implementing outcomes based accountability in children's services

an overview of the process and impact

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implementing outcomes based accountability in children's services:

an overview of the process and impact

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Sarah Golden
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Local Government Group

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Contents

Executive summary

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?'.

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)).[1] 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.

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.

Note

1 See http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/16109926 (LGA and IDeA, 2009) for a copy of the report on the survey findings.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background to OBA

With the introduction of *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (HM Government, 2004) came a greater focus on thinking about outcomes for children and families.

The Mark Friedman Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) approach (Friedman, 2000) (or results-based accountability as it is referred in the USA and other countries) 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 structure provided by OBA provides individuals, teams and groups of stakeholders with a framework for thinking about, and planning action, to improve outcomes. The model emphasises the importance of using a shared and common language across partner agencies.

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.

Using the OBA approach entails the use of a *Turning the Curve* workshop. This involves identifying the desired outcome, projecting what would happen over time if nothing changed, and then planning changes which will lead to improved outcomes or 'turned curves' that move away from the initial projection. A second 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?' (see Box 1.1).

Box 1.1 Use of performance management categories in OBA

How much did we do? (the quantity of the effort)	How well did we do it? (the quality of the effort)
Is anyone better off? (the quantity and quality of the effect)	

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 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 LGAAR).[2] This study, commissioned by LGAAR, on behalf of LG Improvement and Development, is the second element of this research.

Note

2 See http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/16109926 (LGA and IDeA, 2009) for a copy of the report on the survey findings.

2   Research methods

2.1   Aims and objectives

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 explore further why this was the case

- challenges and barriers and how these were overcome.

2.2   Methodology

NFER conducted one-to-one interviews with 18 strategic and operational stakeholders[3] and collected supporting background documentation from nine LAs (one from each Government Office region). The nine LAs were selected from those who responded to the LG Improvement and Development survey assessing the initial impact of OBA and indicating that they would be willing to participate in further research in this area. The LAs were selected to ensure a range in terms of council type and service areas where OBA was being applied. The focus and content of the interview schedule was discussed and agreed with LGAAR.

All nine LAs provided supporting documentation which included notes and actions from OBA *Turning the Curve* workshops, CYPP priorities, OBA project reports and

evaluations, and data giving evidence of improved outcomes for children and young people.

Of the 18 interviewees who participated in this research study, 13 were in commissioning, planning or performance roles, four held service specific roles and one a specific change management role.

Each of the nine LAs formed a 'case study' for this research. Data from each case study was also analysed and a separate report for each is available. Each case study focused on how OBA had been used in that LA or by the Children's Trust. Information is included on implementation and impact, including highlighting learning and how to overcome OBA barriers and challenges.

This report is based on a thematic analysis of all of the interview data using Max QDA – a software package to support complex and large-scale analyses of qualitative data – to provide an overview of the process and impact of using OBA.

2.3   Structure of report

This report begins by summarising how OBA was being used in the nine Children's Services authorities. It then provides an analysis of the impact of using OBA and the perceived challenges and barriers associated with this. The report concludes with a summary of the findings emerging from the evidence.

Note

3 This included LA officers from Assistant Director at Tier 2 level, heads of service at Tier 3 level and programme managers at Tier 4 level.

3 How was OBA being used?

This section reports on OBA as a process and covers why Children's Services authorities were using OBA, who was involved, what it was being used for, how long it had been used for and how it had been introduced. The impact of using OBA is discussed in Section 4.

3.1 Why use OBA?

In all nine areas the main reason why Children's Services authorities had implemented OBA was to help them become more outcomes-focused. OBA was seen as a tool to assist with achieving this, as the following three quotations demonstrate:

> *The appeal of focusing on outcomes was key to it.*
> (Senior Joint Commissioning Manager)

> *I think because it fitted very well with our strategy. Our strategy is to be outcomes-focused and this was a tool which helps you to be outcomes-focused.*
> (Divisional Manager for Joint Commissioning)

> *It hit us at a time that we needed to be more outcomes-focused and we had a real need to make better use of our performance information.*
> (Performance and Improvement Manager)

Overall, interviewees felt that focusing on desired outcomes rather than outputs was felt to be beneficial:

> *I think that philosophy really does help because I think sometimes you get caught up in looking at what's going in … rather than whether it is making a difference.*
> (Contracts and Review Officer)

The *Turning the Curve* workshops were viewed as supportive ways of improving performance because the workshops focus on desired outcomes and the stories behind current performance. Two interviewees noted that *Turning the Curve* workshops were used because they were considered to be the best model for gaining

buy-in from partners to work together to improve outcomes for children and young people.

