# Evaluating 'performance' in family welfare services: Service users' perspectives

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## Abstract

Governments purchase welfare services to assist disadvantaged families. Yet governments and service users are at odds about what constitutes quality, they're after different kinds of results, and they base their evaluations on different sources of knowledge. Using qualitative data collected at four non-profit family services in NSW, this paper will explore how sixty-six adult service users experience, define, and evaluate the quality and effectiveness of the services they receive. I show how the diverse voices of these disenfranchised stakeholders constitute an alternative discourse of 'performance' in human service evaluation that is routinely devalued by government performance monitoring systems. Finally, I assess how service user participation in performance measurement might help ensure that governments and nonprofits 'purchase' and 'provide' the kind of help that matters most in the lives of disadvantaged citizens.

## Introduction

Within the community sector, performance measurement is not always considered in positive terms. Those who directly deliver services to people in need sometimes find performance evaluation to be disruptive, complex, imposed, irrelevant, time consuming, expensive, quantitative, and even punitive (Love, 1998: 146). Yet performance indicators are now entrenched in the public administration of community services, and remain a source of tension in the uneasy partnerships between government agencies and service providers (Meagher and Healy, 2003).

In New South Wales (NSW), community service providers that obtain government support (including most child and family welfare organisations) must comply with the demands of various public funding and oversight agencies. These requirements give rise to a seemingly continuous cycle of data collection and reporting, shaped tightly by political agendas of fiscal constraint and accountability. However, this paper questions whether the performance information monitored by government agencies, such as the Department of Community Services (DOCS), allows them to effectively guarantee service quality, and even to ensure the key policy objective of value for money in the emerging human service quasi-market.

In the first section of the paper, I reiterate some of the problems performance measures pose for the management and funding of community services. In the second section, I

use the case study of NSW family services[1] to highlight the narrow and selective range of activities which are currently subject to this kind of evaluation by government agencies. Indeed, by excluding the diverse perspectives of key stakeholders- service users- these conventional measures risk misrepresenting the extent to which services impact in recipients' lives, and may underestimate services contribution to disadvantaged communities.

In the third section, I respond by exploring an alternative discourse of 'performance', by drawing on qualitative research about how family service users define and evaluate service impact and quality. These service users articulated effectiveness in a framework of social justice, and their analysis of service quality focused on the helping relationships formed in family centres. However, themes of justice and relationships are largely excluded from institutionalised systems of performance monitoring, and clash strongly with principles of economic efficiency that currently mediate government funding relationships with nonprofits. Finally, I argue that service users' routine evaluations might enrich monitoring and evaluation systems used by community service organisations and by governments. Indeed, the results reveal evidence of evaluation tools and sources of knowledge rarely accounted for in conventional performance measurement models, but which are critical if governments are to ensure the services they purchase will effectively tackle entrenched social problems.

## 1.    The problematic development of performance measurement in New South Wales community services

Throughout the 1990s, a series of market inspired reforms transformed the way Australian governments provide for the welfare needs of citizens. In NSW, reforms have been premised on the construction of institutional separations between service funders and service providers. In effect, these purchaser-provider splits enable the government to prescribe the kinds of community services its agencies support (House of Representatives Standing Committee, 1998:13; Nevile, 1999). One of the main purchasers of community services in the state, the Department of Community Services (DOCS) revised its service agreements with community organisations "to reflect the shift from funding based on inputs to purchasing based on outputs and outcomes" (DOCS, 2001: ii). In essence, DOCS no longer sees its role as giving grants or "funding" community services. Instead, it "purchases welfare outputs" specified in contracts from its "community partners".

This redefinition of government and community partners' roles also redefines the place of evaluation in community services management and administration. The outputs and outcomes specified in contracts effectively construct criteria for performance measurement. Moreover, the management information that results has the core aim of allowing DOCS greater scope to monitor and manage service delivery at arms length, and ultimately, to pick and choose between providers vying for a share of government funding.

