

Quality services: ticking all the boxes

A guide to evidence and quality for professionals working with families of prisoners and offenders

Introduction

This briefing paper follows on from an event held by Action for Prisoners' and Offenders' Families (APOF) in June 2014 on quality assurance mechanisms, measuring offenders' relationships and demonstrating the impact of services working with families of offenders and prisoners and serves as a guide for professionals and policy makers working with families.

There is a wide range of organisations providing support for prisoners' families, ranging from one to one befriending programmes, to support in visitors' centres, to prison-based family support. Capturing the value of these organisations is difficult, as outcomes are often intangible and difficult to measure.

Yet there is a need for those providing support to prisoners' families to demonstrate the value of their interventions to commissioners, policy-makers and families themselves. It is therefore important that service providers understand how best to measure the impact of their services.

But providing quality services shouldn't be merely a box-ticking exercise, and service providers report a tension between

delivering what commissioners want and maintaining their flexibility and creativity.

This briefing paper examines some of those tensions and discusses approaches and tools that help ensure organisations are delivering quality services. It looks specifically at the difficulties of evaluating services, approaches to measuring impact and specific ways to measure that impact. It also briefly explores the importance of developing quality staff in delivering effective services.

Evaluating services – some common tensions

Commissioners may feel it wise to spend their money on services that have been approved and 'rubber-stamped' for quality through randomised control trials, but service providers report that they want to provide services that are more creative, flexible and responsive to clients' needs.

In addition, many services provided by those who work with prisoners' families involve early support, the effects of which may be difficult to measure. For example, a visitors' centre providing timely advice about financial assistance is not a headline-grabbing intervention yet could prevent

families from spiralling into real hardship.

There is also the difficulty of assessing the impact of an organisation's work when they are referring to other agencies for support. For example, a visitors' centre may recommend that a struggling parent visits a local children's centre. The two services may continue to work in tandem supporting the family, making it difficult to extricate exactly what impact each service is having on the family.

Measuring impact

The tensions outlined above mean that sensitive, thoughtful and thorough methods are needed to measure the impact of work. The Four Pillars approach provides a clear framework for assessment, which involves: mapping a theory of change; prioritising what should be measured; choosing a level of evidence and finally selecting the appropriate tools. These are outlined briefly below:

Mapping a theory of change involves clearly outlining what your organisation's goals are and how you set about achieving them.

Prioritising what should be measured is important because trying to capture everything you do can be difficult and time consuming. Think about which of the goals are most important to your organisation, as it is these that you should be measuring.

Level of evidence means thinking about the credibility and rigour of the evidence you provide. This might involve providing statistical evidence, experimental evidence or case histories.

Choosing tools means thinking about how you want to gather your evidence. There are a number of tools already in existence that are discussed in greater detail in this briefing.

A thorough explanation of the Four Pillars Approach can be found here: www.thinknpc.org/publications/npcs-four-pillar-approach/

As discussed, proving a causal link between a particular intervention and a desired result can be problematic. Therefore, it can be useful to measure interim or soft targets as well. NPC are currently producing a toolkit specifically for organisations working with prisoners' families around the framework of desistance of offending. The toolkit will be released later next year and information can be found on the NPC website: www.thinknpc.org

An early shared approach to collecting data is recommended, and an honest conversation early on in the process between all parties concerned would be valuable in highlighting what would be most useful and realistic in terms of data collection. The goals of service providers and commissioners should be complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Measurement tools

Organisations can design their own ways of gathering information, or utilise one of the many existing data collection tools. The Growing Our Strengths project facilitated by Action for Children in partnership with Action for Prisoners' and Offenders' Families collated many of these tools and they can be accessed here: www.actionforchildren.org.uk/growing-our-strengths/practice-zone

There is a charge for using many of these tools and training in how to use them may be required. Some, such as the Outcomes Star (more info on page 5), are used collaboratively with clients to chart progression. However, progress on a chart does not necessarily equate to success. For example, it could be that a family member may have started with an unreasonably high opinion of their own ability to budget.

A discussion with a practitioner may give them a more realistic and therefore lower opinion which would be recorded as a 'dip'. Such nuances are difficult to communicate and statistical evidence may need to be supported by case histories.

There are a number of quality assurance and evaluation tools developed specifically for the prisoners' families sector. These include the Recognising Quality Toolkit developed by Action for Prisoners' and Offenders' Families to support the effective running of visitors' centres: http://www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/uploadedFiles/2010_Publications_And_Resources/RQ_bklet_2011lo-res.pdf ; and two questionnaires designed by NPC which look at measuring the visitors' experience and strengthening family ties. <http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/measuring-together-2/>

Quality staff and training

However well-tested and successful an intervention may be, it is only as good as the member of staff delivering it. This means that it is vital to recruit and develop a quality workforce. Yet budgets for staff development and training are rarely included in funding bids.

