



Experts in
Regeneration



Measuring soft outcomes

A basic guide

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This is a guide published by Hall Aitken – please do not copy it. If you would like another copy or help with performance measurement of projects towards soft outcomes then please contact us on: 0141- 204 3183, info@hallaitken.co.uk

Other guides available include ***Bid-writing*** and also ***Performance measurement and self-evaluation***.

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About soft outcomes and indicators

'Hard outcomes only provide half the picture. Sometimes given a lower profile because they are more subjective, soft outcomes provide the important detail that gives a real insight in to the experiences of those who access your service. They describe the journey rather than the destination and chart changes that occur and the progress a person makes towards reaching their goal.' (www.homeless.org.uk).

The purpose of this guide

This guide, ideally accompanied by a training session, will build skills to measure soft indicators. It will help you:

- Understand the difference between hard and soft outcomes;
- Explain the differences to others;
- Understand the range of outcomes that can be measured;
- Use our soft outcome tools; and
- Collate and understand results.

Differences between soft and hard indicators

Indicators are measurable signs of progress. An 'indicator' implies or suggests (or indicates) progress rather than proving it beyond doubt. You are probably familiar with collecting quantitative data on 'hard' indicators such as number of qualifications gained, number of participants, amount of floor space occupied; and number of people into jobs. In some of these cases the indicator may give a comprehensive measure of progress. But in the case of 'soft outcomes' it is generally more difficult to find any indicator of progress and none will provide a comprehensive proof of progress. Examples of soft outcomes include:

- Confidence and motivation changes;
- Feelings – of well-being, of safety, of satisfaction;
- Personal skills – problem solving, time management and social skills; and
- Social cohesion and collective sense of place and purpose.

Soft indicators are then the signals we choose to show progress towards these intangible outcomes. Choosing them can be difficult.

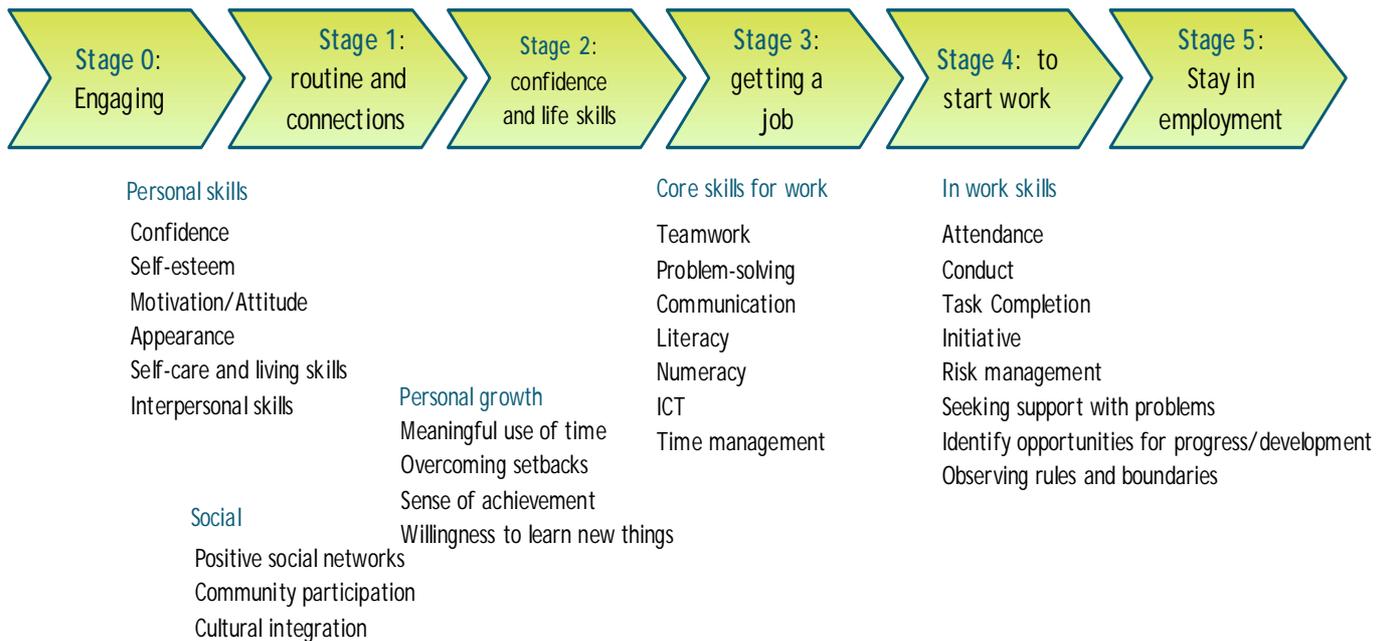
Often changes in these indicators are as important as or even more important than the so-called 'hard' indicators. For example, someone with increased confidence, motivation and interpersonal skills will probably secure a job and stay in it – even if it takes them time to find it. On the other hand many people don't last in jobs they were placed in too quickly by projects concerned with 'hard' targets.

