

Outcome-based Accountability

One of the more widely-used outcome-based approaches is a toolkit known as *Turning the Curve*, based on the concept of Outcome-based Accountability. Also known as 'Results-based Accountability', it was developed by Mark Friedman of the Fiscal Policy Studies Institute and has been used in the United States, Britain and other countries as systematic way to improve the quality of life for all children (and other populations) and the performance of specific services, agencies and service systems.

It provides a pathway for multi-agency partnerships and individual organisations to prioritise the outcomes they want to improve and determine what strategies are needed to achieve them.

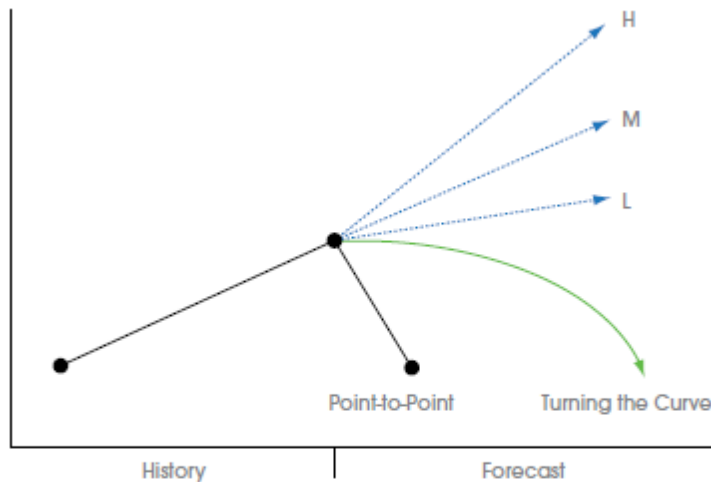
Outcome-based Accountability (OBA) makes a key conceptual distinction between:

- **population accountability** – where the aim is to achieve better outcomes for particular groups (such as all children and young people) in a defined geographical area; and
- **performance accountability** – intended to improve outcomes for the users of individual services, agencies and departments as a contribution towards achieving better outcomes at population level.

By separating 'population accountability' from 'performance accountability', organisations can acknowledge the important fact that no single agency or department is solely responsible for improving outcomes. Outcome-based Accountability enables partnerships to assess their progress by asking crucial questions about whether services are helping to improve children's lives and life chances. Under outcome led planning it is no longer enough to monitor services through output-related questions like, 'How much service do we provide?' or 'How many users do we support?'

Central to the OBA approach is a process called *Turning the Curve*, which enables stakeholders to identify the priority outcomes they wish to improve. By analysing and understanding trend data, they can construct a strategy for achieving better outcomes. When presented in graphic terms (**Figure 1**) their plans demonstrate how future investment in better services coupled with the contribution of non-governmental partners is expected to shift the indicator or performance measure data in a positive direction – thereby *Turning the Curve*.

Figure 1: the turning the curve graph shows baseline of historic data, followed by projected trend data using high (H), medium (M) and low (L) forecasts. Friedman argues that forecasts showing an outcomes curve turning in the desired direction provide a more fair and realistic measure of success than shortterm targets for 'point to point' improvement that can lead to premature claims that a strategy has 'failed'.



At a population accountability level

Turning the Curve brings agency managers and staff together with other stakeholders, including parents and young people, to:

- agree which outcomes will be prioritised for improvement;
- examine baseline data– including projections of where the outcome indicators are heading if no further action is taken;
- analyse the 'story behind the baseline' to determine what factors and circumstances
- are driving each trend;
- compare the evidence gathered from needs assessments and public consultation with the availability and coverage of existing services;
- determine what action is needed to turn the indicator curve towards better outcomes;
- decide which partners must work together in order to achieve the necessary changes; and
- agree an action plan, a budget and a timescale for *Turning the Curve*, while ensuring that monitoring and evaluation arrangements are in place.

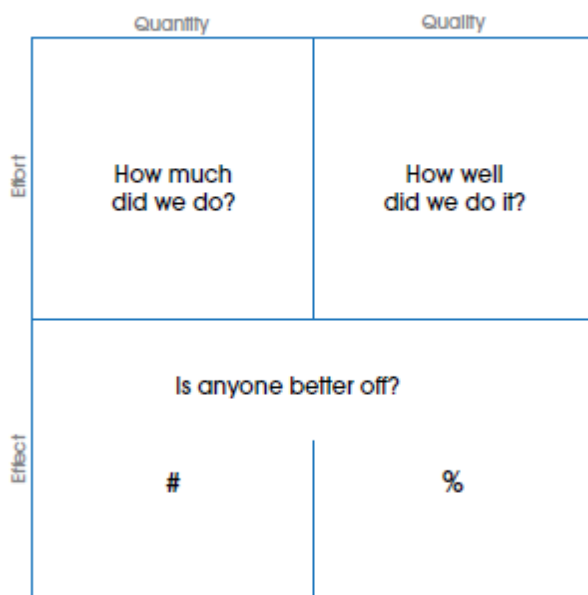
At a performance accountability level

...the process helps managers to identify key performance measures for their service that distinguish between 'quantity' and 'quality' and between 'effort' and 'effect'. Once the relationship between these dimensions has been understood, they can be used to monitor performance more effectively – making it clearer how the service or agency can play its part in delivering better outcomes.

As with 'population accountability' managers need to take account of relevant data trends as well as the views of service users before they determine the 'story behind the baseline'. They must also consider how best to work in partnership with stakeholders (including children, young people and parents) in order to improve their performance. A simple square divided into four boxes or quadrants (see **Figure 2**) is proposed as a graphic way to demonstrate how the different dimensions of performance are expected to improve.

Figure 2: the performance measurement categories below show two left-hand boxes containing measures of quantity and those on the right relate to quality. The two top boxes relate to the effort that goes into delivering the service, while the bottom two are used for measures of effect. The quadrants can be used for planning and performance review to record answers to the following questions:

- *Upper left:* How much service is being provided? (inputs/quantity of effort);
- *Upper right:* How well is the service being provided? (outputs/quality of effort);
- *Lower left:* How many users are better off? (quantity of effect); and
- *Lower right:* What proportion of users are better off? (quality of effect)



The outputs measured in the upper left box are the least important in relation to achieving better outcomes. The lower right measurements, concerning the quality of results, are the most important, followed by the upper right quadrant, specifying how well the service was provided. Used as a tool to monitor performance, the two lower boxes equip public and voluntary sector managers with an equivalent to 'the bottom line' in the private sector.