

MEASURING THE OUTPUTS OF INFORMATION AND ADVICE SERVICES

PSSRU

Outline of a research project funded by HM Treasury

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INTRODUCTION

Information and advice is increasingly being seen as an essential area of activity, prioritised through recent national government policy documents. Information & Advice (I&A) services are perceived as critically important within the social care field, ensuring individuals are enabled to navigate and access mainstream services (Baxter et al., 2006). Third sector organisations (voluntary/community and private organisations) play a crucial role in providing I&A generally and in social care in particular. In a recent review, the Department of Health (2007) estimated that among social care third sector organisations (TSOs), 42 per cent provide advice or counselling services, whilst in healthcare, 47 per cent provide services around information and advice. Of all health and social care information, 37 per cent is provided by the third sector and 36 per cent by the public sector. Nevertheless, whilst the value of I&A services is acknowledged in general, TSOs providing I&A services often find it difficult to obtain secure funding. In part, this is associated with it being difficult to demonstrate the value of these services when competing for scarce resources.

PROJECT AIM AND STRUCTURE

The research forms part of the overarching Quality Measurement Framework Project (see Forder et al., 2007), funded by the Treasury under Invest to Save and led by the Office of National Statistics (ONS). The aim of this project is to create a new mechanism for more effective and efficient measurement and monitoring of third sector public services, reducing the burden on the third sector while releasing cash through more efficient use of public funds to provide public services. The overarching aim of this project, 'Measuring the Outputs of Information and Advice Services' (MOIAS) is to develop an approach to measuring outputs that reflects the quality and outcomes of these services. Building on earlier conceptual work (Netten and Forder., 2008) the MOIAS project has been structured in two phases that will enable development of the embryonic nature of work in this field. The first exploratory phase will investigate the acceptability, plausibility and feasibility of developing output measures whilst the second 'testing phase' will investigate and illustrate how such measures would work in practice with a number of organisations.

PLANNED RESEARCH ACTIVITIES

We only describe the first phase of the research as, until this is completed, it is not known what output measures may be developed or the sample necessary for testing.

A small number of organisations are being selected as research 'sites' for the exploratory phase of the research to ensure the scope of activity and 'reach' of I&A services can be encompassed (Saxton et al., 2007). For example, activities I&A services may offer include different types of support to their users, ranging from self-help through leaflets and/or websites to the provision of legal help on complex matters. Within 'reach', information may focus on numerous areas, education, financial information, housing, employment, immigration, and health and community care. To identify an approach to measuring quality weighted outputs five methods will be used:

- **Telephone interviews** will be carried out with staff and commissioners in the sample organisations as well as a wider 'expert' sample, to establish those outcomes and elements of quality valued by stakeholders and how these could be measured.

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- **Documentary analysis** will explore prior accreditation and regulation guidelines to which different I&A services are required to respond, to ensure that any approach to measuring outcomes can take account of existing practice;
- **Interviews and/or focus groups** will allow an examination of the user experience; how they define their short-term outcomes and what they perceive as ‘quality domains’.
- Bringing together the empirical work, a **focused literature review** will enable the team to draw on previous evidence around the identified and weighted outcomes. For example, these could include empowerment, knowledge, safety and control.
- The final method within the exploratory phase will be to construct a self-completion questionnaire and **cognitively test** this with service users to assess the understanding of the questions. Thirty users will take part and there will be a staggered, iterative process with questions refined as we move through the process.

TIMETABLE AND OUTPUTS

The MOIAS project commenced in the spring of 2008 and will finish at the end of 2009.

The outputs will include interim and main reports, background papers and annexes on specific issues and an assessment of the feasibility of outcomes measures within this area. Summary findings will be provided for participants and made available on our website.

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