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[1] Family services aim to strengthen family relationships and communities so as to prevent child abuse and neglect. They provide things like counselling, playgroups, and education and support groups for parents who are socially and economically disadvantaged. There are about 170 family services in NSW and they serve around about 1 in 135 families at any one time (Allen and Bullen, 2003:14). Most services receive some funding from State governments or the Commonwealth, although the amounts tend to be quite small. In NSW, most funding for family services comes from state government programs such as the Community Services Grants Program and Families First. Yet most services survive by cobbling together funding from a range of sources.

In response, community service organisations in NSW have tended to comply pragmatically with indicator requirements, with some experiencing a 'performance measurement fatigue' from a succession of inappropriate reporting requirements imposed in the late 1990s (Mahony, 1999). Community organisations funded through DOCS Community Services Grants Program (CSGP) for example, bypassed the difficulties of developing outcome measures based on their own value sets, instead adopting performance indicators developed outside the community sector to keep the funding body happy (Bullen, 1998).

It is thus not surprising that performance indicators can, at times, be perceived as irrelevant and burdensome in the community service sector. Indeed, these critical perspectives seem valid given the clash between the underlying model of performance measurement and the values and structure of community welfare organisations. Performance measurement, for example, is premised on a neat, logical and linear concept of production, in which inputs directly produce outputs which affect outcomes. Caution about this simple conceptualisation is justified in human services, which are by their nature complex and indeterminate. Goals may vary between programs, and even the same programs seek different outcomes for different service users (Qureshi, 1999:258). Moreover, service users are 'co-producers', whose participation (and in some cases compliance) is necessary for interventions to succeed.

Further, performance measurement can seem inappropriately applied because this system is predicated on 'upward' accountability to managers and funders. In contrast, community organisations tend to have flatter management structures and seek 'outward' accountability to clients, communities and colleagues (Mulgan, 2001). Conventional performance measures are also criticised for prioritising quantified efficiency measures, without accounting for the traditional social change and social justice values associated with community welfare (Love, 1998:146).

In effect, pressure to present funders with quantified measures of performance has meant many social services have continued to be evaluated according to what can be counted, rather than meaningful signs of effectiveness (Wadsworth, 1997:99). Indeed, the following section shows the narrow and selective range of government performance indicators that apply in NSW family services. These measures exclude the experience-based knowledge of service users, and leave important components of service quality and effectiveness beyond scrutiny. Ultimately, this leaves services vulnerable to undervaluation and underfunding by governments.

## 2.    Government performance indicators and family services

Recently, family service provision has rapidly developed as a child abuse prevention strategy[2]. However, the NSW and Australian governments collect and publish only a limited range of information about the performance of these services.

- ▪ *National performance indicators*

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[2] In NSW, the growth of early intervention strategies is reinforced by legislation, with DOCS required to protect children from harm using the "least intrusive intervention", and to try to provide alternative forms of support before taking children into care (Children's and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act, 1998). DOCS spending on family support services grew from $18.2 million in 1997-98 to $31.7 million in 2001-02 (CCQG, 2003: 116), and was boosted again in December 2002 as part of a political response to what was widely perceived as a 'crisis' in child protection (AIHW, 2004:7).

The national performance information available precludes even hesitant judgments about family services' quality or effectiveness. The Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, for example, estimates the cost of child protection in each state based on the numbers of notifications, investigations and substantiated cases of child maltreatment (SCRGSP, 2004:15.26). Even though child protection authorities increasingly refer cases to the family support agencies with which they contract, these types of indicators track only those interventions directly undertaken by government workers, leaving non-government services altogether absent from this national performance report. Moreover, client involvement in these indicators is nonexistent. Client satisfaction indicators are listed as 'under development' for future publications in the areas of child protection and out of home care but not for family services, and are being developed as output rather than outcome indicators (SCRGSP, 2004:15.4).

- *State level performance indicators*

Like the Steering Committee for the Review of Government Service Provision, the NSW Government's Service Efforts and Accomplishments (SEA) reports leave the performance of outsourced programs beyond scrutiny. Although they "endeavour to report available information about what government activities are actually achieving" (Walker, 1999:9), the indicators for child and family services do not include any measure of client change or even client satisfaction (CCQG, 2003: 118) and are so broad that they reveal little about the impact of services in client's lives. The SEA indicators, for example, monitor administrative outputs, such as numeric counts of child protection reports, assessments, care and protection orders. Outcome measures count non-accidental injuries and assaults, and child homicides, revealing the impact when protection systems fail, yet not capturing the broader personal and community impact of services when they succeed. Where family support services are directly monitored, it is in terms of inputs, such as the value of DOCS funding (CCQG, 2003: 112) and the number of funded family support projects as well as the number of children referred to services. The only output measure is the number of children receiving DOCS family support services (CCQG, 1998: 30).

