

# Outcomes Based Accountability: a brief summary

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## Background

The current focus in British social policy on outcomes or results has been informed by the work of Mark Friedman in the United States<sup>1</sup>. Mark and colleagues visited the UK in March 2000 to discuss their experience of applying a “results based” or “outcomes based” approach to planning services for children, young people and families. The publication that applied this thinking to services in the UK<sup>2</sup> was influential in determining the outcomes framework that underpins Every Child Matters and the 2004 Children Act.

Since that time staff from around 120 local authorities and a number of voluntary organisations have attended events on OBA run by the IDEA. An initial evaluation has been published<sup>3</sup> and a paper describing the approach and including some 20 case studies was published by the DCSF earlier in 2008<sup>4</sup>. OBA has also featured strongly during the fieldwork with over 100 local authorities for the Narrowing the Gap project<sup>5</sup> and is informing the work of the newly established Centre for Excellence and Outcomes (C4EO) based at the National Children’s Bureau.

## Outcomes Based Accountability

OBA is a conceptual approach to planning services and assessing their performance that focuses attention on the results – or outcomes – that the services are intended to achieve.

It is also seen as much more than a tool for planning effective services. It can become a way of securing strategic and cultural change: moving organisations away from a focus on ‘efficiency’ and ‘process’ as the arbiters of value in their services, and towards making better outcomes the primary purpose of their organisation and its employees.

Further distinguishing features of the approach are

- The use of simple and clear language
- The collection and use of relevant data
- The involvement of stakeholders, including service users and the wider community, in achieving better outcomes
- The distinction between accountability for performance of services or programmes on the one hand, and accountability for outcomes among a particular population on the other.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedman M (2005) *Trying Hard is not Good Enough: how to produce measurable improvements for customers and communities* Trafford Publishing.

<sup>2</sup> Utting, D, Rose W and Pugh G (2001) *Better Results for Children and Families: involving communities in planning services based on outcomes* NCVCCO

<sup>3</sup> McAuley C and Cleaver D (2006) *Improving Service Delivery – introducing outcomes-based accountability* IDeA

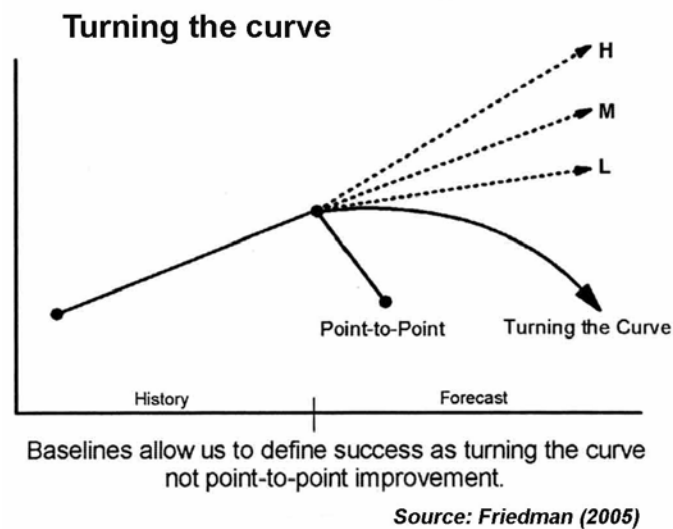
<sup>4</sup> Utting D, Painter A and Renshaw J (2008) *Better Outcomes for Children and Young People – From Talk to Action and Turning the Curve Stories* DCSF

<sup>5</sup> Local Government Association (2008) *Narrowing the Gap: final guidance year 1* LGA/C4EO

## Tools in the OBA approach

Central to the OBA approach is a process described as “turning the curve” (see Figure 1 overleaf). An outcome in need of improvement is described, and then consideration is given to what is likely to happen over time if nothing changes. Plotted as a graph, this projected trend data provides a baseline against which subsequent progress can be measured. By instituting effective and timely action to achieve better outcomes, service planners can expect to achieve results that move away from the projected baseline, thereby “turning the curve”.

