



# executive summary implementing outcomes based accountability in children's services

## an overview of the process and impact

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### Introduction

The Mark Friedman Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) approach starts with a focus on outcomes and provides a framework for planning and performance managing services. The OBA model has been used in the USA and several countries worldwide as a way of structuring planning to improve outcomes for whole populations and for improving services. The OBA approach focuses on outcomes that are desired and monitoring and evidencing progress towards those desired outcomes. Key features of OBA include:

- population accountability, which is about improving outcomes for a particular population within a defined geographical area
- performance accountability, which is about the performance of a service and improving outcomes for a defined group of service users.

Another key feature of OBA is the use of performance management categories which distinguish between 'How much did we do?', 'How well did we do it?' and, the most important category, 'Is anyone better off?'.<sup>1</sup>

Local Government Improvement and Development (LG Improvement and Development, formerly the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA)) has invested significant resources over a number of years to support local authorities (LAs) in implementing the OBA approach. LG Improvement and Development commissioned a survey assessing the initial impact of OBA on improving outcomes for children and young people (undertaken by Local Government Association Analysis and Research (LGAAR)).<sup>1</sup> This study, commissioned by LGAAR, on behalf of LG Improvement and Development, is the second element of this research.

## Aims and objectives

The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was asked to identify the impact of the OBA approach on LA practice in Children's Services. The specific objectives were to identify:

- a sample of LA Children's Services authorities at different stages of implementing the OBA process
- any changes and improvements to outcomes as a result of using OBA
- examples of success and the factors that contributed towards this
- if implementation of OBA had not led to an improvement in outcomes to further explore why this was the case
- challenges and barriers and how these were overcome.

## Methodology

NFER conducted one-to-one interviews with 18 strategic and operational stakeholders and collected supporting background documentation from nine LAs (one from each Government Office region). Each of the nine LAs formed a 'case-study' for this research.

## Summary of findings

The research found evidence to suggest that, at a comparatively early stage in its use, OBA was contributing to improved outcomes for children and young people in a few instances. In the main, however, at this stage the use of OBA was having an impact on working practices and indirectly on relationships between Children's Services and partners in the Children's Trust as the *Turning the Curve* workshops provide an opportunity for partners to come together with a common focus. Staff who had been using the OBA approach believed that, over time, this would lead to improved outcomes for children and young people.

Although the interviewees had yet to identify a clear relationship between the use of OBA and improved outcomes for children and young people, in general, they were looking at making greater use of OBA across Children's Services. This was primarily because they had found the process of undertaking a *Turning the Curve* workshop a helpful methodology for structuring thinking and moving towards becoming more outcomes-focused. Some interviewees also found the outcome grids and report cards useful, although these were less widely used. OBA was often regarded as one of a range of management tools available, but one which did not, however, deal with cost effectiveness.

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/16109926> for a copy of the report on the survey findings.

As they were adopting the OBA methodology in a Children's Services and Children's Trust setting, the interviewees were learning and, through their fuller understanding, adapting the approach to enable them to make best use of it. This included selecting the elements of the approach that assisted them in identifying outcomes and improving performance.

The research suggests that the process of implementing OBA benefited from the support of Directors of Children's Services and equivalent Tier 1 (director-level) officers from across the Children's Trust partner organisations. Where the OBA approach was being applied to the review and development of the Children and Young People's Plan (CYPP) and to the process of commissioning services and contract monitoring there was more likelihood of OBA becoming embedded in Children's Services practices.

The evidence from the interviews suggests that while OBA can appear initially to be a simple approach for focusing on outcomes, fuller engagement with the approach showed that it is complex. Consequently, it is evident that in adopting OBA, Children's Services authorities needed to allow time to understand fully the concepts and terminology and to ensure these are mutually understood. In all nine case-study areas training had been undertaken in OBA and it appeared that this had been valuable in assisting in the understanding of the process.

## Issues for consideration

Based on the evidence collected, a number of issues emerged at local level which are worthy of consideration in supporting Children's Services authorities in implementing OBA. Although it is too early to assess the full impact of OBA at this stage, should Children's Services authorities be encouraged to implement OBA, the following issues are worthy of consideration at local level.

- Gain commitment at high strategic level and engage with key partners.
- Ensure those leading the implementation are trained and fully understand the approach so they are able to support others.
- Ensure there is clarity of the aims and reasons for implementing OBA and whether it is being used to focus on population outcomes or specific services.
- Involve as many partners as possible in *Turning the Curve* workshops to support shared ownership of the approach.
- Ensure there is a common understanding of the OBA language: for example, what an outcome is; the difference between 'effort' and 'effect'.
- Ensure those leading the *Turning the Curve* workshops are fully prepared and aware of what data is available.
- Keep practising using the outcomes grids for performance accountability – they are dynamic documents which can be improved.
- Dedicate time for relevant personnel who are going to be using OBA to engage with it and 'champion' it across the Children's Trust.
- Begin by introducing OBA in one or two specific service areas or focus on particular population outcomes.
- Build OBA into existing systems/strategies to ensure it becomes embedded.
- Embed OBA in performance management by using the OBA outcomes grids to focus monitoring on outcomes and how these will be measured.
- Build OBA into a key officer's role within the LA or Children's Trust – someone who can act as a champion and maintain the wider commitment to the approach.
- Use examples of success of using OBA to help gain more universal commitment.



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