mark, measure this.

Quality of advice relates to the measuring of how good the advice given to clients is. This is primarily about case file review and the processes that are put in place to ensure that staff and volunteers provide thorough and accurate advice.

Quality of service relates to measuring how appropriate clients consider the service to be. This is often done through customer satisfaction surveys. Other

methods for capturing this data include suggestion/comment boxes and complaints, comments and compliment processes. There are also elements of quality of service assessment within the questionnaires in this resource.

While the purpose of the Age UK approach is to gather information to enable Age UK/Age Concern I&A services to improve themselves, the data produced will also be of significant value when reporting to funders and other key stakeholders and for preparing future funding bids or service tenders.

What we are not measuring

There are a couple of things that are often associated with the practice of outcome measuring that are not included with the Age UK approach.

The 'pew effect'

This refers to the sense of relief people often feel immediately after having visited an advice service. This sense of relief can come from simply unloading your problems or knowing that you've now started to address your problems. While this may be something that is easy to measure and would reflect favourably on I&A services, it is a somewhat false measure in that it does not reflect the quality of advice received or any longer-term gain for the client. The Age UK approach does, however, look to measure similar but longer-term gains relating to clients feeling more secure, in control and better informed.

Wider social impact

The Age UK approach does not measure the wider social impact of advice work. However, data captured on practical gains can often be used to demonstrate the contribution to wider social impact made by I&A services.

What we are measuring

The Age UK Advice Outcomes Approach focuses on clients who have received advice from a local Age UK/Age Concern. Clients receiving information (e.g. those issued with a factsheet or telephone number) are discounted from the approach, as it is very difficult to identify a definite link between the information provided and any practical or consequential gain that the older person has received. It is far easier to make clearly justifiable links between the advice that a client receives and practical and consequential gains, especially when these gains are directly related to a problem that an I&A service has helped to solve or address. The Age UK approach includes two key components:

- the capturing of simple practical gains information from all or the majority of advice clients
- more in-depth interviewing of a limited number of clients.

For both of these components, resources have been developed for capturing and then analysing the information. The approach also includes suggested processes for checking the results of the advice outcome monitoring (the technical term for doing this is triangulation) and opportunities for gathering information to use in case studies.

Where possible, the resources and tools have been designed to be embedded into existing I&A service good practice, such as case file reviews, case follow-up to closed files, service reviewing processes and staff appraisal and development.

Each of these resources is described in more detail below.

Practical Gains Tool

The Practical Gains Tool is designed to help Age UK/Age Concern I&A services gather detailed data on the practical gains that they achieve for clients who receive advice. Information from individual clients provides monthly, annual and year-to-date reports on practical gains in four key areas of advice work for older people. These key areas mirror, but also expand upon, the areas of advice that an Age UK Brand Partner will be expected to provide. The four areas are:

- **Money and benefits**, including welfare benefits for older people and their carers, debt, grants and payments, taxation and financial products and services.
- **Housing advice and housing options**, including homelessness, eviction and court action, rented accommodation/landlord issues, owner-occupier issues and housing options.
- **Health and social care**, including community care and residential care.
- **Consumer and access to services**, including practical help at home services, social inclusion, leisure and education services/opportunities, consumer – paying for and switching services, consumer – contract issues and consumer complaints.

Within each of these sections the most common practical gains for older people, as identified by staff in Age UKs and Age Concerns, are selectable. Not all Age UKs or Age Concerns will advise in all of these areas, and it is very likely that some common gains have been missed. Age UK will review the use and results from the tool on a regular basis to make improvements to it. To this end there is an option for capturing any missed practical gains in the tool and these can be reported back to Age UK.

In addition to practical gains, there is an option to record when a client has received appropriate information or advice relating to any of the above categories. While this is clearly not a practical gain, it has been included for Age UKs/Age Concerns that wish to capture this outcome at the same time.

Entering data into the tool is very simple. An adviser using the tool will open a new page for each client and will then select from a short series of menus (using the section titles listed above) until they are then able to select the specific relevant practical gain. Depending upon the nature of the gain, they will either enter a 'Y' to confirm the gain or an amount for a financial gain. So, for example, if an adviser has assisted a client to get a tax rebate, they will select 'Money and benefits', then 'Taxation outcomes', then 'More detailed taxation outcomes', and then finally enter the amount of rebate into the box for tax rebate.