> *When the team considered how to get buy-in from partners and how to improve outcomes, there was a consensus around OBA and Turning the Curve as being the best model to go with.*
> (Local Strategic Partnership Performance Manager)

Some interviewees observed that OBA was one approach of many and other methodologies or frameworks could also be useful, particularly those that are geared towards cost effectiveness (such as the Balanced Scorecard developed by Kaplan and Norton – see www.balancedscorecard.org for further information). One commented about OBA:

> *I think it is a useful methodology and we have benefited from using it but I wouldn't want to stand up and argue the case for it being the methodology.*
> (Head of Standards and School Effectiveness)

OBA was viewed as a helpful common-sense approach and a methodical way of focusing on outcomes rather than processes. However, there were instances of LAs only using particular elements of the OBA approach – 'cherry-picking' the parts that they wished to use – such as the *Turning the Curve* workshops to provide a means for getting the relevant agencies around the table for brainstorming and planning with the outcome as the focus. As the quotation below illustrates, there was recognition that only particular elements of OBA were being applied:

> *We are doing lots of parts of OBA well but we are not sticking well enough to the stages of it for me to say OBA has definitely helped us to change direction or ultimately achieve better outcomes for young people.*
> (Children and Young People's Strategy Officer)

This interviewee also mentioned the issue of identifying the impact of using OBA which is discussed in more detail in Section 4.

3.2   Who was involved?

The typical model comprised a team of senior managers within Children's Services (Tiers 2 or 3) leading on OBA implementation with one or two key officers to 'champion' the approach more widely and involve partners. High-level support from the Children's Trust executive board or the Director of Children's Services was often available and supported successful implementation. This senior commitment was shown through, for example, attendance at *Turning the Curve* workshops, supporting the use of OBA as a framework for commissioning and verbally raising awareness of the approach. In all case-study areas, there were staff who had undertaken training in OBA with external facilitators.

The *Turning the Curve* workshops, a key part of OBA, usually involved a wider range of agencies and partners, with practitioners and strategic officers working alongside each other. The other agencies involved varied depending on the focus, for example, where the focus was on reducing levels of teenage conceptions there was usually involvement from the local Primary Care Trust (PCT) and voluntary sector support groups. In some cases, young people and their families participated in the *Turning the Curve* workshops.

3.3   What was OBA being used for?

OBA was being used in the case-study LAs in a variety of different ways and to benefit different groups of children and young people and different service areas. Some Children's Services authorities had applied OBA to service areas that were not performing well or where they were finding it difficult to make improvements and 'turn curves'. OBA was used to get the trend (for a particular target or performance area) moving in a positive direction. As one interviewee commented, they were using OBA 'to address our more stubborn targets'. In these cases, OBA was being used to help achieve specific Local Area Agreement (LAA) or National Indicator (NI) targets (such as to reduce

teenage conception rates or to improve achievement at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage). Others were applying OBA more broadly, by incorporating it into the commissioning process and the monitoring of contracts or into the review and development process for their CYPP. One LA referred to OBA being applied to the Local Safeguarding Children's Board (LSCB) business planning process. The LSCB were starting to implement report cards to monitor and challenge progress. OBA was also being used to improve the process of gaining feedback from service users.

Tables 3.1 and 3.2 show a summary of the areas where OBA was identified as being applied within the nine Children's Services authorities which participated in this research. These have been categorised by the research team into population and performance accountability where this was considered possible. It is worth noting that the interviewees did not make these distinctions when describing how they were using OBA and therefore it was not always clear which type of accountability the examples referred to. For clarification:

- population accountability is about improving outcomes for a particular population within a defined geographical area

- performance accountability is about the performance of a service and improving outcomes for a defined group of service users.

