TasCOSS

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How to set a baseline outcomes indicator

A baseline is where your service, or your client, started from. It is a snapshot of the situation at that time. You use it as the starting point for measuring.

A *baseline indicator* is when you want to continue the baseline level of achievement.

For example, your baseline might be that your service has, for the past decade, managed to house 30% of its homeless clients within four months of them contacting your service. Your baseline indicator might be that you want to continue to be able to house 30% of clients within four months. If you have increasing numbers of clients and a worsening housing market, that might be a very good achievement.

Here's how to do it.

Collect baseline data from the start.

For clients this might be assessment or goal-setting data from the beginning of your work with them. Or it might be service data that you are collecting (eg the number of clients seen, or sessions offered).

It's really important that you collect baseline data from the beginning of any program or funding agreement.

We didn't collect baseline data from the start.

What if you haven't collected baseline data and the program you provide isn't a new one? You might have little or no data to determine a baseline.

In that case you can use year 1 as a base-line year. You can collect data during that year to create a base-line to measure against in the future. If it is for a funded program you may need to negotiate this with your funding agreement manager before commencing.

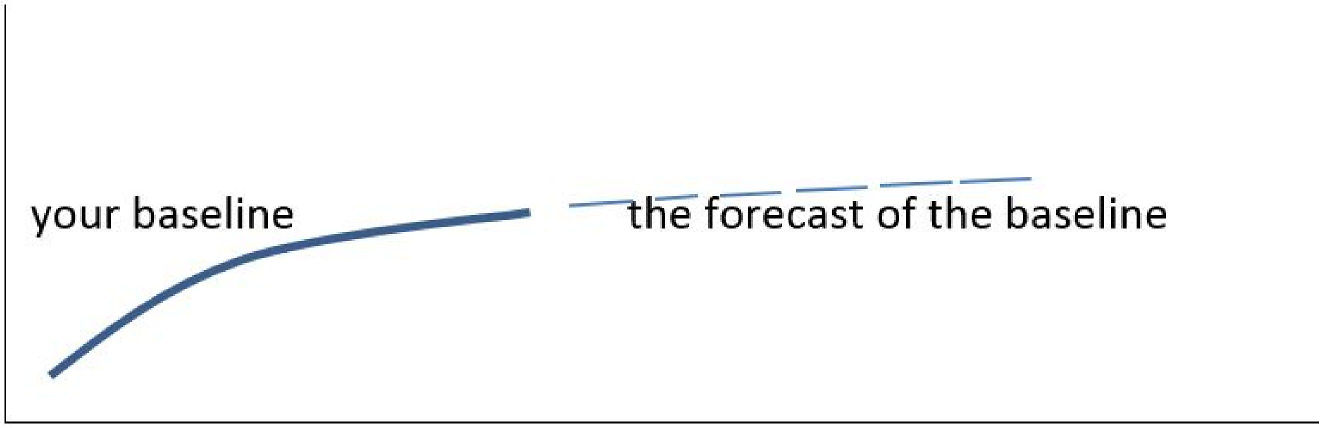
For example: a cooking healthy food program in its first year measured that 75% of participants reported improving their fruit and vegetable intake as a result of their participation. This is the program's baseline. The program could then set the goal of maintaining 75% of participants reporting that outcome … or it could set a target to improve on it in the second year. That would be a target indicator!

Consider doing a forecast of your baseline data

This is an idea that comes from the Results Based Accountability Framework. It means that you look at what your baseline data says for the last few years and then you project forward what it will look like. If you can achieve improvements on your baseline it is important information to share with stakeholders.

Here's an example of how the RBA thinkers suggest you forecast your baseline.

In the example below the service helps people find housing. Its performance measure is 'number of clients housed'. Let's imagine that no matter how hard the service tries it struggles to get more than 40% of its clients housed, but it wants to do better. Based on what it has been achieving in the past (the baseline) the service predicts that it won't see much improvement on what it can deliver.



Why do you bother with the forecast? The RBA thinkers stress that forecasting the baseline is important for two reasons. First, it prompts you to ask 'is this future ok?' If it's not ok you'll probably immediately start planning what you can do about it. Second, it helps you communicate your achievements because you can show improvements against what would have happened without changes. Perhaps you'll change strategies and help more people find housing. Then you might be able to say 'in the last six months 50% of our clients were housed. That is 70 *extra* people who were supported to find housing on what we had forecast would have been achieved if we had not made changes'.

Also see – How to use Results Based Accountability.

Referenced links

- How to use results based accountability