The reports produced by the Practical Gains Tool will not only collate the total numbers of each type of gain but also the total numbers under each of the headings in the list above. They will also include:

- the total value of each financial gain
- a range of totals of different types of financial gains (e.g. total welfare benefit gains, total value of tax gains)
- an overall total financial gain amount
- average amounts of financial gains achieved per client.

For more information on both the process for entering data and the reports produced, consult the guidance notes included in the Practical Gains Tool.

Ideally, the process of capturing practical gains should be undertaken for all clients who have received advice from an I&A service. As a minimum, it should be done with every client who has received case work or some element of practical support. It is recommended that it is also done with all clients receiving single instances of face-to-face advice. It would also be useful to capture the data for all clients receiving telephone advice, although these clients would be the lowest priority in capturing the information (as they are often the most difficult to follow up with, and the causal link between advice and practical gain is likely to be weakest with these clients). In developing the tool it was envisaged that Age UK/Age Concern I&A services would use it during the follow-up process that they use to close client files. In some cases this will be a paper exercise of capturing the gains from the recorded case notes; in other cases the information will be captured either from contacting the client or from data received via another agency (for example, details of welfare benefit claims from the Pension Service).

It is hoped that local Age UK/Age Concern organisations will share their report data with the national Age UK organisation to enable national influencing and campaigning work to be undertaken using robust common data from across the federation.

Advice Outcomes questionnaires

In addition to the quantitative data gathered on practical gains, the Age UK Advice Outcomes Approach also looks to capture more detailed and rich information from a much smaller number of clients. The questionnaire gathers data not only on the practical and consequential gains received by the client,

but also how well they felt the service worked for them – did it successfully help them to solve their problem, did it meet their expectations, were they happy with the result achieved, and was the service delivered in a manner than was suitable for them?

The three questionnaires

There are three versions of the questionnaire. Which one an I&A service would use is dependent upon the nature of the service that the client received. The first questionnaire will be applicable for the vast majority of clients; the second is specifically for clients who have been referred on to another agency for further advice; and the third relates to clients who have received support brokerage.

Using the questionnaire as the basis of an interview

The services piloting the questionnaires found that they worked best when used as the basis of a face-to-face or a telephone interview. The response rates from postal questionnaires were not too bad, but it was difficult to obtain qualitative client feedback using this method. Not only do qualitative questions demand more time and thought from respondents and therefore often lead to clients leaving them blank, but the responses can often be obscure or difficult to interpret. In general it was found that postal questionnaires either didn't provide the level of detail that the Age Concerns were looking for, or were not a suitable method for capturing information about the intricacies of advice work. They proved especially difficult to use where clients had multiple problems. Developing questionnaires that were used as part of an interview enabled us explore these complex issues.

Clearly, conducting interviews is more resource-intensive than issuing and collating the responses from a postal survey, but the depth of information gathered was seen to justify the level of staff resource used. Face-to-face interviews were seen as the gold standard, providing the best opportunities to obtain feedback in depth. Some of the first round of pilots used this method to survey particularly vulnerable or confused clients via home visits. However, given the considerable resource implications of this method, the second round of pilots focused on contact by telephone. The questionnaires included in the resource are those developed specifically from the second round of piloting. Telephone interviews typically provide good-quality narrative information, which can be tested and explored with the client, alongside the collection of quantitative data. They are more suitable where clients have brought multiple problems to the bureau. Overall, the use of telephone-based outcomes surveys is **strongly recommended** on the basis of our piloting experience.

Phone surveys are also fairly resource-intensive – with respect to getting hold of clients, talking to them, writing up interviews, inputting the responses into the analysis software and considering the results. The number of clients contacted is therefore limited, which makes this kind of survey more appropriate for reflecting on advice or operational practice than for presenting an overall picture of the I&A service's work. The Practical Gains Tool has

been developed to specifically address the issue of producing an overall picture of an I&A service's work.

The size of the client sample

It is unlikely that you will be able to interview sufficient numbers of clients to demonstrate that the results are representative of your work overall, or able to satisfy tests of statistical significance.