Table 3.1 Population accountability examples

Case study	OBA usage
1	To help reduce teenage conception and childhood obesity
3	To report progress on specific outcomes identified as priorities in the CYPP
3	To improve educational attainment for a local population
4	At locality level to support a staying safe project and an educational achievement project
6	To reduce teenage conception rates
8	To reduce teenage conception rates
9	To reduce teenage conception rates in a particular locality

Table 3.2 Performance accountability examples

Case study	OBA usage
1	To develop and review their CYPP
1	To develop and monitor the LSCB annual plan through the use of report cards
1	To help schools evaluate the impact of their extended services
1	For commissioning and decommissioning specific services
2	For purchasing specific services – particularly the performance monitoring of all contracts
2	To help thinking around performance indicators in a range of service areas including mental health services, teenage conception, children's centres and occupational therapy
5	To monitor commissioned projects and services purchased from external agencies
6	To support performance monitoring of services using report cards
7	To develop the LSCB business plan
9	To increase school attendance in a particular locality

Box 3.1 provides more detail on using OBA to develop and review the CYPP

Box 3.1 Using OBA to develop the CYPP

One Children's Trust had built the OBA approach into the review and development of their CYPP for 2009–11. The development of the CYPP was based on a process of needs analysis, identification of priorities, consultation and review. The OBA approach was used in the middle stage – the identification of priorities. Nine *Turning the Curve* workshops were held, involving a wide range of partner agencies, and the results of these workshops helped to inform the draft CYPP. The topics for the workshops were determined following consideration of the initial needs analysis. The workshops were well attended by colleagues from all Council directorates and partner agencies including schools, the health sector, police and voluntary sector. Each workshop identified the outcomes that those attending wanted to achieve and the indicators that could measure this, and shared background knowledge about the issue before brainstorming ideas for actions to contribute to achieving the outcomes.

3.4 How long had OBA been used for?

The use of OBA in the case-study LAs was relatively new in some cases – with OBA being used for four or five months – but some had more experience and had been introduced to the approach two or three years ago. Only two of the LAs referred specifically to delays in implementing OBA: one mentioned that gaining sign-up and gaining full understanding of the OBA approach had taken longer than anticipated; another mentioned technical issues in ensuring their performance management systems could incorporate the OBA model.

There was evidence that the longer OBA was used, the more embedded the approach became in LA Children's Services practices, such as there being reference to OBA in service-level action plans with named individuals or groups being responsible for championing OBA across the LA or Children's Trust or identifying where the approach might be helpful in improving outcomes. Additionally, the more OBA was used, the less it was labelled as OBA and the more it was said to have become incorporated into day-to-day practice for identifying outcomes and monitoring performance. For example, one interviewee referred to another example of where the OBA approach was being used and commented 'this all lacks the label of OBA but is very much driven by that process'.

Newer users of OBA tended to be applying the approach to specific projects or to improve specific population outcomes in isolation (such as to reduce under-18 conception rates or to reduce absenteeism in schools). Where OBA had only been applied to a specific area, there were usually plans to apply it more widely in the future. (See Section 5.3 for further details.)

3.5 How was OBA introduced?

Interviewees gave an account of how OBA was introduced in their service area or Children's Trust and details of the individual approaches and circumstances are described in the individual case studies (see the separate case-study report for further details). Below are some of the common scenarios and approaches. The impact of these is discussed in Section 4.

- Those who would be using OBA attended externally-run training on the broad concept of OBA. This could involve officers attending an OBA introductory event and/or a train-the-trainers event. LG Improvement and Development-led information seminars, or the individual LA bringing an OBA expert in to specifically run training.

- Officers who planned to use OBA built a business case to show the value of using the OBA approach, to present to senior management in order to gain commitment and to agree on how best to implement and use OBA.

- OBA was introduced to those with responsibility for improving outcomes for children and young people across the Every Child Matters (ECM) areas, or those who were responsible for the wider implementation of OBA, such as heads of service.

- OBA was introduced and promoted to wider groups across Children's Services (depending on the planned scope for implementation). This was usually through workshops and events using the *Turning the Curve* methodology for all partners involved in that service area. This is illustrated by the following comment: 'We just introduced the technique and encouraged people to think about it in their areas.' The purpose of the workshops was to familiarise people with the OBA conceptual framework and to apply the approach to specific priority areas.

- Action plans and strategies were developed by the teams or working groups, based on the outcomes from the *Turning the Curve* workshops.

- OBA was used in developing and monitoring contracts and service-level agreements.

4 What was the impact of using OBA?

Measuring the impact of using OBA is, as with any measure in non-experimental conditions, problematic because no single factor is likely to have led solely to any change observed. In general, interviewees were reluctant to attribute any improvement in outcomes for children and young people specifically to OBA, because OBA was just one part of an approach being used to identify and improve outcomes. This is illustrated in the following comment:

I think saying OBA leads to an improvement in outcomes is really misleading; rather, I think it leads to an improvement in the planning processes to improve outcomes which might then lead to improved outcomes because the planning is better. It's the actions that you identify and the way you drive them that makes a difference rather than the actual methodology.