Working with prisoners' families is an evolving discipline that requires a wide range of skills and knowledge. Staff are expected to have considerable skill in working with families as well as detailed knowledge of the criminal justice system. In addition they must be skilled in multi-agency working and are expected to work across boundaries to forge new ways of working and to persuade colleagues to do the same. Such workers have been termed 'boundary spanners'. Yet unlike more established professions such as social work and teaching, working with prisoners' families lacks an initial training programme and solid communities of practice that new staff can easily slot in

to. These difficulties are compounded by the fact that many family workers (especially those working in prison settings) may be situated some distance from their line managers and lack regular supervision. Operating in such conditions can be difficult, and staff have reported that they find it difficult to identify and then articulate what they don't know.

A commitment to staff learning and development is key. Hidden Sentence is now a well-established training course owned by NOMs and developed by APOF and its member organisations. The training course raises awareness of the issues faced by prisoners' families and can lead to a Level 3 City and Guilds qualification.

However, Hidden Sentence does not cover all the knowledge, skills and attitudes that are necessary for effective working with prisoners' families. There are many other areas such as safeguarding, assertive questioning, motivational skills, solid knowledge of the criminal justice system which need to be addressed. APOF is currently drawing together a framework of these competencies, matching them to existing training courses and developing others as required.

But staff development is not just about going on courses, and organisations need to develop learning cultures which encourage shadowing schemes, online learning, peer supervision and Action Learning sets. Reflective practice should be at the heart of a learning culture and there are many ideas on how to encourage self-reflection here: <http://www.open.edu/open-learn/education/learning-teach-becoming-reflective-practitioner/content-section-0>

The National Occupational Standards set out what is expected of workers in certain sectors and can be useful in drawing up job specifications. Although there are no standards specifically laid out for those

who work with prisoners' families, there are related standards such as Playwork in Prisons and Work with Parents. APOF is currently drawing together these standards to provide a framework for the sector.

Conclusions

Measuring impact of work delivered is not just necessary for funders and commissioners but is an invaluable way of helping organisations to assess their work and to consider if they are providing the best possible service. Before embarking on the evaluation process, organisations need to think carefully about their goals and what it is they want to quantify. It is important to be transparent and honest with commissioners and funders about what it is possible to measure, as some outcomes are difficult to prove.

It is also important to capture interim, 'soft' targets to fully show the value of the work. There is a range of measurement tools to help with this process (see below). Workforce Development is often a neglected area but a well-trained, motivated workforce with the right skills and knowledge is vital. Staff should have access to continuous professional development and a culture of reflective practice should be encouraged. APOF will be producing a framework for professional development, expected to be available from late 2014.

Appendix One Measuring Impact Tools

Specific Tools for Working With Prisoners' Families

Measuring Together, NPC

Two questionnaires designed by NPC which look at measuring the visitors' experience and strengthening family ties.
www.thinknpc.org/publications/measuring-together-2/

Recognising Quality Toolkit, APOF

A toolkit to help quantify the effective running of visitors' centres
www.prisonersfamilies.org.uk/uploaded-Files/2010_Publications_And_Resources/RQ_bklet_2011lo-res.pdf

General Tools for Working with Families

We have selected the most appropriate tools for this sector from the Growing our Strengths website, compiled by Action for Children. More details and a full bibliography can be found here:
www.actionforchildren.org.uk/growing-our-strengths/practice-zone

Family Pathfinder Information System

The system is built by York Consulting for the Family Pathfinder Evaluation (DfE), this is an online tool assessing the risks and resilience factors within families.

Family Pressure Scale - Ethnic (McCubbin et al. 1996a)

The questionnaire is designed to be used with families from minority ethnic backgrounds. It covers issues such as couple conflict, children's racial or ethnic identity and life changes such as moving to a new house.
www.amazon.com/Family-Assessment-Resiliency-Adaptation-Inventories/dp/0963933450.

