



Soft Outcomes and European-funded Projects

WHAT ARE SOFT OUTCOMES?

Soft outcomes are the results that projects achieve which cannot be measured in the same way as hard outcomes, such as qualifications or employment. They are, nevertheless, real results that have a positive bearing on the development of an individual's journey to employment and they can be measured, recorded and shown as such. Improved motivation or attitude and self-esteem, are good examples of soft outcomes that projects might measure and record.

WHY DO WE NEED TO MEASURE AND RECORD SOFT OUTCOMES?

It is recognised that for many participants of European funded programmes, the achievement and measurement of hard outcomes is difficult because of the barriers many face when confronted with projects offering training and/ or other forms of support and guidance. Many projects are set up to work with people who are most excluded from the labour market, who need to overcome a range of barriers before engaging with the more standard provision of training, leading to formal qualifications and jobs. Soft outcomes are particularly relevant to projects being delivered through the 2014-20 programme that deal with those furthest removed from the labour market, including hard to reach NEET's.

It is necessary for such projects to set up systems to measure and record soft outcomes for several reasons. In the first instance, a European-funded project has to be able to show, from its records, that it is achieving what it said it would achieve. This is a necessary part of the project's record keeping systems. Secondly, good projects keep track of their activity and the results of that activity in order to see if it is working in the way intended and in order to review and change things if it is not. This is the basis of any monitoring and evaluation system. And thirdly, it is of vital importance to be able to work with participants to identify what their support needs are, how those support needs change over time and what provision the project can offer to ensure that those needs are met within the context of project activity. Fundamental stages in this process are initial assessment, regular reviews of participant progress and an appropriate exit strategy, all based on the needs of the individual within the context of project activity, as well as potential referral to other providers where relevant.

HOW CAN WE MEASURE AND RECORD SOFT OUTCOMES?

There are no hard and fast rules on how to measure soft outcomes. Project sponsors are largely free to develop their own systems as appropriate to the beneficiaries of their projects. It is important however, to remember that the results of measuring and recording soft outcomes must be both valid and reliable. In order to ensure that this is the case, there are a number of stages in the process and a number of factors that must be taken into account.

The process:

1. Look at what your project is meant to be achieving. Make a list of these results. You might find it helpful to refer back to your application or tender documents for European funding, as well as to any other final description of the project.
2. Decide what information you need to show that you have achieved each of the results on the list — for example, proof of increasingly regular and punctual attendance, or of engagement with work placements.
3. Decide which methods would be best for gathering that information—for example, participant self-assessment exercises, timesheets, or records of work experience—and who will produce it.
4. Produce the necessary paperwork, for example, self-assessment questionnaires or work placement diaries.
5. Make sure that everyone involved in the process understands why it is needed, how it works and their role in it.
6. Try it out and, if it needs changing, change it! Remember, this is your project and what you do needs to work for your project, so no 'off the peg' system is likely to be 100% appropriate. Remember also that, as your project develops, you need to review the systems you use to make sure that they remain the right ones.

Factors to take into account:

- the participants—for example, if you decide to use self-assessment techniques but you are working with people with literacy difficulties, a written, textual questionnaire will not be appropriate
- the producers—for example, if work placement employers are providing you with feedback about participants, make sure that they know exactly what kinds of information you need and in what format
- the project—for example, if one of the things you need to measure is an increased ability to work as a member of a team, is the information you are recording or gathering the right information to prove this?

Some points to remember:

- the methods and systems you provide must be appropriate for the people who will use them to give you the information you need
- the methods and systems you provide must come with clear guidance about how to use them
- the methods and systems you provide must generate the information you intended and that information must be relevant to the stated outcomes of your project
- the methods and systems you provide should be sufficiently varied to avoid any possibility of subjectivity or other bias distorting the overall results

Examples of soft outcome indicators

- within social skills—for example, interaction with others, personal hygiene, punctuality and attendance
- within key skills—for example, numeracy, literacy and IT
- within practical skills—for example, cooking and eating healthily, shopping, travelling

The first group, above, might be based around developing appropriate attitudes, motivation and self esteem, the second around acquiring necessary knowledge and understanding and the third around applying the first two to deal with actual situations.

Examples of methods to measure and record progress towards soft outcomes

- staff and/or work placement employer logging of contribution to group discussions or team work
- participant records showing attendance at and arrival at/departure time from a project
- examples of participant literacy, numeracy or IT work
- video diary, written account or photographs of any practical work
- trainee self-assessment of current attitudes, feelings, behaviours and/or knowledge

In order to measure distance travelled, i.e. the progress made by an individual participant over time, it is essential to have a baseline from which to start. This should be provided by the initial assessment. This should be carried out with the individual participant, project staff as appropriate and any other person or persons necessary to ensure that a fair and complete assessment is made. An individual action plan should be produced as a result of this assessment and both documents should be agreed by the participant and the project. This allows for regular reviews of progress against objectives set and for adjustments to be made according to individual need within the context of the project and any necessary external referrals (e.g. for additional college-based courses). In the later stages of a participant's time with a project, an exit strategy should be produced in the same way, in order to maximise the benefits of the individual's time with the project. An exit strategy should also allow for follow up in order to be able to offer any further support that might be required and to keep track of what the participant does after they leave the project. In this way, a holistic and individual support package is produced and records are maintained throughout to evidence the outcomes that the project is claiming.

Please refer to Appendix A for an example of a soft outcome collection and assessment tool.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

- **Distance travelled:** the progress made towards employability, or job or qualification outcomes by a participant on a European-funded project.
- **Exit strategy:** the plan of action agreed between the project and the participant in the later stages of their involvement, and which should be designed and implemented so as to maximise the effectiveness of the support that has been provided to provide a link into whatever the next stage might be for the participant, and to allow for follow up.
- **Individual action plan:** a strategy that is agreed between the participant and the project, which looks at the initial or most recent assessment. This is used to decide on current aims and objectives for the individual, on actions designed to help achieve these within the context of the project and any necessary external referrals. The action plan should be signed and dated by both the participant and the project to show that it has been agreed.
- **Initial assessment:** the assessment made when the participant joins the project in order to establish a baseline. This may include levels of literacy and numeracy, IT, life and social skills, or more practical skills, particularly if the project delivers any kind of vocational training. Assessments may be carried out on a one-to-one basis or with small groups, and may take place over a short period or several days depending on the needs of the participant and the type of project. Assessment never delivers a pass or fail result, but rather a complete picture of where the participant is now in relation to

each of the areas assessed. This then enables the project to determine with the participant where they would like to move on to next, and to action plan accordingly. The results of the initial assessment should be discussed and recorded on a one-to-one basis, and should be signed and dated by both the participant and the project to show that they have been agreed.

- **Monitoring and evaluation:** projects need to set up systems that enable them to keep track of their activity and the results of that activity to see if it is working in the way it was intended, and in order to review and change things if it is not.
- **Record keeping:** a European-funded project has to be able to show, from its records, that it is achieving what it said it would achieve, using the resources (human and financial) that it said it would use.
- **Review:** participant reviews need to be carried out at regular intervals in order to track the progress made towards the aims and objectives agreed in the individual action plan, and to determine whether any changes or additions need to be made. Every review should be recorded, and should be signed and dated by both the participant and the project to show that it has been agreed.
- **NEETs:** Young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training.