(Head of Standards and School Effectiveness)

4.1 What outcomes were evidenced as a result of using OBA?

The research team examined the impact data from the nine case-study areas by attributing the OBA definitions of population and performance accountability (see Section 1 for definitions of population and performance accountability).

If OBA had an impact at population level, then outcomes will improve for particular populations. If OBA had an impact at service level (performance accountability level), then service improvements might happen in terms of:

- a change in the number of service users the service was working with and/or

- a change in the quality of the service for the service users and/or most importantly

- a change in outcomes for the service users.

The research team found limited conclusive evidence of improvement in outcomes or service performance from the case-study interviews and documentation supplied as shown in Tables 4.1 and 4.2.

Table 4.1 Population accountability

Case study	Service(s)	Impact	Comments
1	Early years	An overall improvement in achievement at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) by 5 per cent (from 44 to 49 per cent), also with the most disadvantaged closing the gap by 1.3 per cent.	Achievement is defined by the national Target E (NI72) – the percentage of young children who achieve a total of at least 78 points across the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, and Target H (NI92) – to reduce inequality by improving the average score of the lowest 20 per cent of results.
8	Teenage conceptions	A reduction in the number of teenage conceptions.	The interviewee was reluctant to attribute this reduction specifically to OBA but following the use of OBA within this area, improvements were evident.

Table 4.2 Performance accountability

Case study	Service(s)	Impact	Comments
5	Locality commissioning to support vulnerable groups	Increases in the percentages of children and young people (from vulnerable groups) who report positive outcomes: e.g. 56 per cent have accessed inclusive/diversionary activities; 34 per cent reported improved self-esteem/confidence; 59 per cent reported now having someone to talk to; and 22 per cent showed improved behaviour at home and/or school (see Case Study 5 for corresponding numbers).	OBA led to more targeted service provision (e.g. emotional health and well-being support in schools) leading to a reduction in numbers of children and young people supported. Support now offered is focused at an early intervention/ preventative level on an ongoing basis rather than large numbers of children attending short-term activities. This has led to an increase in the numbers of children and young people from the traditionally vulnerable groups accessing the support offered.
9	School attendance	Increased school attendance rates and more positive attitudes to school attendance.	Again, the interviewee was reluctant to attribute this specifically to OBA but acknowledged that this was the approach used.

There were also examples where the OBA approach had been used but there was no evidence, at the time of the interviews, of improved outcomes. One LA officer explained that they had used an OBA approach with a *Turning the Curve* workshop to try and reduce the number of teenage conceptions but teenage conceptions had not yet decreased. The LA officer noted that this did not suggest that OBA was ineffective: 'We always knew that was going to be hard but it doesn't mean the method is flawed in terms of using OBA.' Teenage conception was viewed as a stubborn issue that required further focus before the results would show improvement.

4.2 What was the organisational impact?

Although the evidence of a change in outcomes in the areas that had adopted OBA was limited at this stage, it was evident that using the OBA approach had impacted on working practices in the case-study areas. Across the nine Children's Services authorities, the interviewees were positive about the impact of OBA on their working practices. In all nine LAs there was evidence of organisational impact. The general consensus from interviewees was that the changes in working practices would, over time, lead to improved outcomes for children and young people.

The research team categorised the organisational impact of OBA, evidenced in the case studies, into four areas:

- enhancing communication between agencies/partners

- providing a framework for monitoring performance

- increasing the extent to which service users' views were gathered and recorded to inform the development of services

- encouraging a more outcomes-focused approach.

Examples are given under each of these headings below, with an indication of the service area or issue being referred to first.

4.2.1 Enhancing communication between agencies/partners

- Teenage conception and obesity: OBA provided a mechanism for bringing together people from different agencies to talk about the same issue from their particular angle, to develop a mutual understanding of the issue. One interviewee commented: 'It gave us the opportunity to share all of our information and all of our knowledge about an issue.'

- Commissioning: Improved partnership working with greater interaction with partners when developing contracts/service-level agreements and better accountability.

- To develop the CYPP: OBA helped to identify areas that needed multi-agency intervention that they were previously trying to address as single agencies.

- First-time entrants to the criminal justice system: OBA helped to involve partners in the performance management and led to improved dialogue. An OBA approach was used to examine why there had been a reduction of 30 per cent in first-time entrants to the criminal justice system (from 350 to 245 young people).