ITQOL: Infant Toddler Quality of Life Questionnaire

The questionnaire is developed for use in infants and toddlers at least 2 months of age up to 5 years. It includes infant /toddler-focused questions, such as development, pain and moods, as well as questions for parents, on subjects such as worry and time limitations.
www.healthactchq.com/survey-itqol.php

McMaster Family Assessment Device (Epstein et al. 1983)

This questionnaire is designed to be filled out by all family members over the age of twelve. It is designed to evaluate families according to the McMAster Model of Family Functioning. Issues covered include: problem solving, communications, behaviour control, affective responsiveness, affective involvement and general functioning.
<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1752-0606.1983.tb01497.x/abstract>

Outcomes Star

The Outcomes Star measures progress for service users. Different versions of the star are available for different topics (alcohol recovery; community involvement; domestic violence; homelessness; family support; long-term conditions; mental health recovery; music therapy; sexual health; young Muslims; substance misuse; NEET)
www.outcomesstar.org.uk/

Adult Wellbeing Scale (Irritability, Depression, Anxiety – IDA Scale. Snaith et al 1978)

This scale is based on the Irritability, Depression and Anxiety Scale. This scale covers four aspects of wellbeing: depression, anxiety and inwardly and outwardly directed irritability.
www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_4079490.pdf

Coping Responses Inventory (Moos 1993)

This brief self-report inventory is designed to identify cognitive and behavioural responses the individual used to cope with a recent problem or stressful situation. There are eight scales including Approach Coping Styles (Logical Analysis, Positive Reappraisal, Seeking Guidance and Support, and Problem Solving) and Avoidant Coping Styles (Cognitive Avoidance, Acceptance or Resignation, Seeking Alternative Rewards, and Emotional Discharge). There are two separate versions of the CRI: the CRI-Adult (for individuals older than 18 years of age) and the CRI-Youth (for individuals aged

12-18 years).

<http://www.hogrefe.co.uk/coping-responses-inventory-cri.html>

Family Needs Scale (Dunst et al. 1988)

This scale asks the family to indicate which of 41 different areas they would like some assistance. The areas include daily childcare and family routines such as budgeting money, transportation, school placement and having someone to talk to.
http://www.wbpress.com/index.php?main_page=product_book_info&products_id=235

Family Support Scale (Dunst, Trivette and Deal 1988)

This scale measures parents' satisfaction with the perceived helpfulness of support they receive in raising a young child. Sources of support covered in the scale are informal kinship, social organisations, formal kinship, nuclear family, specialized professional services, and generic professional services. There two open items for parents to assess other sources of support not identified in the scale. The service providers will be able to identify the areas that need to be improved and addressed to better meet the needs of the families.
http://www.wbpress.com/index.php?main_page=product_book_info&cPath=70_82&products_id=228

Recent Life Events Questionnaire (Brugha et al 1985 plus nine additional items added)

This questionnaire aims to look at recent life events (e.g. unemployment, physical illness, death of someone close) which occurred in the last 12 months and whether the respondents think the events affected them. It can be used to evaluate the impact of events over a longer period.
http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_4079492.pdf

Significant Others Scale (SOS) (Power, Champion and Aris 1988)

This scale measures different resources of social support which may be provided by a number of significant others in one's life. The scale has been found to be able to significantly distinguish between depressed and non-depressed respondents.

<http://goodmedicine.org.uk/files/assessment,sos.DOC>

Soft Outcomes Universal Learning (SOUL) record (Butcher et al, 2006)

SOUL measures progression in soft outcomes such as confidence, self-esteem and problem solving. It can also be used diagnostically to help the individual identify changes they want to make. It is designed to be used with a wide variety of people and there are sections suitable for adults, young people and children.

<http://soulrecord.org/>

Support Functions Scale (Dunst, Trivette and Deal 1988)

The scale measures parents' needs of different types of support. It is to be used with parents of young children. Parents are asked to rate their need for financial, emotional, instrumental and informational support. The scale enables service providers to identify areas of concern in a short length of time.

http://www.wbpress.com/index.php?main_page=product_book_info&products_id=323

Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS)

This scale measures mental well-being, covering subjective well-being and psychological functioning.

<http://www.healthscotland.com/understanding/population/Measuring-positive-mental-health.aspx>

Family Activity Scale (Derived from The Child-Centredness Scale – Smith 1985)

The Family Activity Scale is derived from a Child-Centredness Scale devised by Smith (1985). There are two separate scales: one

for children aged 2–6, and one for children aged 7–12. The scale is designed to identify the extent of joint, child-centred family activity and independent/autonomous child activity, and self-care.

http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_4079493.pdf

Home Conditions Scale (Family Cleanliness Scale - Davie et al 1984)

The scale is identical to the Family Cleanliness Scale devised by Davie and others (1984). It helps to assess the safety, order and cleanliness of the place where the child lives.

http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_4079489.pdf

Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) (Caldwell and Bradley 1984; Bradley et al 2000)

The HOME inventory is designed to measure the quality and extent of stimulation available to a child in the home environment. Versions of HOME have been developed for infants (birth to age 3), children aged 3-6, children aged 6-10, early adolescents aged 10-15, child care, children of disabilities.

<http://ualr.edu/case/index.php/home/home-inventory/>