- *Program level performance measures*

Naturally, performance measures at the program level give richer (though by no means comprehensive) accounts of family services and their results. The largest purchaser-provider framework for NSW family services is the Community Services Grants Program (CSGP). In 1989, DOCS stated that recipients of CSGP funds had to use performance indicators to measure outcomes (Bullen, 2004:23), and compliance with a performance monitoring framework continues to be a prerequisite to maintaining support (DOCS, 2002:3).

However, the indicators that relate to family services funded under the CSGP ("Family and Individual Support") distort performance by assessing services more thoroughly using simpler to measure outputs rather than outcomes (see DOCS, 2002). The CSGP's output measures indicate client throughput, or the volume of service provision, rather than meaningful results for clients. For the objective of "supporting children, young people, individuals and families so that they can enhance their independence, safety, self-esteem and quality of life" indicators fall into four main types: the number of occasions of services, the number of clients assisted, the number of referrals made or received, and the number of requests not able to be met (DOCS, 2002:13). In addition there are descriptive measures of resource use, to ensure services reach their target populations, such as the number of clients or 'cases' experiencing child protection or domestic violence issues. DOCS uses these output measures in different combinations across the

family service activities: to measure how well services provide information, options, referrals, counselling, casework, group work, therapeutic interventions, material assistance, recreation or vocational services, and co-ordination activities.

For the activity of providing counselling, casework, or group work intervention, outcomes are measured in terms of the proportion of cases where the risk of crisis is reduced or prevented, where self-esteem, independence, safety and quality of life have improved and where the safety and wellbeing of children with child protection issues has increased. This comes closest to capturing the impact of services for clients than do other measures. However, the indicator relies on service practitioners' individual assessments of client developments, regardless of the assessments made by service users themselves. The outcomes achieved through the provision of practical, physical or material assistance also rely on staff assessments as to whether clients are better off. Similarly, for co-ordinating case work and advocating access to services for clients, staff must assess outcomes in terms of the percentage of cases where the risk of crisis is reduced or prevented. Notably, client satisfaction is confined to measuring outcomes of recreation and vocational activities, like drop in centres (DOCS, 2002: 14), and the framework gives no clues as to how this should be measured.

In summary, the performance indicators currently utilised tend to track outputs more thoroughly than outcomes, and where outcomes for clients are monitored, these indicators rely on assessments by practitioners rather than the perspectives of service users themselves. Interestingly, DOCS has not completely standardised the CSGP measures across services, so professional accounts of outcomes cannot be fed into cross-government performance indicators, like the SEA reports. In effect, this undermines the value of knowledge obtained at the front line to the broader system through which services are resourced. Moreover, users' marginal role in assessing family service performance under the CSGP, and their complete absence from higher level performance indicator systems contravenes research findings that service users have particular strengths in evaluating aspects of quality and effectiveness in human services and superior access to critical performance information (eg Pharis and Levin, 1991; Winefield and Barlow, 1995).

## 3. Service users and 'performance' in family services

In response to these limitations in government performance evaluation systems, I sought to explore how service users experience and perceive the performance of family services, and to establish how this alternative discourse might underpin an alternative approach. To do this, I spent around seventy hours at four family centres to establish what family services actually involve at the front line, and to see what kinds of outputs and outcomes participants were seeking. I then conducted interviews and focus groups with sixty-six service users, and nine family workers[3]. Observations, along with user and worker accounts were also compared with findings from other research studies in the field, to triangulate the findings and ensure the trustworthiness of the study, following established research conventions (eg Guba and Lincoln, 1985).