- Safer and healthier home life project: OBA has helped the Children's Trust to develop ideas and a subsequent action plan for partnership working in a population with multiple needs.

- Teenage conception: OBA has supported relationship-building with partners from the PCT and building a Children's Trust partnership.

- Areas of the LAA: Improved partnership working between the LA, the PCT and voluntary and community sector organisations.

4.2.2 Providing a framework for monitoring performance

- Local Safeguarding Children's Board: Staff developed an OBA-based report card which is presented regularly to the LSCB and members use it to monitor progress, challenge progress and monitor performance.

- Commissioning: Use of OBA resulted in changes in working practices by 'sharpening up' the commissioning process and decommissioning services that were not performing effectively. One interviewee commented: 'That's the key impact that OBA has had; people are asking "Does it make any difference?" and also "Will you notice if it isn't there?"'

- To monitor the CYPP: Staff used OBA to monitor the indicators.

- To monitor the CYPP: OBA has helped to improve the quality of their action planning and helped them to develop more effective performance monitoring: 'We are monitoring more regularly and we have clearer indicators to monitor against.'

4.2.3 Increasing the extent to which service users' views were gathered and recorded to inform the development of services

- Mental health services: Use of OBA resulted in changed working practices in terms of the type of data that is recorded and monitored. Previously data was collected on the number of referrals and the waiting times, but now they collect data on service user views using before- and after-questionnaires to measure impact.

- Commissioning: Use of OBA resulted in more structured processes with feedback from children and young people becoming an established part of the process, which it was not previously. Commissioning documents are now more concise and easier to understand.

4.2.4 Encouraging a more outcomes-focused approach

- To develop the CYPP: OBA has helped staff to change the way they work to focus on what they are trying to achieve rather than the process of delivery.

- To develop the CYPP: Staff used OBA to help ensure their CYPP was outcomes-based.

- Educational attainment: One Local Area Partnership used OBA to address education issues by narrowing the gap. They identified children reading as an outcome. This led to local initiatives such as books being given away by an ice cream van in specifically targeted deprived areas, to encourage reading and promote services.

- Performance management: OBA has enabled the Children's Services authority to have a better understanding of outcomes and has streamlined the various action plans through a report card showing accountability and performance. One interviewee commented: 'I think the biggest difference is that things are probably more proactive.'

- Teenage conception: OBA has helped the service to move towards a more outcomes-focused approach.

5   What were the barriers and challenges?

5.1   Barriers and challenges

As when any new approach is implemented, there are a number of barriers and challenges. The main challenges identified were:

- the need for **training and support**

- the time needed to **build up confidence and experience** to use OBA

- where managers **felt threatened** by OBA

- where there was a lack of **senior-level support**.

One of the main challenges focused around the need for **training and support** in OBA:

> Some services have found it simple to use, but some services found it very difficult to use, because their comprehension of measurement was a unit of activity rather than outcomes.
> (Performance Manager)

The most common area where interviewees felt they could have made improvements to increase the impact of the OBA approach was through OBA training reaching a wider group of professionals. Resource and capacity were often cited as reasons for not being able to do this. Some interviewees felt that this resulted in pockets of OBA expertise and pockets of OBA use, rather than a more systematic programme of OBA implementation, supported at Chief Executive level and built into forward planning across Children's Services. The following comment is an example of this:

> There are still some people who are saying that they are not quite sure what OBA means, and what it means to themselves. So we're having to do quite a lot of back-tracking and go over old ground really. So perhaps we could have, in the beginning stages, been much … clearer, and made sure that we got more professionals involved right at the very beginning so that we're all singing from the same hymn sheet, rather than it being a cascade effect.
> (Quality Compliance Officer)

Building up the confidence and experience to use OBA and to train others in using OBA was time consuming and adequate resources and capacity were needed to allow for this within individuals' workloads. In one case, the LA had appointed an officer to deal specifically with championing OBA and implementing the approach more widely. This was a way of aiming to improve the impact by ensuring OBA remained high on the agenda and colleagues remained motivated to use and embed the approach. In another case, the LA was keen to ensure that OBA work was not viewed as additional work, but merely a different way of looking at the same issues:

> I think it's about trying to get away from the mindset that we're not asking them to do more work; we're just asking them to evidence what they're actually achieving.
> (Quality Compliance Officer)

For LAs that were using OBA for contract monitoring there was an acknowledgement that some **managers felt threatened** by OBA because the results of it (if it showed the service was not leading to the desired outcome) could lead to their service being decommissioned. But involving such services in *Turning the Curve* workshops was suggested as a supportive way of improving performance.