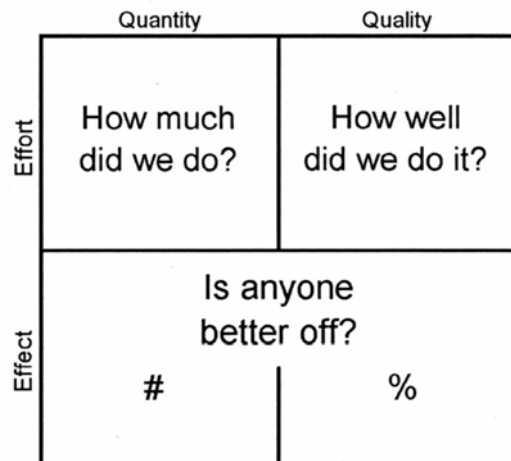
**Figure 1**



Turning the Curve processes can be applied to both population accountability and service performance.

The other process central to this approach is the use of performance management categories shown below in Figure 2. The aim is to distinguish between quantity and quality, and between inputs, outputs and outcomes or results. The bottom right hand box – what proportion of service users are better off (quality of effect) - is the most important, but the one that is often neglected.

**Performance measurement categories**

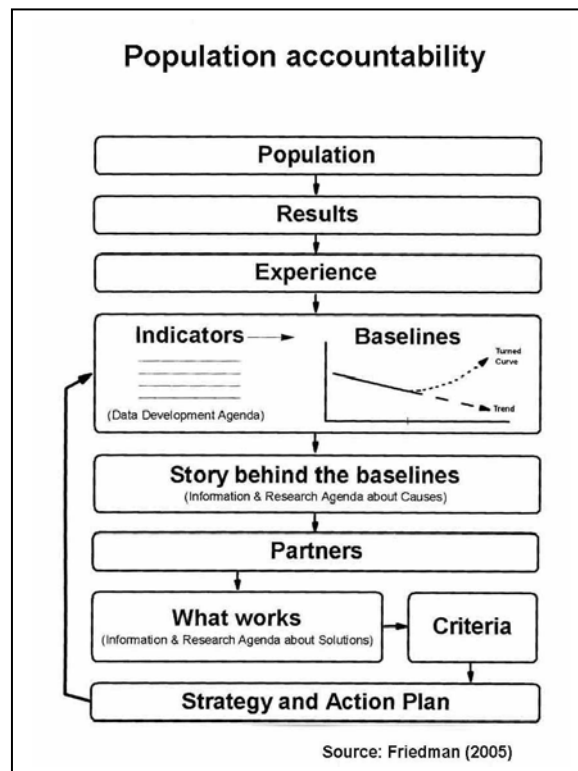


**Figure 2**

**Population accountability**

The OBA process for population accountability follows the key stages shown as a flowchart in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**



*Population/users:* What group or groups of children and families are to be covered, and in what geographical area?

*Results:* what outcomes or results are wanted for the population identified?

*Experience:* In choosing indicators (see below), how will the wider community as well as the identified population experience – see, hear or feel – the intended outcomes?. For example, ‘stay safe’ could be experienced in many different ways, including more children walking to school, more families using parks at weekend and less abuse from binge drinkers near the local off-licence.

*Indicators:* For each outcome selected, there needs to be a set of indicators relevant to measuring progress. For example, Standard Achievement Test (SAT) scores at age 11, or GCSE results at age 16, or numbers of teenage pregnancies.

*Baselines:* A baseline must be established for each indicator used for OBA. As seen in Figure 1, this should, ideally, consist of an ‘historic’ part, showing trends based on the most recent available data, and a ‘forecast’ of where the trend will go if current services and budgets remain the same.

*Story behind the baselines:* What lies behind each set of baseline data? For example, if children at primary schools in a particular neighbourhood are achieving results below the national and local authority average, why is this? What explains teenage pregnancy rates that are twice as high in two local authority wards as the whole of the rest of the borough?