The services that participated consist of child abuse prevention programs delivered by Uniting*Care* Burnside to families in deprived areas of Sydney's west, outer west, southwest fringe, and on the NSW mid-north coast. The types of services provided

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[3] Whilst these staff contributed content to the research in their own right, they were primarily included to provide a set of perspectives which could be compared and contrasted with users' accounts for purposes of triangulation. As a consequence, staff perspectives on performance will not be discussed here.

included playgroups, parenting education, domestic violence prevention, group outings, therapy groups, and conflict resolution groups. Services operate in areas with high rates and incidences of reports of suspected child maltreatment, and high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage. The four sites were selected to capture the range of possible outcomes of family services and achieve breadth and depth of understanding.

Sixty five of the sixty six service user participants were parents. Fifty five were female and eleven were male. All respondents experienced socio-economic disadvantage. Most were sole caregivers with pensions or benefits as their main source of income, and most lived in public housing or rental accommodation, and had relatively low education levels and limited experience in paid work. Most had also experienced other forms of disadvantage and distress, such as domestic violence, mental illness, and social isolation. Participants described difficult relations with ex-partners, parents or other potential sources of support, and many reported being investigated by child protection authorities, or having had a child removed from their care.

The interviews and focus groups invited participants to explore the outcomes they experience as a result of receiving Burnside services, how they determine when services are having an impact, which aspects of services they value, how they determine when services are good quality, and how they think services should be evaluated. Naturally, these stakeholders experience and perceive service 'performance' differently to government funders, and employ dramatically different evaluation criteria and methods.

## Service users' perspectives on outcomes

Despite some internal diversity[4], the outcomes participants identified across the sites differed markedly from those monitored by governments. In particular, users' understandings of service outcomes were framed strongly around the idea of social justice they strive for. Some articulated their desired outcomes in terms of overcoming distributive injustices, which relate to inequities rooted in the economic structure of society. These outcomes included gaining skills and knowledge to get a job and eliminate poverty from their household, and ensuring their children would grow up with the education to participate fully in work and society. More frequently, users' goals were articulated in terms of overcoming injustices which can be understood to be rooted in the status or cultural order of society, as their justice claims related to the elimination of degradation and disrespect[5].

- *Distributive justice*

In terms of outcomes relating to distributive or economic justice, participants identified how family centres and parenting groups facilitated access to material resources and opportunities. Access to educational resources such as tutoring or computer classes were particularly valued[6]. At each centre, participants identified services impact in enabling them to share material resources including food, transport, second hand clothing and gardening equipment, and providing access to subsidised activities. For example:

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[4] There were slight differences in responses based on gender and location. However, the strongest difference in how outcomes were perceived were based on participants' relationship to the child protection system (ie whether or not a child had been removed).

[5] This draws on distinctions between types of injustices made by Fraser (2003). Importantly, Fraser also argue that economic and cultural injustices tend to occur simultaneously and so must be simultaneously addressed.

[6] Naturally, this theme was stronger at the western Sydney centre where programs were designed to use education to break cycles of disadvantage, and where entitlement to parenting groups resulted from children's participation in tutoring.

Being a single parent myself, we can go on excursions, and we go to places we might not have been able to afford on our own.

*(Suzannah, outer-western Sydney[7])*

- *Recognition*

While outcomes relating to economic justice were important, the outcomes participants most commonly and thoroughly discussed were services' impact on their confidence, their family relationships, custody and contact arrangements, and friendships and social connections. These outcomes are encapsulated in Honneth's (2001) articulation of social justice as recognition, comprised of love, legal status, and solidarity[8].

### i. *Love*

By 'love', Honneth refers to respect associated with primary relationships (2001:48). This involves self-respect and trust in oneself as preconditions for the expression of needs and feelings to others. Service users in this study most often described outcomes in terms of improved self-confidence, communication, trust, independence, and ability to make decisions. Some participants perceived improvements in their psychosocial health, in terms of strengthening or rediscovering their identity, describing that "you just have an opportunity to really find out who you are", and "you feel like you're useful again". Over time, these effects were critical to their capacity to facilitate other lifechanges, and were ultimately manifest in stronger relationships with children and other family members.

Indeed, participants' enhanced capacity for self respect and self expression was associated with an expanded repertoire of parenting skills. They gave numerous examples of this, including "ways to communicate without yelling and screaming", "crouching down and being at eye level with a child when I talk", and understanding and respecting their child's views. In this way, this outcome of 'love' was itself regenerative, as parents' self realisation allowed them to increasingly recognise their children's specificity through loving relationships. Indeed, parents described how they used these skills with children and family members, ultimately resulting in stronger family bonds and reduced incidence of domestic violence, child abuse and neglect.

