

Parks and open spaces: Towards An Excellent Service

7. Guidance on Improvement Planning

Supported by:



1 Introduction

- 1.1 TAES Self-Assessment has many potential benefits, as described in the self-assessment guidance document. Essentially, TAES Self-Assessment is a means to ensure that your service plans contain relevant and valuable medium-term improvement projects.
- 1.2 This document assists parks and open spaces organisations to identify and plan improvement actions effectively, leading to tangible changes in the way the organisation works.
- 1.3 This guidance is not mandatory; it merely reflects good practice.

2 Principles of improvement planning

- 2.1. Improvement planning involves prioritising the key areas for improvement and identifying the improvement projects that will make the greatest difference. The improvement plan should contain a small number of 'breakthrough' improvement projects, rather than many minor actions or incremental improvement tasks relating to parts of the organisation. At first this may seem counter-intuitive, as many areas for improvement will have been established during the self-assessment. Remember that people will often (and should be encouraged to) go away from the self-assessment and amend their team and individual plans as a result of learning from the self-assessment. Remember also that "awareness is curative" (Gallwey, W T. (2000) 'Inner Game of Work', New York: Random House) – people often alter their own behaviour merely as a result of becoming more aware of how they are doing.
- 2.2. The improvement projects should achieve **sustainable** change. This is achieved by focusing the projects on tackling root cause, changing the organisation's management system and embedding the changes into process documentation, team and individual goals and training and development plans.
- 2.3. Where possible the improvement projects should be allocated to improvement teams, which are given the complete responsibility to plan and implement the improvement action. Ideally, these teams should comprise staff involved in the particular process at all levels.

- 2.4. Project management techniques should be used to plan and implement the improvements, including identifying defined outputs, clear start and finishing times, milestones, pilot projects and defined outputs. Improvement tools could also be used, including scenario planning, cause and effect analysis and creativity tools.
- 2.5. Implementing improvement projects involves people changing their working behaviour, so consideration needs to be given to how this change is managed. This could include piloting, training, one-to-one and group coaching or mentoring (ie, people passing on their experience and knowledge to other people on a one-to-one basis).
- 2.6. To ensure the effectiveness of this plan it is important that it is not seen as an 'add-on' to the organisation. It must be seen as the integral element of service plans. Therefore it is important that the self-assessment programme is coordinated with the planning cycle.
- 2.7. The improvement plan must be a working document, which enables the organisation to focus its resources and attentions on changing the way it works, which will in turn lead to improvements in the outcomes achieved.

3 Improvement planning process

To develop improvement plans, the self-assessment team should follow these steps:

- a. Review the strengths and areas of improvement to identify themes and improvement priorities, bearing in mind long-term strategic direction and the needs of stakeholders.
- b. Identify improvement projects that will tackle these improvement themes and priorities and make a significant difference to the service. Remember to consider resources and existing workload when agreeing improvement projects; a small number of completed projects is much better than many half-completed projects. Also consider the opportunity for some quick wins.
- c. Establish a clear output for each improvement project (what changes will be made).
- d. Identify an improvement team leader to be responsible for completing this improvement project (ie, achieving this output). Identify other members of the