So this guide aims to help you clarify the soft outcomes you are aiming to achieve and to go on to choose 'soft indicators' that help show if you are making progress.

Examples of soft outcomes

Different issues are important at different times as people progress along their employability pathway. In turn this will influence what outcomes you will focus on. Figure 1 below gives examples of what outcomes may be relevant at different stages.

Figure 1 Soft outcomes on the employability pathway



Different outcomes for different target groups

Key changes vary for different target groups. For example, with young people you may wish to measure improved behaviour, increased confidence, improved self-esteem, increased motivation, and satisfaction with facilities. For women recognition of their own prior skills and experience may be important, while for SME owner/managers confidence for next year's trading results, expectation to grow or employ staff can be suitable progress indicators. For people with mental illness or with learning difficulties you could track reduced anxiety or depression. So you will need to use tools that address these specific issues.

How to measure soft indicators

The key to measuring progress towards soft outcomes is agreeing a set of simple indicators that most or all of stakeholders accept as being useful.

It is possible to draw on a sound research base for some indicators. For example the proportion of people eating breakfast is probably a good indicator of progress towards healthy eating and reducing obesity; there is good research evidence demonstrating a causal link between breakfasts and lowering obesity. But even here you can probably think of several flaws with this indicator. Often you will not have this level of research to draw on in any case – although it is well worth checking what others do before you develop something from scratch.

Once you realise (and convince other stakeholders) that the goal is *plausible indicators* of progress you can begin to search for or develop your own.

General approaches

You can measure soft indicators through:

- Observation; and
- Subjective questioning.

Observation can be expensive and needs a fair amount of input from project staff or course tutors. But some types of focus groups provide a reasonably cost-effective approach.

In practice **subjective questioning** - using questionnaires or interviews - is the main method of assessing soft indicators. It relies on positive staff/client working relationships. Repeated use of the same questions at regular interval allows you to track progress over time or distance travelled.

Distance travelled – A key concept of the use of soft indicators is the distance travelled over time – the added value of an intervention. The focus is on the progress made by the individual from their starting point rather than achievement of common standards.

There are three methods of measuring soft outcomes that have become widely used by a range of projects:

The Rickter Scale www.rickterscale.com	A board with sliding scales – users must attend a one day training course before they can use it
The Outcomes Star http://www.homelessoutcomes.org.uk/	A pen and paper based system using rating scales and available at no cost
The SOUL Record http://www.theresearchcentre.co.uk/soul/soulrecord.htm	A pen and paper system which can be customised to different needs – users must attend a one day training course

Of these, we understand that the SOUL record is based on the largest body of research (a £250K Big Lottery Funded research project) but the Rickter Scale is widely used and the Outcomes Star has an increasing user base too.

Hall Aitken can arrange training in the Rickter Scale and SOUL record (at a cost).

Measuring generic soft outcomes

We have identified two key indicators that are relevant for most employability interventions where soft outcomes are important. These generic indicators are:

- Attitude - including confidence, self-esteem and motivation;
- Interpersonal skills - including social interaction, presentation and time management.

The tools you will need to measure them are:

- An implementation plan;
- A questionnaire for measuring the clients' perceived changes in attitudes and interpersonal skills; and
- An observation schedule for measuring the staffs' perceived changes in attitudes and interpersonal skills of the client.

Generic indicators

– soft indicators to measure change towards general but not specific programme outcomes.

