

# Parks and open spaces: Towards An Excellent Service

## 6. Guidance on Self Assessment

Supported by:



## **1.0 Introduction**

- 1.1 The TAES Framework is used in conjunction with formal cyclical self-assessment. This underpins continuous improvement.
- 1.2 This document assists parks and open spaces organisations to carry out TAES Self-Assessment effectively, leading to improvements in the way the organisation works. Self-assessment is a popular tool, used in many organisations around the world. It is not a new technique, nor particularly complicated. Many organisations and partnerships are using a structured self-assessment and many are using aspects of self-assessment by a different name. However, there are many stumbling blocks to carrying out comprehensive and effective self-assessment. This section will assist your organisation to avoid these stumbling blocks.
- 1.3 This guidance is not mandatory; it merely reflects good practice.

## **2.0 What is self-assessment?**

- 2.1 Self-assessment is simply a comprehensive, systematic, regular review of the progress of the organisation, carried out by people involved in the organisation, resulting in plans for improvement.
- 2.2 Self-assessment is recognised world-wide as a key organisational and partnership tool (and is the 'direction of travel' for local authorities).
- 2.3 Self-assessment establishes an agreed, comprehensive picture of the organisation's current and future health. The simple goal is to reach consensus agreement on strengths and areas for improvement in relation to agreed excellence criteria (eg, the TAES Framework); this is then used as the basis for creating and implementing plans for improvement. If more than one organisation is involved in providing the services within a formal partnership, the self-assessment (and improvement planning) should be carried out jointly.
- 2.4 Effective self-assessment provides:
  - identification of the organisation's strengths

- identification of the organisation's areas for improvement
- effective measurement of the organisation's progress
- a basis for improvement in the way the organisation works

2.5 The process of carrying out self-assessment can also improve:

- staff awareness of the organisation
- staff ownership of improvements
- values and habits of continuous improvement, synergy, trust and teamwork
- understanding of what is required to improve the service
- improvements in partnership relationships

### **3.0 TAES Self-Assessment techniques**

#### **3.1 Consensus workshops**

These workshops are used to discuss progress against the criteria. The objective is to arrive at a consensus agreement (which everybody is happy with) in relation to each criterion, and therefore to obtain an accurate picture of the organisation or partnership's progress, strengths and areas for improvement. Critical friends, often from other organisations or specialist excellence assessors, can be used to challenge assumptions and provide an external viewpoint. Different tools can be used to maintain energy, focus and involvement (eg, using scorecards, silent feedback through post-it notes, sub-groups, asking people to move to different parts of the room to reflect on their perception)

#### **3.2 Self-assessment matrix**

The TAES Framework contains a matrix of pre-prepared statements of the organisation or partnership's progress in relation to each criterion. Staff are asked to mark which statement most closely reflects the organisation or partnership's position. These are used to provide a simple basis for self-assessment, allowing the self-assessment team or other staff members to make a judgement on progress.

### **3.3 Focus groups and surveys**

Group discussions and written surveys with a cross-section of staff, partners or customers are used to obtain feedback on performance relating to the criteria (particularly the people management criteria). This information is fed into the consensus workshops.

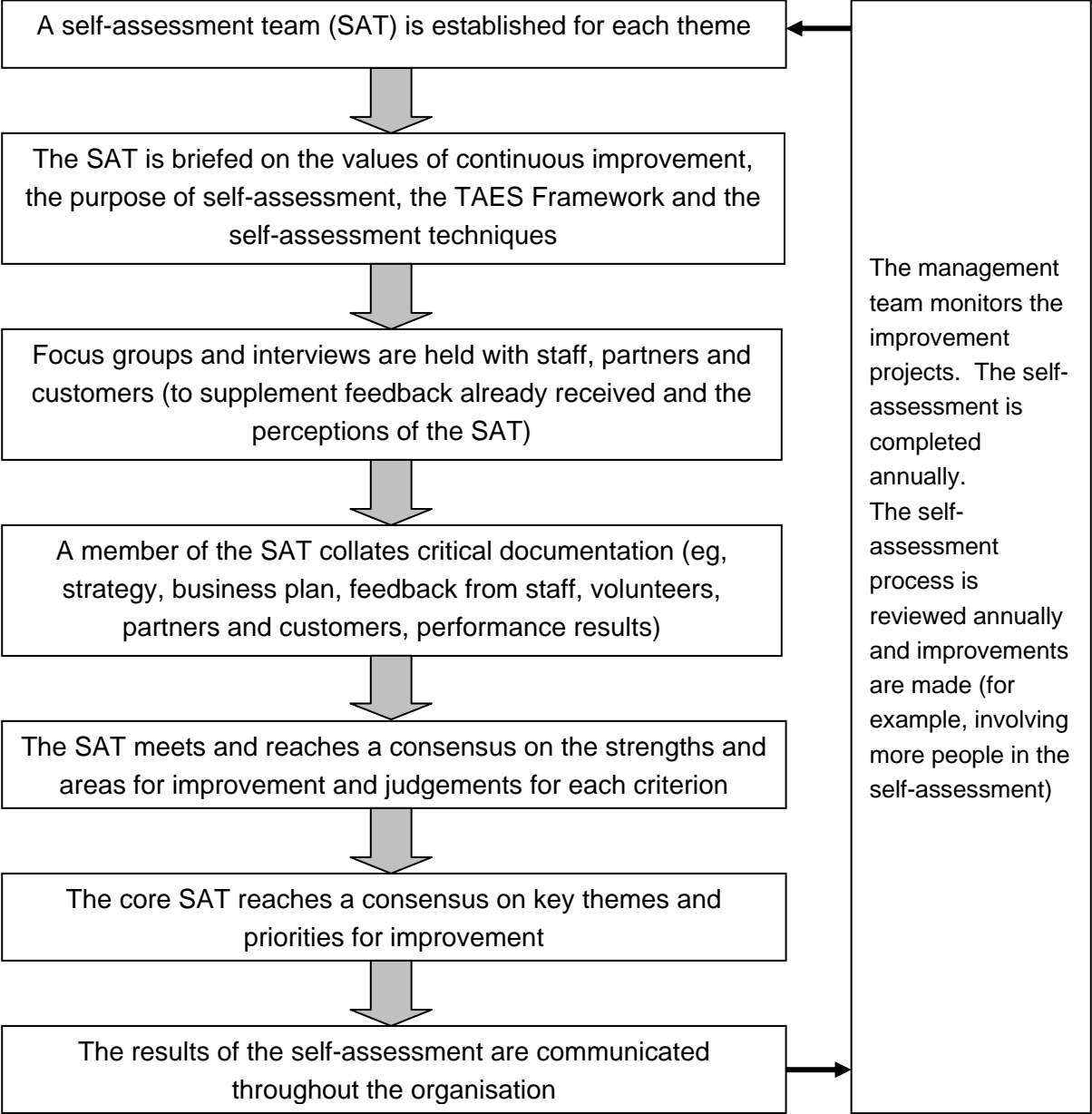
### **3.4 Documents and performance information**