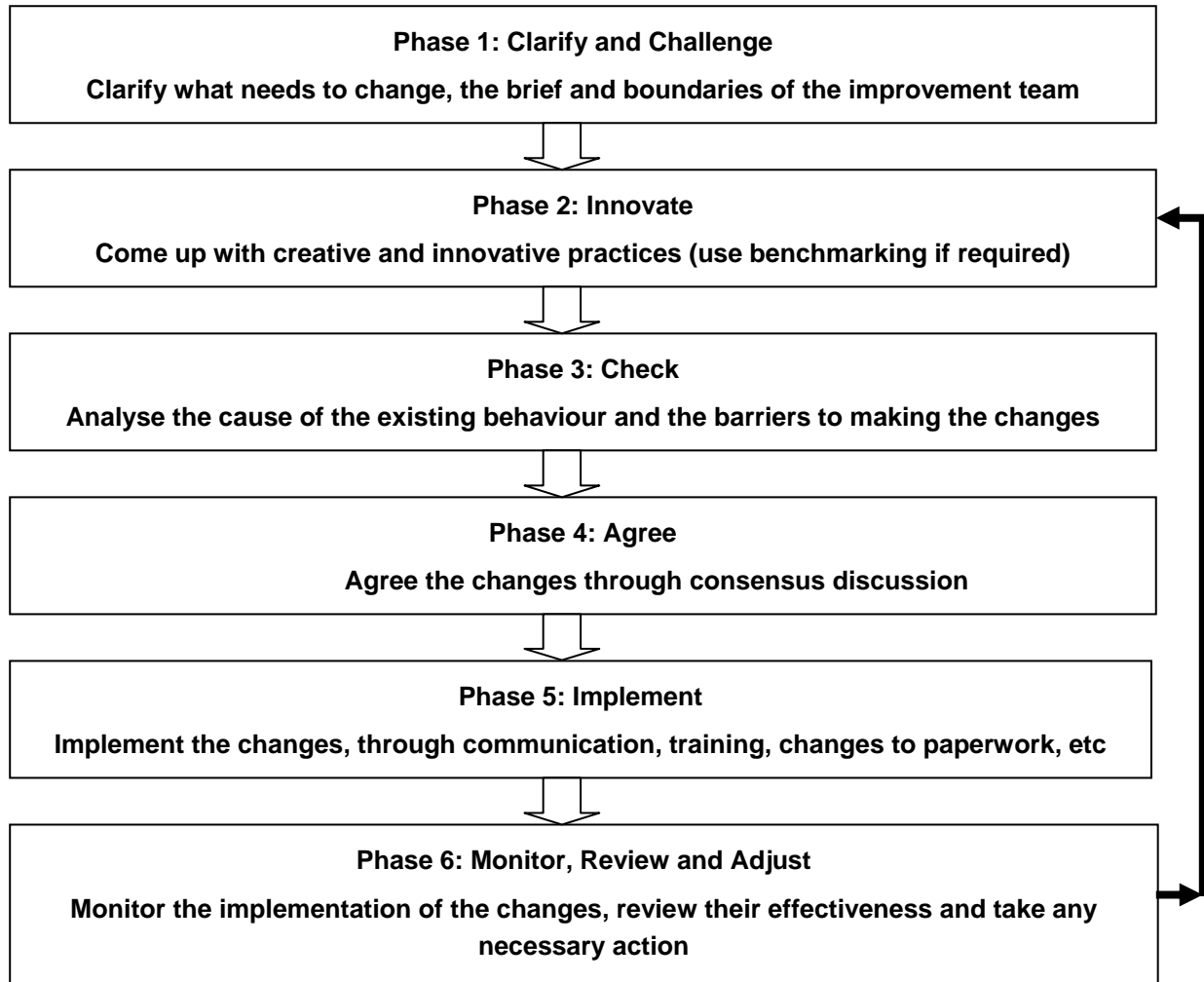
improvement team, bringing in people who are involved in the element of the organisation to be improved.

- e. Identify a project start date and planned completion date.
- f. Think creatively about the project and capture any ideas for action relating to the improvement project, including possible benchmarking partners (see below) and other resources (eg, peer support).
- g. Document the improvement project, output, improvement team leader, improvement team, start date, planned completion date and any ideas for action.
- h. Communicate the improvement plan with the senior management team and elected members and develop their ownership and support for the projects. Add the plan to the business plan, incorporating existing improvement projects into the one plan.
- i. Distribute the improvement plan to core staff and partners as appropriate. Communicate the plan via meetings, workshops or seminars. Ensure the plan is seen and used as a live, working document. Link individual goals to the improvement projects.
- j. Review progress in achieving the improvement projects on a regular basis (eg quarterly). Update the improvement plan document as a result of this review showing achievements, and re-issue.

