



6. Data collection methods

At this stage, you know what change you are looking out for (your outcomes and intermediate outcomes), what you will be measuring to see if this change has happened (indicators), you now need to work out how you will measure your indicators i.e. your data collection methods.

When looking at the indicators you have chosen as most important, you need to ask the following questions:

Questions to ask your indicators

1. **Are we already collecting data on these indicators?**

If you're already collecting this data, then that's great and you can continue to use this. It's worth thinking carefully about **all** the data you collect, which you might not necessarily see as traditional monitoring and evaluation data. For example, case notes contain an awful lot of information, and maybe you can think about how this can be used? Perhaps there are judgements from counsellors which equate to evidence of improvement, or comments from service users. **N.B.** If using this kind of data, you need to be careful about confidentiality – you may need to get permission to use this data beforehand or make sure that it's anonymised.

2. **Can we collect the desired information just by adapting our current system?**

E.g. do you need to just add an extra question onto the survey that all clients are requested to fill in? Simple adaptations to existing data collection methods are an effective and efficient way of collecting the necessary data.

3. **Do we need a new method for collecting this information?** If this is the case, then you need to take time choosing which method(s) you will use to collect all the information you need.

You now need to decide **how** to collect the information that you need.

There is a huge range of data collection methods available, but they can be put into two broad categories: quantitative and qualitative methods.

Quantitative data collection methods

Quantitative data consists of numbers and anything that can be easily counted e.g. how often a client attends an appointment. Examples of quantitative data collection methods:

- Registers
- Distance travelled /user satisfaction forms

Qualitative data collection methods

Qualitative data normally consists of words rather than numbers and gives a greater depth of detail than simple numerical statistics e.g. how a client feels about their experience of the service. Examples of qualitative data collection methods:

- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Case notes
- Diaries
- Pictures

It can be useful to collect data on one indicator in more than one way, as this can produce more robust evidence. A combination of qualitative and quantitative data collected on one indicator can be even more effective.

Scales

Scales can be very useful, as they are easy to design, use and analyse. They are a way of getting qualitative data into quantitative form and so are very appropriate for measuring outcomes.

Most scales ask about the following:

- **Frequency** (how often something happens)
- **Severity** (how good or bad something is)
- **Satisfaction** (how satisfied a client is with a service)
- **Ability** (how able a client is to perform certain tasks)
- **Agreement** (how strongly a client agrees with a statement)

Some tips:

- Try and stick to the same scale within a questionnaire to avoid confusion
- Scales should have a minimum of 4 points and maximum of 10
- Using an odd number of points enables people to pick the middle if they do not have an opinion. An even number of points forces people to express an opinion one way or another. It's worth thinking about which of these is preferable. You could always have a separate option for 'don't know' to give those completing the scale an opportunity to offer no opinion.
- All the points should be labelled with descriptive words or phrases
- You can even use pictures (this can help to increase accessibility of a document - see appendix for an example).

Scales do not only have to be used with questionnaires, you can be imaginative with them, e.g.

- Outcomes star
- Targets
- Physical movement (e.g. standing in a line)

More details on these different options for using scales and distance-travelled tools are available in the appendix.

These scales can be filled in by either the client themselves or an observer (i.e. staff member). You can get both client and staff to fill in a scale relating to the same outcome, so they can be

compared (e.g. a client may view themselves differently from how a counsellor does, so it's useful to have both points of view). You could then combine these two bits of data with some qualitative data (e.g. from an interview), which you could then use to triangulate¹ your data and strengthen it further.

So, there are many different methods of data collection, but here is a brief overview of the different categories and options (further details are given in the appendix):

Directly from individuals

- diaries and anecdotes
- questionnaires
- interviews
- participatory methods

Using an independent observer

- written accounts
- observation forms

Documentary sources

- existing project information
- public documents (e.g. research)
- personal files or case notes
- existing databases

Audio-visual methods

- audio recording
- video diary
- photographs
- drawings

Some key points about data collection:

- **Be creative with your methods, but remember to be consistent:** i.e. you can use creative methods such as participatory tools, but you need to use them consistently, just as you would use a traditional survey consistently i.e. you must make sure you ask the **same question** at the start and end of an intervention, although you can use different tools to ask that same question if you wish.
- **Data can come from both service users and staff:** Staff collection can be especially useful for intermediate outcomes, one-off or anonymous service users. It can take the form of observation e.g. punctuality, ability to talk about self in a positive manner,

¹ Triangulation is when you use more than two research techniques to collect data on a particular issue (in this case, on one particular outcome). If you have a number of different data collection methods telling you the same thing, then this strengthens your argument. At the same time, if different methods present conflicting information on the same outcome, then the reasons for this should be investigated to make any necessary changes to data collection systems.

interest in participating in given service, ability to deal with unexpected events/situations.

- **Sampling and snapshots can make life a lot easier.** A 10% sample is very common – it's better to collect less data well than lots of data badly. Snapshots can be useful for things like help lines, where you might nominate two weeks every 6 months when you carry out a monitoring exercise on all callers, or perhaps every 10th caller. **N.B.** for some data and for some funders, you need to collect a complete set of data and sampling is not appropriate in every circumstance e.g. equalities monitoring information.

If nothing else, remember to be **consistent**.