Senior-level support was important for driving forward the approach:

> If we could get good commitment at a higher level I think we could do really great stuff … I feel a bit like a disciple sometimes, I feel sometimes I have to be quiet about it because it's as if I'm banging on about it again.
> (Children's Trust Development Officer)

The support of senior management was seen by staff at tiers 3 and 4 as an important tool in minimising the risk of OBA being perceived as 'just another initiative' and therefore the possibility that it would not become an embedded part of staff's practice.

5.2 How can the barriers and challenges be overcome?

Interviewees made a variety of suggestions for overcoming barriers and challenges when using the OBA approach. These can be categorised in three areas: considerations when planning OBA implementation; short-term considerations whilst implementing OBA; and long-term considerations.

5.2.1 Implementing OBA: planning considerations

When planning for implementing OBA, LAs suggested the following general principles be followed.

- Gain commitment at high strategic level and engage with key partners, for example through demonstrating how the model can help to improve performance and outcomes – as one interviewee said: 'there's a large amount of scepticism so it's about demonstrating real examples' – and by using the *Turning the Curve* workshops as an opportunity to share knowledge and understanding and demonstrate how the OBA approach can assist.

- Ensure those leading the implementation are trained and fully understand the approach so they are able to support others, considering appropriate sources of expertise such as LG Improvement and Development, Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (RIEP) or other authorities.

- 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 'Don't lose sight of the outcome that you want to achieve'.

5.2.2 Implementing OBA – short-term considerations

When planning for implementing OBA, LAs suggested the following short-term principles be followed.

- Involve as many partners as possible in *Turning the Curve* workshops to support shared ownership of the approach: 'It might be a bit time consuming but it will result in much smoother working.'

- 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*[4] 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.

5.2.3 Implementing OBA – long-term considerations

When planning for implementing OBA, LAs suggested the following long-term principles be followed.

- Build OBA into existing systems/strategies to ensure it becomes embedded.

- Embed OBA in performance management by using the OBA *outcomes grid*[4] 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.

Generally there was consensus over the main considerations when implementing OBA, but there was one area where there were different views. There were conflicting views as to whether OBA needed to be applied in full, as the core planning tool, or whether it could be viewed as a model that could be adapted and tailored, using the parts that were most relevant and useful. The evidence suggested that the former approach supported officers in embedding OBA in LA

practice, but the latter more flexible approach was, perhaps, easier for smaller teams to use when first piloting OBA.

5.3   What were the next steps?

All case-study LAs indicated that they planned to continue to use OBA. Their next steps were based around continuing to further promote, roll-out and embed the principles of OBA across Children's Services and the LA as a whole, and evaluating the impact of OBA locally and making decisions based on the evaluation findings.

In one LA, where OBA had been piloted in one area for locality-based commissioning, their next steps involved a **roll-out** across the localities. There was clear acknowledgement that this required a robust and specific training package to be implemented. The training was viewed as the first in a number of steps designed to embed OBA within Children's Services with a view to:

- commissioning projects using OBA to drive performance and improve the outcomes for the children and young people they support

- achieving locality action plans which focus on outcomes and are measured using OBA

- using OBA more widely across all Children's Services in the LA.

One interviewee anticipated that OBA could be used to support 'tough decision-making' such as **decisions** on which of their existing priorities to focus on. This was thought to be required if there are budget cuts:

There will be all sorts of decisions to be made about current services and how to reshape things, and I think the next step could be OBA being used to help bring stakeholders together to own that process.

(Principal Officer for Extended Services and Children's Centres)

Another interviewee observed that OBA would be **one tool** which could support them in identifying strategies to address the challenges in their Trust:

OBA is not something we should be considering on its own. We need to consider it as part of a wider problem-solving approach … that's what OBA is to us. It's a means by which we'd look at really difficult issues and consider how we would tackle them.

(Local Strategic Partnership Director)

Note

4 Outcomes grids are part of the OBA methodology consisting of four quadrants used to identify the quantity and quality of the effort and the effect. These revolve around the three key questions: *1. How much did we do? 2. How well did we do it? and 3. Is anyone better off?* to give performance measures.