4 Improvement teams

- 4.1. An improvement team is a small team of people representing different parts of the organisation, established to identify, plan and implement improvements, which result in increased value. An improvement team is set up to work on a specific improvement project to achieve the defined output. There could be a number of them in operation at a time.
- 4.2. The improvement team is given complete responsibility to make the improvements. Any issues relating to capital expenditure or changes to wider staff roles will probably need to be reported to the senior management team for approval. The improvement team could meet on several occasions to ensure that the changes have been made – and then disband.

- 4.3. Improvement teams should operate in a structured way and should use a range of improvement tools and techniques (improvement team training could be considered). A typical improvement team process is as follows:



5 Best practice benchmarking

- 5.1. Making improvements within your organisation involves adopting different processes and practices. It is often quite difficult to be sufficiently innovative to identify different ways of doing things – we are often very caught up in the way we currently do things. One of the techniques available to improvement teams (and to individuals seeking continuous professional development) is simply to ask other people ‘how do **you** do this?’ In its formal sense this is known as best practice or process benchmarking and is one of the most popular organisational tools throughout the world.

Best practice benchmarking can be defined as: “A continuous, systematic process for evaluating the work practices of organisations, which are recognised as representing best practices, for the purposes of organisational improvement” (Spendolini, M J. (1992) ‘The Benchmarking Book’. New York: Amacon Press)..

5.2. We need to carry out benchmarking, because:

- We all have too much to do and not enough time in which to do it.
- We need to focus on the outside world.
- None of us can keep up with everything.

5.3. The tool of or best practice *benchmarking* - an improvement planning tool - should be separated from the important measurement tool of *performance benchmarking*.

5.4. Best practice benchmarking could involve the following steps:

- a. Identify the subject of benchmarking (eg, one of the improvement projects).
- b. Establish a project team.
- c. Clarify the subject to be benchmarked.
- d. Find suitable benchmarking partners, through industry media, professional bodies, regional groups, industry networks, personal contact or consultants.
- e. Make contact and establish the partnership.
- f. Agree protocol, including confidentiality.
- g. Meet, discuss, listen carefully, observe ‘their ways’ and collect the information.
- h. Plan and carry out improvements.
- i. Review progress.

An example of an improvement plan

NOTE: in this example, the improvement teams are responsible for agreeing and planning the specific actions.

Ref	Improvement project	Improvement leader and team	Project start date	Planned completion date	Links to strategy	What we have achieved
IP1	<p>Improve the organisation's strategic approach</p> <p>Project output:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • green space audit completed • parks and green space strategy produced • clear performance outcomes established for the organisation • performance measures and targets directly linked to these outcomes • specific change goals developed • clear links between strategy and service plans • improvement and service development plans in service plans • a strategy review and development process in operation <p>Ideas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • develop a benchmarking partnership with neighbouring authorities in relation to developing strategic synergy with partners • investigate the use of the balanced scorecard as a way of structuring strategy 	<p>Julie Smith</p> <p>Fred Jones</p> <p>Jane Thomas</p> <p>John Peters</p> <p>Peter Perkins</p>	<p>1 April 2006</p>	<p>30 September 2006</p>	<p>Strategic objectives 1, 2 and 3</p>	

Ref	Improvement project	Improvement team and leader	Project start date	Planned completion date	Links to strategy	What we have achieved
IP2	<p>Improve the involvement of staff and partners in improvement activity</p> <p>Project output:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • cross-functional improvement teams, including representatives from partners, set up for each improvement project with responsibility for Plan Do Check Act (PDCA) • a system in place for establishing which people will be involved in which teams • a system in place for capturing and using people's improvement ideas 		1 April 2006	30 September 2006	Strategic objectives 2 and 4	
IP3	<p>Improve performance measurement and review</p> <p>Project output:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a system in place for collecting and collating performance information relating to the performance measures • a system in place to measure user, partner and staff satisfaction • a system in place for analysing the performance information in relation to historical trends and internal targets • quarterly review process in place 		1 July 2006	31 March 2006	Strategic objectives 1 and 3	