From the pilots it was agreed that conducting two or three interviews a month was practicable. On average it took about one hour and 20 minutes of staff time for all of the work involved in each interview. Once the information from about 20–25 responses has been gathered, you can begin to build a picture of the kind of results you are achieving for clients. It is likely to take 6–12 months initially to gather this number of responses. However, each individual response can provide you with the opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the individual staff member who provided the advice. To this end, it is recommended that Age UKs/Age Concerns consider aligning their questionnaires with their case file review processes (i.e. interviewing the clients who are having their case files reviewed) and use the combined learning from both exercises in staff supervision and development.

Rather than conducting enough interviews to ensure that the results are representative, the Age UK Advice Outcomes Approach suggests that Age UKs or Age Concerns triangulate their results through conducting short telephone or postal surveys of clients using similar questions. This will enable the Age UK/Age Concern to compare the results against those from the surveys, to see if clients are reporting similar results. For more information on triangulation, refer to Section 6, 'Triangulation and alternative outcome-gathering methods'.

The pilots demonstrated that it may be almost impossible to get a truly representative sample of Age UK/Age Concern advice clients. It was felt that many clients would have difficulty coping with an interview or questionnaires or would for other reasons need to be excluded from a sample (for example, clients with dementia). Therefore, you may not be able to claim that your results are 100 per cent statistically valid. It is unlikely that you would be expected to provide data that was robust enough to meet such academic rigour. However, when presenting your results you should always acknowledge the limitations of your survey.

Clients who have received face-to-face advice and casework

The pilots found that the questionnaires are most appropriate for use with clients who have received either ongoing advice casework or some form of practical support. These are the clients who are most likely to provide the most data and the greatest insight into a service and the impact it has on its clients. They also form the client group where any impact can be most directly attributed to the I&A service. One of the pilots only provided one-off face-to-face advice but found that the approach was still very beneficial to them,

especially in gaining an understanding of the effectiveness of the organisations that they referred their clients on to for further advice and support.

Why the approach is not suitable for telephone advice

The approach was found not to work with clients who had received telephone advice. They are unlikely to be motivated to provide much outcomes information and may be frustrated if the completing of the questionnaire takes longer than their original enquiry. The adviser's role in achieving any outcomes will be difficult to assert.

When to collect information about outcomes

Successfully gathering information about outcomes from clients depends on an outcome being available, and the point at which this occurs will vary from one instance to another. Some enquiries/issues can be resolved almost immediately, while others may take months or years. Contacting clients too soon will merely elicit the response that the issue is not yet resolved. On the other hand, if you leave it too long, the client may no longer recall the key information that will interest you.

In some situations, the best time to make contact can be individually determined. For example, where you have been involved in taking action for a client, and finding out what happened is integral and routine to your practice, the adviser can estimate the best point to contact the client. This can then be included in a 'carry forward' system. In the Age UK approach we recommend that practical gains are captured as part of a case closure procedure.

The pilots identified that questionnaire interviews needed to take place within four weeks of the last contact with a client; otherwise a significant number of clients either couldn't remember much about the issues they had consulted the I&A service about or the result.

Which consequential gains we are asking about

In the questionnaires we focus on six particular consequential gains for advice clients:

- To what extent the client now feels able to sort things out for themselves (a **personal** gain).
- Any difference in terms of peace of mind and well-being (a **personal** gain).
- Any difference in terms of the client's knowledge about how things work (a **personal** gain).
- Any differences in terms of the client's knowledge of services and support available to them (a **personal** gain).
- Any changes in their health and comfort (a **health** gain).
- Any gains in terms of their relationships with family or friends (a **quality of life** gain).

And a further six similar, but more service specific gains, for clients receiving support brokerage:

- To what extent the client now feels able to choose and control their care for themselves (a **personal** gain).
- Any difference in terms of peace of mind and well-being (a **personal** gain).
- Any difference in their knowledge about the range of local services and options available to them (a **personal** gain).
- Any changes in their health and comfort (a **health** gain).
- Any gains in terms of their relationships with family or friends (a **quality of life** gain).
- Any difference in how independent the client now feels (a **personal** gain).

The responses to these questions range from the impact being very positive to it being very negative. It is important to capture apparently negative results because this can challenge a service to think about what it delivers. For example, the pilots found that many clients didn't feel that their ability to sort things out had improved and some reported that their knowledge of how things worked had decreased (due to the complexities of their problem that they were previously unaware of). Yet these same clients responded very positively in terms of their peace of mind. These clients had no interest in either understanding their problems or dealing with them themselves, but they were relieved that they could come to Age UK/Age Concern for help. For a service that aims to empower its clients to deal with their own problems, these results might be challenging and lead them to thinking about whether their approach suits clients (it could also explain apparently negative responses to some of the quality of service questions) or whether their advisers were taking an over-protective and disempowering approach with clients.