### ii. *Legal status*

This element of social justice involves "being granted the moral rights and responsibilities of a full legal person within their own community" (Honneth, 2001:49). As these services were directed at preventing child abuse and neglect, much of the work involves advocacy for clients in child protection and family court proceedings, and many of the outcomes users' described unsurprisingly related to legal arrangements regarding children.

For parents with a child removed from their care, retaining or regaining custody and contact was a major outcome sought, as was an improved relationship with government agencies such as DOCS. Participants who had a child returned to their care as a result of participating in Burnside services used their legal status as the key indicator of outcomes. Alison, for example, had no uncertainty as to whether services were working:

I've got three children back in my care since I've been here

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[7] To protect the privacy of participants, all names have been changed.

[8] I recognise the fundamental differences between Fraser and Honneth's theories of justice (Fraser and Honneth, 2003) but will not explore those here. Although Fraser's argument that economic and cultural injustices are irreducible is most compelling, I find Honneth to have developed a more differentiated framework for understanding misrecognition as it has emerged in my data.

Those who were in the process of renegotiating custody and contact arrangements hoped that parenting skills and family management courses would help them to regain their status as primary carer, improve their standing in the eyes of DOCS, or resolve the uncertainty surrounding their parenting status and role. Simon explains how his parenting group was helping:

> I could be faced with anything through the court system you know. I could have contact with them every two weeks or could have them full time, so just knowing how to cope with that…

*(Simon, mid-north coast)*

### iii. Solidarity

Solidarity is the third element of Honneth's framework integral to the elimination of degradation and disrespect. Relationships of solidarity are argued to allow people to "find acceptance and mutual encouragement of their individuality, as individuals formed by their very life experiences" (Honneth, 2001:50). Indeed, these service users highlighted friendship, social connection, and reduced personal isolation as important service outcomes for them. Many described this in terms of revelations that they are not alone:

> I've learnt that everyone else is feeling the same feelings and the ups and downs and the hardship and the- Y'know, all that goes along with being a single parent…

*(Paula, mid-north coast)*

Participants also valued how parenting groups provided a safe environment in which to exercise their rejuvenated skills of communication and relationship building, by making friends and sharing knowledge and experience, for example:

> Not only is it the courses, its actually coming to a place where you feel safe, not judged and you can make a network of friends where you might have been isolated before.

*(Isabel, outer-western Sydney)*

For some, family centres also provided a space to bond by transgressing cultural stereotypes, as Jennifer pointed out:

> You know you're accepted. It doesn't matter what culture you are, what race or creed you are, what colour skin you've got, you know that you fit in. There's no denomination, there's no 'I own my own house, she's housing commission' or 'this one drinks Nescafe and this one drinks Homebrand'. None of that, you know what I mean? We're all on the same level path and it doesn't matter, it doesn't.

*(Jennifer, western Sydney)*

**Service users' perceptions of quality**

Participants described service quality primarily through the helping or therapeutic relationships they formed with staff and with other service users. Relationships with staff were a central constituent of service quality, consisting of a bonding or relational dimension, and a collaborative dimension (ie agreement as to intervention goals and tasks)[9]. Parents evaluated the bonding dimension of helping relationships by bestowing characteristics of an ideal and equal family or friendship on 'good' workers, describing the quality of their work processes in terms of the warmth, availability, respect and trust

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[9] This draws on analysis of the therapeutic or working alliance made by Bordin (1979) and used by Horvath and Symonds, 1991 in counselling; and Dore and Alexander, 1996, in family social work.

that practitioners modelled in routine service interactions. One participant described her sentiment, which was typical across the centres:

> …to me they're not staff, and they've never ever made out that they're better than us. To me they are friends.

<div align="right"><em>(Sandra, outer-western Sydney)</em></div>

In terms of quality in the collaborative dimension of successful helping, participants valued the non-directive approach implicit in the strength based practice model utilised by family workers:

> You're given many options, many different ways of dealing with the problems you're having with your kids. Like there's no 'you must do it this way'. It's more of a guidance.