Planning your research

Take time before you start doing anything to consider some important questions such as:

- Who are you going to measure changes in soft indicators with?
- Do you have their informed consent?
- What methods you are going to use?
- How will you conduct this within the existing project activity?
- What tools and equipment do you need?
- How often do you need to do it?

The implementation plan at the end of this guide will help you focus on these questions and help plan how you are going to do this within the project.

To be able to measure the distance travelled you will need to establish a person's starting point – the baseline – through the initial assessment. It is difficult to assess change in soft indicators retrospectively as people's memory of their past attitudes and feelings are usually inaccurate. But often this is the only

Baseline position – A starting point against which changes can be measured

Retrospective baseline position – A starting point in the past against which changes can be measured. This is where you ask beneficiaries to think back to a specific point in time and recall their feelings at that time.

option we have. Methods include:

- Retrospective questions; or
- Presenting material (for example press cuttings or photographs) and statistics about the starting time to remind people before discussion in a focus group.

This guide includes a questionnaire we have developed for measuring change in generic soft indicators.

Triangulation to assess progress towards outcomes

To make your evidence more robust it is important that you use more than one method to track progress of people during their journey. If we only ask for people's opinions without having some way of double checking the results are not as accurate as they could be. Other common methods to measure soft indicators include:

- Focus groups; and
- Journals and diaries.

These help us to gather people's views and collect stories that highlight changes.

More innovative methods are:

- Using videos (vox pops, video diaries, reports to camera);
- The Most Significant Change (MSC) method; or
- SMS or web-based survey.

Use more than one method

The key to checking whether an individual's responses represent genuine change is to compare them with the assessment by others. Within a project the person most closely associated with individuals will be able to report on their perceptions of changes in an individual's attitude and interpersonal skills. We recommend that the project staff member rates individuals at the same time as participants complete their own self-assessments. The findings can then be compared to see whether the changes tally.

Noting changes in individuals, groups and the programme

You can download an excel spreadsheet from our website to record responses from survey and external feedback. This will allow you to track movement and progress for individuals and a group of people.

What do you do with the data?

You should use the data in your regular reviews to assess progress towards outcomes. It will help project staff to change, update and amend the delivery of support. You will understand whether you are helping clients and the data can be aggregated to enable funders to see whether a programme is having a positive impact on client soft outcomes.

Remember that this is a **basic** guide. The key is to have simple questions that participants understand and can answer. And compare these to others' assessments. More sophisticated guides and tools are available at a cost.

Planning tool for soft outcomes measurement

Please use this form to plan your activities for measuring generic soft indicators – **attitude and interpersonal skills**.

Project name:			
Lead officer:			
Telephone:		E-mail:	
Which project beneficiaries will you measure these soft indicators with? E.g. will you work with all project beneficiaries or beneficiaries of a particular element of your project?			
<input type="checkbox"/> All beneficiaries			
<input type="checkbox"/> Sample of beneficiaries - How will you select the sample?			
Methods to gather data			
Self-completion questionnaire		Interview	
Video diary		Other(please state)	
What tools or equipment will you need to do this?			
How will you record the data you gather?			
How will you analyse and report your findings to the board and funder?			
What support do you need to implement your plan and from whom?			

Planning framework

Method element	Start date	Tools equipment needed	or	Frequency of measurement	Who is responsible?	Method of recording	How this will be analysed?
Interview							
Questionnaire							
Observation							
Other							

Questionnaire for generic indicators – attitude and interpersonal skills

(Insert relevant text stating the purpose of the questionnaire, who has commissioned it, who will have access to the analysis and that it is confidential)

National Insurance number (for making results anonymous):

Name:

Date:

Question	Strongly disagree										Strongly agree
1. I make a real effort to do those things that matter to me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
2. I am a confident person	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
3. I do my best and if I make a mistake I try again	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
4. I am willing to take on responsibility	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
5. I feel good about myself	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
6. I usually get on well with people	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
7. I care about my appearance	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
8. I am reliable and turn up to appointments on time	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
9. I am well organised	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
10. What is the main thing that prevents you from getting a job?											
11. How confident do you feel at the moment about overcoming this?	Not confident at all	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Very confident	

Thank you.

This information will help us understand what benefits you achieve as a result of the project. You can see a record of your own results at any time and we will let you know using the anonymous identifications how the information has been used.