The self-assessment team will refer to key documents (eg, strategies, business plans, summaries from focus groups, performance trends), which demonstrate approaches and performance relating to each criterion.

## **4.0 The TAES Self-Assessment process**

Organisations need to need to develop their self-assessment process, using a combination of the above techniques. An outline process is shown on the next page. The exact process will depend on the specific requirements of the organisation and the resources available to carry out self-assessment.

**TAES Self-Assessment outline process**



The programme of self-assessment should be aligned with the organisation’s performance review cycle. In this way, self-assessment can be used as part of the review process and to inform the service plans.

## 5.0 Tips for effective self-assessment

- a) Remove any perception that self-assessment is a threat or criticism.
- b) Ensure people recognise that self-assessment is not a review of the people working in the organisation – it is about the way the organisation works.
- c) Minimise the pressures to achieve higher judgements – self-assessment is not a competition, a points-scoring exercise or a way to improve your image. These perceptions are all barriers to identifying accurate and in-depth areas for improvement.
- d) Remind everyone that identifying ratings is not an exact science and should not be the focus or the goal – establishing accurate and valuable areas for improvement is the primary goal.
- e) Ensure that people view self-assessment as a valuable tool for identifying improvements, rather than as a tool necessary because of external pressure, a one-off exercise or a ‘bolt-on’ to normal work.
- f) Before and during self-assessment, reinforce the essential need for honesty and confidentiality.
- g) Reinforce the belief that, in this exercise at least, there is no ‘failure’ – just feedback, no ‘problems’ – just areas for improvement (they cannot be ‘problems’ if they have been clearly defined) and no ‘blame’ – just cause.
- h) Keep the energy and involvement going by planning shorter sessions and using tools described earlier in this section; mix up the techniques used.
- i) Always stick to the planned start and finish times.
- j) You do not have to start at Criteria 1.1 and work through to 8.4 – group the criteria.
- k) Challenge people’s assumptions and perceptions through asking ‘how’, ‘what’ and ‘when’ – not ‘why’, as this provokes a defensive response.

- l) Remember that the key to obtaining comprehensive insight about the organisation is consensus agreement (individuals only know part of the overall picture). A consensus view is 'win/win', not 'lose/win', 'lose/lose' or 'democracy'. To achieve consensus, all self-assessment team members should be encouraged to express their perceptions and views and to:
- Believe that everyone's perception of the organisation is right and valuable - the goal is not to persuade everyone that your view is right!
  - Remember that everyone's perceptions added together will create an insight which is 'greater than the sum of the parts'.
  - "Seek first to understand then to be understood" (Covey, S R. (1989) 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People'. New York: Free Press).
- m) It is very valuable to have a small number of critical documents on the table during the self-assessment (eg, strategy, business plans, performance trends, summary of partner and core staff perceptions).
- n) Ensure that self-assessment does not become a paper-chase or a box-ticking exercise.
- o) Remind everyone that you do not have to do anything for an external validator – documentary evidence is for your benefit
- p) Avoid discussions about trivia or a checklist approach – TAES Self-Assessment is about developing collective insight to how the organisation works and what needs to be improved in order to make a significant difference to results.
- q) Always begin with the end in mind – if faced with a difficult decision during self-assessment, go back to this statement.
- r) Remember your sense of humour!
- s) Reinforce and sharpen the understanding that self-assessment is just a very good way of identifying improvement in the way the organisation works, which will lead to improved outcomes and therefore to everyone's future success. **All** organisations have strengths and areas for improvement – the successful ones know what they are.