Asking about the quality of service

Included on the questionnaires is a selection of fairly generic questions regarding the quality of service received, and a range of additional or alternative questions relating to specific service issues.

The pilots demonstrated that it was very useful to ask quality of service questions, as they could shed light on some of the issues/responses collected in the more outcome-focused section of the questionnaire. They also help to provide a fuller picture of the client's experience of the service. A number of the pilots found that the information gathered was much better than that collected through more traditional client satisfaction questionnaires. As the client is asked the quality of service questions after discussing their problem, the actions taken to resolve it, and the outcome achieved, they had a clearer recollection of the service they had received and were able to provide more informative feedback.

However, some clients felt that the quality of service questions made the questionnaires/interview too long. While it is recommended that quality of service questions are included, Age UKs/Age Concerns may decide not to ask them.

Producing case studies from the questionnaires

Producing case studies either for funding bids, reports to funders, campaigning and policy work or promoting a service is essential for I&A services but many Age UKs/Age Concerns do not have a regular process for it and may have to hastily produce them when required. Included within this resource in section 5 “Producing case studies” is guidance on how an Age UK/Age Concern can produce case studies from the information gathered on the questionnaires. This should enable Age UKs/Age Concerns to build a bank of useful case studies and employ case studies more effectively in their work. And it should help them to avoid the need to contact past clients at short notice to ask whether they agree to be used in a case study.

Who should conduct the interviews

Although much of the work involved is administrative, experience from the pilots has shown that – where interviews with clients are involved – people with advice work experience (not necessarily current) are more likely to pick up on issues raised by clients. For example, understanding that further steps might be available in resolving a client’s problem. It is important, however, that advisers do not survey their own clients. It may be possible to use admin staff to do phone interviews where they are sufficiently experienced in dealing with clients and I&A work, or, alternatively, volunteers, management committee members, student placements or outside consultants. In a number of the pilots, the interviews were conducted by the advice service manager. While they found this a particularly useful exercise that provided them with a first-hand insight into how their service worked for its clients, a number of them reported that they struggled to fit the interviews into their schedule. However, the pilots confirmed that, if an Age UK/Age Concern has an existing regular process for service review, the interviews can either complement or replace elements of it.

Analysing the questionnaire results

Citizens Advice has kindly agreed to allow us to use a software package that they developed for analysing the questionnaire results. This software, which has been adapted to make them appropriate to Age UKs/Age Concerns, produces a comprehensive range of statistical reports. An Age UK or Age Concern can use it when reviewing the extent to which their work is achieving the desired outcomes. The information could also form the basis for internal discussion about service improvement. Guidance on use is included within the software itself.

Additionally, analysis of individual questionnaire returns can be used to raise issues about professional practice. Where the responses are linked to case

files or individual enquiry sheets or considered alongside a case file review, they can be used to assess the quality and adequacy of the adviser's response to that particular client. This can either assist with staff supervision and development or provide an opportunity to provide positive feedback to the adviser. They can also identify further follow-up that may be required for the client.

Externally, information from the questionnaires can be used alongside the results from the practical gains recording to provide additional information about:

- typical consequential gains for clients
- how effective the service is at meeting client expectation and solving client problems
- levels of satisfaction with the service.

Clearly this data will be useful when reporting to the public, funders, and other stakeholders. Qualitative information can also be provided in the presentation of case studies derived from the questionnaires.

It is worth noting that surveys of this kind will throw critical as well as positive light on your work. In reality, it is the critical comments that often provide the clearest guidance to service improvement and so should be especially welcomed. At the same time, it is likely that the majority of responses will be positive. It is important that this information is also fed back to staff where it can have a powerful effect on morale.

Some of the pilots identified resistance or anxiety from staff and volunteers when introducing the idea of outcome monitoring. It was found that involving staff and volunteers in considering the results of the monitoring can help to lower anxiety levels among advisers who are aware that their work is, in part, being judged. It was also recognised that it was helpful to feed back positive comments to all staff very early on in the process, to encourage their co-operation.