6 Conclusions

This research study, focusing on the process and impact of implementing the OBA approach in Children's Services, 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 (such as Balanced Scorecard).

As they are 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 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.

References

HM Government (2004). *Every Child Matters: Change for Children*. London: DfES.

Friedman, M. (2000). *Results-Based Accountability (RBA) and Outcomes-Based Accountability (OBA) Implementation Guide* [online]. Available: http://www.raguide.org for further information [7 July, 2010].

Local Government Association and Improvement and Development Agency (2009). *Outcomes Based Accountability Survey* [online]. Available: http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/16109926 [7 July, 2010].

Appendix A – A brief summary of OBA

This Appendix provides more information about the OBA approach, in particular, the background to OBA, its concepts and tools. It is taken directly from the LG Improvement and Development website: http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=8941122 and is written by Gillian Pugh.

Outcomes Based Accountability: a brief summary

Gillian Pugh

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[1]. 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[2] 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[3] and a paper describing the approach and including some 20 case studies was published by the DCSF earlier in 2008[4]. OBA has also featured strongly during the fieldwork with over 100 local authorities for the Narrowing the Gap project[5] 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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[1] Friedman M (2005) *Trying Hard is not Good Enough: how to produce measurable improvements for customers and communities* Trafford Publishing.
[2] Utting, D, Rose W and Pugh G (2001) *Better Results for Children and Families: involving communities in planning services based on outcomes* NCVCCO
[3] McAuley C and Cleaver D (2006) *Improving Service Delivery – introducing outcomes-based accountability* IDeA
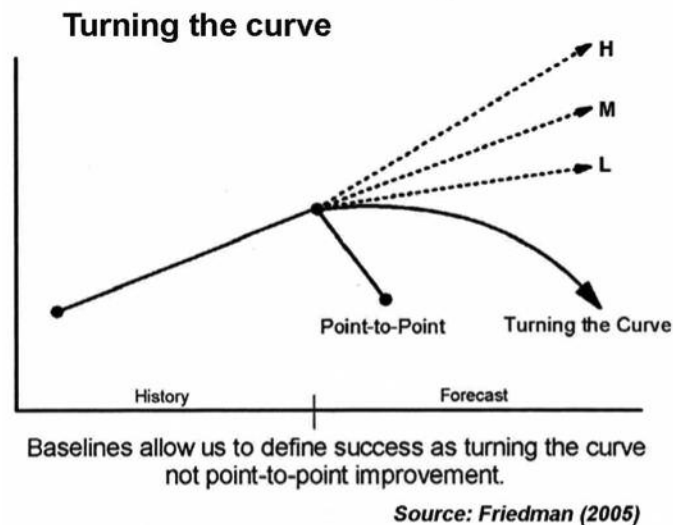[4] Uting D, Painter A and Renshaw J (2008) *Better Outcomes for Children and Young People – From Talk to Action* and *Turning the Curve Stories* DCSF
[5] Local Government Association (2008) *Narrowing the Gap: final guidance year 1* LGA/C4EO

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

Baselines allow us to define success as turning the curve not point-to-point improvement.

Source: Friedman (2005)

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.

