

# Self Assessment Guidance and Tips

## 1. 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. 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 worldwide 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 (e.g. 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 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. The TAES Evaluation System

TAES Self Assessment involves applying the following evaluation system to each of the 32 Criteria and 8 Themes. This enables organisations to crystallise their thinking during the Self Assessment and provides a basis for strengths and areas for improvement to be agreed:

**Poor** - No approaches have been planned

**Fair** - Approaches are in the process of being planned and implemented covering many of the relevant guidance points

**Good** - Approaches have been planned covering most of the relevant guidance points and these are implemented systematically

**Excellent** - Approaches have been planned covering all of the relevant guidance points and implemented systematically; the effectiveness of the approaches and their implementation has been measured, reviewed and improved; your performance measurement tells you that the approaches are having a positive impact.

The TAES matrix shows what 'poor', 'fair', 'good' and 'excellent' means in relation to the Descriptor. Once you have assessed the organisation against the Descriptors, you should return to the Criterion to agree strengths, areas for improvement and rating. Once you have assessed the Criteria, focus on the Theme description to agree an overall judgement.

### 4. TAES Self Assessment Techniques

#### 4.1. 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 (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)

#### **4.2. 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.

#### **4.3. 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.

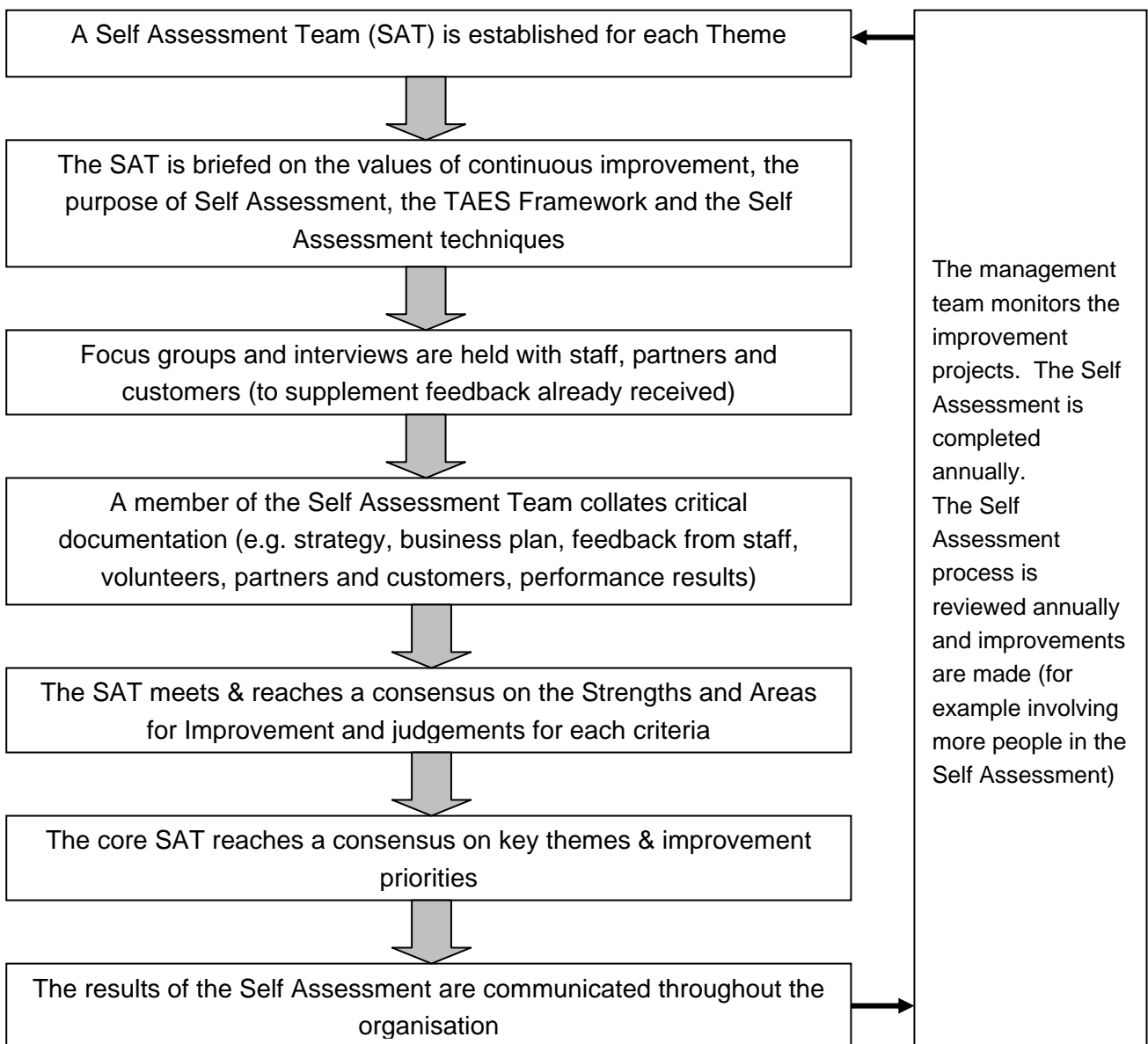
#### **4.4. Documents and performance information**

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.

### **5. 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 upon the specific requirements of the organisation and the resources available to carry out Self Assessment.

## Outline TAE Self Assessment 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.

## 6. 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 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 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 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' <sup>1</sup>
- 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 – 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!

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Dr Stephen Covey – 7 Habits of Highly Effective People  
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