*Needs assessment:* The Turning the Curve process recommends that the choice of target outcomes and selection of indicators for measuring progress should precede the assessment of related needs in the relevant population. In Friedman’s view, needs assessment should be treated as a tool to help understand the story behind the baselines and to plan improved services and programmes that will achieve better outcomes.

*Partners:* Which stakeholders, including community organisations and local people, as well as public, voluntary and private agencies, need to come together to achieve better outcomes.

*Action needed to succeed (‘what works’):* Guided by the data and the story behind the baseline, what changes would help to bring about the intended better outcomes. This might include

- Evidence concerning effective services in other areas – including examples of ‘what works’ suggested by rigorous research and shared knowledge concerning ‘best’ and ‘promising’ practice.
- ‘No-cost’ or ‘low-cost’ ideas that may not be accredited by research but have the potential to be effective based on experience and knowledge of the community.
- Innovative approaches that can stimulate creative thinking, even if the actual ideas seem ‘off the wall’.
- Solutions based on having a fixed, but generous pot of money available to pay for them.

*Criteria and action plan:* Four criteria are suggested that can be used to test the potential value of potential components in an action plan:

- Specificity: Is the proposed action specific enough to be implemented?
- Leverage: How big a contribution will it make to improving outcomes and ‘turning the curve’?
- Values: Is the proposed action fair and ethical?
- Reach: Is it feasible and affordable?

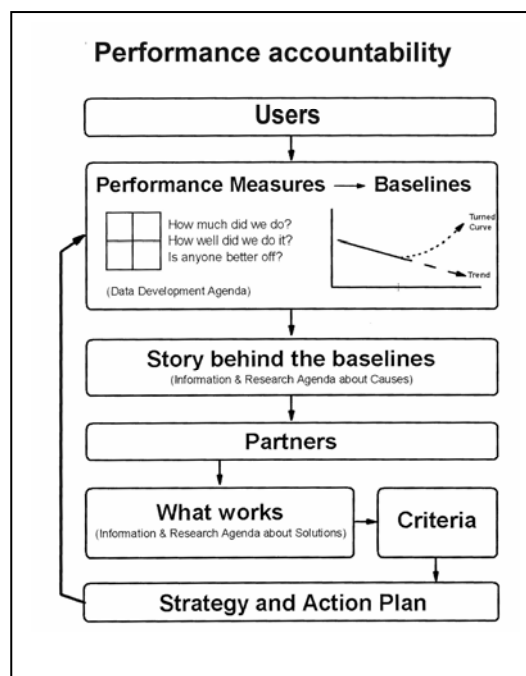
Conventional SMART criteria can also be used to assess whether solutions are realistic and deliverable.

*Budget:* ‘No-cost’ and ‘low-cost’ ideas offer an important means of achieving ‘quick wins’. But major changes in services for children, young people and families (like other age groups) are likely to involve significant sums of public and possibly other money. This process has been used strategically by agencies working in partnership – including those responsible for local Children and Young People’s Plans – to make a compelling case for change. This, in turn, makes it easier for the partners to secure the necessary resources from within and beyond their own agencies.

### Performance accountability

Performance accountability for services follows similar steps already described for population accountability, but starts with identifying the service users – see Figure 4.

**Figure 4**



Seven key questions are identified that organisations should routinely ask themselves, questions that can be as useful for staff supervision as they can for monthly or quarterly monitoring:

1. Who are our users?

2. How can we measure if our users are better off?
3. How can we measure if we are delivering services well?
4. How are we doing on the most important of these measures?
5. Who are the partners that have a role to play in doing better?
6. What works to do better, including no-cost and low-cost ideas?
7. What do we propose to do?

### **In conclusion**

The OBA approach can provide a useful framework, or set of questions, to help organisations work collaboratively to ensure that they are planning effectively and to know whether they are making a difference to the lives of their service users.