Culture and Sport Improvement Toolkit

Guidance on Self-Assessment

April 2008

1. Introduction

Formal, cyclical Self-Assessment lies at the heart of the Culture and Sport Improvement Toolkit.

This document assists organisations to carry out 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 document will assist your organisation to avoid these *stumbling blocks*.

This guidance is not mandatory; it merely reflects good practice.

2. What is Self-Assessment?

Self-Assessment is simply a comprehensive, systematic, regular review of the progress of the organisation against recognised principles of *excellence*, carried out by people involved in the organisation, resulting in plans for improvement.

Self-Assessment is recognised worldwide as a key organisational and partnership tool and is the 'direction of travel' for local authorities.

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 (e.g. the CSIT Benchmark); 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.

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 improvement in the way the organisation works

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. Self Assessment Tools and Techniques

Organisations have the option of using a mixture of various tool and techniques to carry out Self-Assessment. The following tools and techniques are the most commonly used.

a. 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 (e.g. using scorecards, silent feedback through post-it notes, sub-groups, asking people to move to different parts of the room to reflect their perception)

b. Matrices and Questionnaires

A Self-Assessment matrix comprises 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. Questionnaires are used in a similar way, with staff asked to rate the organisation's progress against each criterion using a rating scale (e.g. 1 to 4). These tools provide a simple basis for Self-Assessment, allowing the Self-Assessment Team or other staff members to make and record a judgement on progress.

c. 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
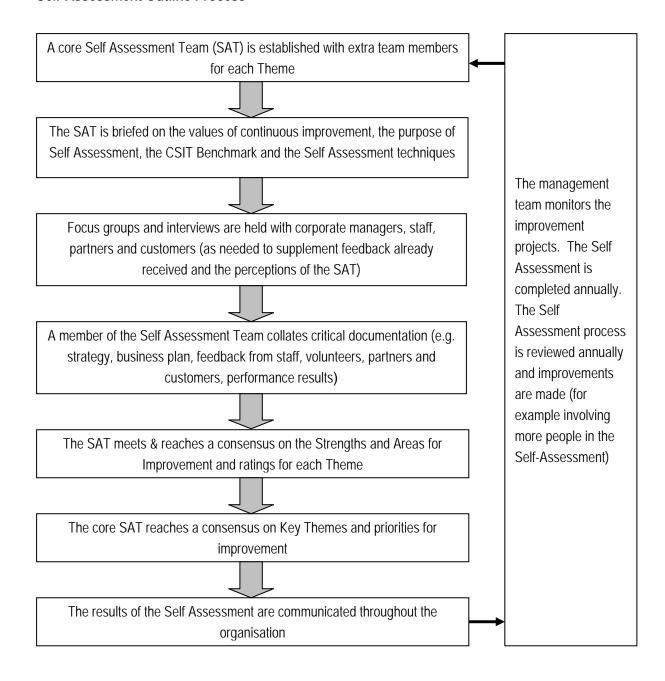
d. **Documents and performance information**

The Self-Assessment Team will refer to key documents (e.g. strategies, business plans, summaries from focus groups, performance trends), which demonstrate approaches and performance relating to each criterion.

4. The 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 upon the specific requirements of the organisation and the resources available to carry out Self-Assessment.

Self-Assessment Outline Process

A core Self Assessment Team (SAT) is established with extra team members for each Theme

The SAT is briefed on the values of continuous improvement, the purpose of Self Assessment, the CSIT Benchmark and the Self Assessment techniques

Focus groups and interviews are held with corporate managers, staff, partners and customers (as needed to supplement feedback already received and the perceptions of the SAT)

A member of the Self Assessment Team collates critical documentation (e.g. strategy, business plan, feedback from staff, volunteers, partners and customers, performance results)

The SAT meets & reaches a consensus on the Strengths and Areas for Improvement and ratings for each Theme

The core SAT reaches a consensus on Key Themes and priorities for improvement

The results of the Self Assessment are communicated throughout the organisation

The management team monitors the improvement projects. The Self Assessment is completed annually. The Self Assessment process is reviewed annually and improvements are made (for example involving more people in the Self-Assessment)

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.   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 a tool necessary because of external pressure, a one-off exercise or a 'bolt-on' to normal work

f)   Before, during and after Self-Assessment workshops, 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 can't 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 don't have to start at Criterion 1.1 and work through to 8.6 – 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' [1]

m) It is very valuable to have a small number of critical documents on the table during the Self-Assessment (e.g. strategy, business plans, performance trends, summary of partner and core staff perceptions)

n) Ensure that Self-Assessment doesn't become a 'paper-chase' or '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 –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!

---

[1] Source: Dr Stephen Covey – 7 Habits of Highly Effective People