<div align="right"><em>(Craig, south-western Sydney)</em></div>

Further, the friendships service users formed with each other, and with Burnside as an organisation, were also central to service users' perceptions of quality.

**Service users and evaluation**

For those participants who were renegotiating their legal status, having children restored to their care, or having an increase in the amount of contact they were allowed was the ultimate indication of service effectiveness. However, this evidence was not available to the majority of service users who retained care of their children, or who were not involved in child protection or family law processes. Instead, these participants judged the quality and effectiveness of services through their own self reflection, emphasising how participating in the service makes them feel, whether a strategy worked for them, cross-checked against whether others had noticed them change. Examples of how service users knew services were working were predominately informal:

> ...doing things a certain way instead of ways that I used to do it… I dunno, I can just feel it, its hard to explain…

<div align="right"><em>(Kathy, mid-north coast)</em></div>

> Friends and associates that don't go to the group say there's something different about you, you're a lot calmer, a lot more relaxed.

<div align="right"><em>(Adrian, outer-western Sydney)</em></div>

When asked how they thought organisations should evaluate services, participants most frequently identified data collected from service users like themselves, and reiterated the criteria for 'performance' based on relationships and social justice, as outlined so far. In their view, the next most important source of data (other than from themselves) would come from family workers. This included the solicited and unsolicited feedback received informally in providing services, or structured feedback processes like questionnaires and service user meetings. Importantly, participants were overwhelmingly critical of evaluation approaches involving distanced, external, non-involved judgment, preferring inclusive methods and personal interaction.

## Conclusions

This paper has contrasted the ways governments measure the performance of family services with how service users experience, judge and articulate the value of the services in which they participate. Even though governments purchase family welfare services to assist disadvantaged families, these stakeholders differ drastically as to what constitutes quality, they're after different kinds of results, and they base their evaluations on different kinds of knowledge.

Service users predominately described 'performance' in terms of the quality of the interpersonal relationships involved in service delivery, and the achievement of social justice. External performance measures which related to the child protection system were components of effectiveness, but not for all service users. In general, the participants in the study would prefer evaluators to consider sources of performance data that are infrequently considered to be critical management information, such as self reported changes in their experience of justice and relationships, and professional observations of these collected in the context of service delivery. In contrast, government performance indicators prioritise knowledge about bureaucratic activity even where services are delivered at arms length from government departments, and draw little from the rich vein of client knowledge this study illuminated.

The issues unearthed in the study go to the heart of evaluation problems in community welfare services, raising fundamental questions about which forms of knowledge count, and which stakeholders have the power to define the content of 'valid' kinds of knowledge. By drawing service users' perspectives into debates about performance evaluation, I highlight their epistemic authority that derives from direct access to information about how services meet their needs. Indeed, the alternative discourse of performance highlighted here can breathe life into evolving approaches to performance monitoring and public administration. Involving this stakeholder group can expand the sources of evaluative evidence available. Moreover, participation in evaluation can generate wider benefits by engaging service users in the routine decision making contributing to social policy making. In doing so, this attributes a marginalised group a role as full citizen-participants in democratic dialogue.

User participation need not lead to the abandonment of administrative data in performance evaluation, nor its replacement with accounts of service performance which are partial and anecdotal, as suggested by Tilbury (2003:9). Instead, as Moxley and Manela (2001:574) optimistically point out, "consensus can emerge between bureaucratic providers and recipients and a common outcome set can evolve. Changing the culture of planning and evaluation activities so that recipients have new roles in articulating outcomes and specifying thresholds of success can enable service systems to build bridges between providers and recipients". Forging this consensus by incorporating users' perspectives into performance evaluation and funding systems would also help achieve Pollitt's (2000:146) vision that performance indicators provide information about public services that appeals to service users and the wider citizenry, using categories and procedures rightly constrained by the cognitive styles of citizen-consumers (Pollitt, 1988). Including client's perspectives can also help to ensure that providers' quality assurance systems of human service providers monitor what really matters to the quality of life of the most disadvantaged, and, in this way, offers to further enhance government's capacity to purchase 'best value' services.

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