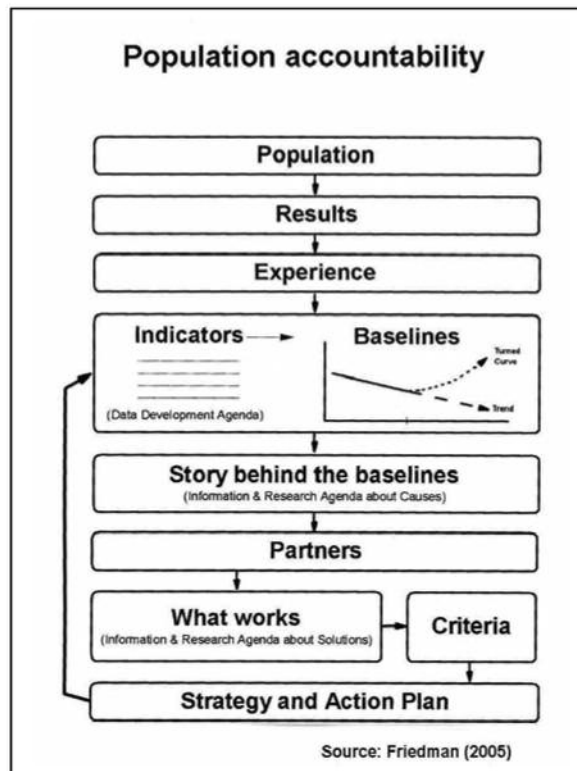**Performance measurement categories**

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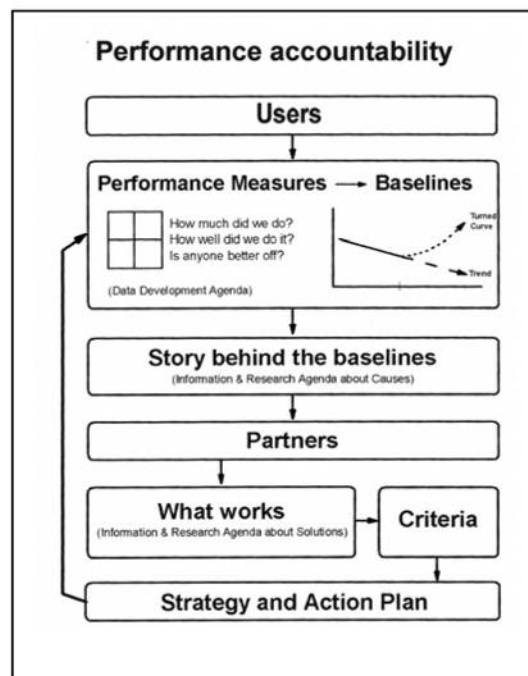
Seven key questions are identified that organisations should routinely ask themselves, questions that can be as useful for staff supervision as they can for monthly or quarterly monitoring:

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.

Recently published reports

The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by the NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/
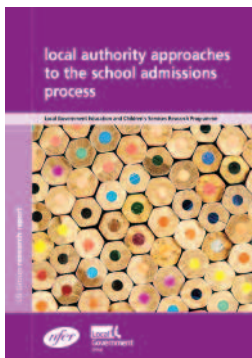
local authority approaches to the school admissions process

This report gathers the views of local authority admissions officers on the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches, as well as the issues and challenges they face in this important area. Key findings show that, in most areas, the process was being implemented with fairness, efficiency and clarity.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LAW01/
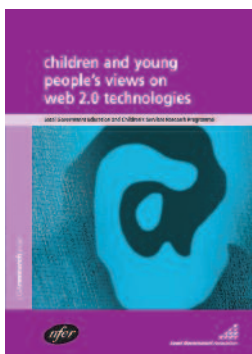
Children and young people's views on web 2.0 technologies

This research focused on how web 2.0 technologies allow users to share, collaborate and interact with one another. The project explored the potential of using these tools to collect the views of young people and to involve them in their local community.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LWT01/
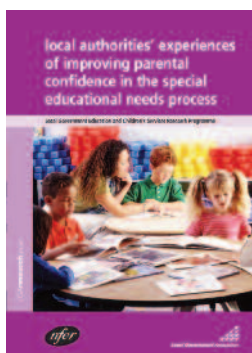
Local authorities' experiences of improving parental confidence in the special educational needs process

This research focused on LAs with evidence of good practice in supporting children with SEN. Partnership working is enhanced where SEN teams have a positive ethos and approach towards parents. LAs need to ensure that parents have good quality, face-to-face contact with SEN professionals at the earliest possible stage in the process.

www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/LAM01/

For more information, or to buy any of these publications, please contact: The Publications Unit, National Foundation for Educational Research, The Mere, Upton Park, Slough, Berkshire SL1 2DQ, tel: +44 (0)1753 637002, fax: +44 (0)1753 637280, email: book.sales@nfer.ac.uk, web: www.nfer.ac.uk/publications.

LG Group research report

Is your local authority using outcomes based accountability for planning and managing the performance of services?

If yes, does it lead to an improvement?

The Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) approach uses performance management categories that distinguish between 'How much did we do?', 'How well did we do it?' and 'Is anyone better off?'

Based on interviews in nine local authorities, this research identifies the impact of the OBA approach on local authority practice in children's services. The report covers:

• how OBA is being used

• the impact of an OBA approach

• the barriers and challenges to using OBA.

Although it is too early to assess the full impact of OBA, the research identifies a number of issues for consideration by children's services authorities. For example, it is recommended that local authorities:

• gain commitment at high strategic level and engage with key partners

• 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

• ensure there is a common understanding of the OBA language, for example, what an 'outcome' is, and the difference between 'effort' and 'effect'.

This report is important reading for all local authorities using, or considering using, an OBA approach.