Better Housing Services: Improvement Toolkits

WLGA • CLILC

Improvement Toolkits

Guidance

1 Introduction and Background

1.1 Aims and purposes of the toolkits

The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) Manifesto 'Leading Reform in Local Services', launched in October 2005, highlighted the need to improve the quality of local authority services and to explore with local authorities ways in which this can be done efficiently and effectively. Housing was identified as one of the six priority service areas for the WLGA. In order to assist improvement within key housing services, four housing service improvement toolkits have been developed to cover the following areas:

- housing advice and homelessness;
- housing repairs and improvement;
- the strategic housing function; and
- management of the supporting people programme.

Local authorities that piloted the toolkits have been very enthusiastic about their use, saying, for example:

- *'There was a much more positive and open response from staff than is normally the case for audit or inspection'*
- *'The toolkits have helped us to change the way aspects of the service are delivered, to better meet the expectations of our stakeholders'*
- *'We have used the findings successfully to make the case for more funding and staffing resources'*

- *'An assessor from another authority was able to raise different ways of doing things with our staff, and also found ideas to take back to her authority'*
- *'We are considering setting up a reciprocal arrangement with a neighbouring authority to use the toolkits to peer review each others' services every alternate year'.*

There are a number of purposes for which the toolkits can be used, for example:

- self assessment by services/functions within a local authority;
- self assessment for use by the local authority in its Wales Programme for Improvement risk assessment processes;
- peer review (for example, staff working in a service area from one authority could peer review the same service area in another authority using the toolkit as a basis);
- by service managers to contribute to service or strategic planning;
- as a framework for Best Value or other types of service review;
- to prepare for audit or inspection;
- as a tool to help work towards the impact assessments required by equalities legislation;
- as a framework for discussions with tenants' panels;
- as a framework to inform decisions about the shape of services where a major change or restructure is proposed (for example, to help prepare for stock transfer, or to help shape services following a decision to retain stock);
- to help decide what to do next following significant developments in services; and
- as a tool for continuous improvement, integrated with an authority's regular business planning processes.

The toolkits do not aim to be prescriptive, but to:

- outline what constitutes effective practice;
- improve local authorities' understanding of their own performance and what they need to do to improve; and
- make a valuable contribution to managing performance, improving services and managing risk.

It is not the intention that use of the toolkits should in any way be enforced. Rather, they are designed for use by local authorities that wish to review or assess their own services.

1.2 Links to other relevant frameworks and between toolkits

The toolkits have been developed to link to other relevant frameworks. For example:

- the emphasis on the role of self-assessment and peer review in driving improvements set out in the guidance for local authorities on the Wales Programme for Improvement (WPI) has underpinned the development of the toolkits;
- sustainability, a key aspect of WPI self assessment and risk assessment, runs through all sections of the toolkits, particularly Part B (see 1.5 below);
- the toolkits refer to the indicators within the performance measurement framework for local government in Wales;
- the diversity and equality section of the toolkits has taken account of the equality standard for local government.

The toolkits have also been developed to link to each other. Toolkits on strategic housing and supporting people provide more of a strategic overview, whilst the other two focus more on service delivery. However there are, for example, sections in the strategic housing toolkit that refer to housing advice and homelessness, repair and improvement, and supporting people, and, conversely, sections on strategic fit in each of the other three toolkits.

1.3 How the toolkits were produced

The toolkits were produced by the WLGA with funding from the Welsh Assembly Government Social Housing Management Grant programme, the Community Housing Cymru (CHC) and four local authorities (Carmarthenshire, Conwy, Denbighshire and Merthyr Tydfil).

A project Steering Group, comprising key stakeholders and administered by WLGA, played a lead role in overseeing the production of the toolkits.

Practitioner Groups were set up for each of the four toolkits. Their role was to ensure that the toolkits were practical, informed by current issues and good practice, and would drive improvement in services. Each Practitioner Group included representatives from the relevant local authority housing service and from relevant voluntary, public and private organisations with expertise in that service area.

Each toolkit was piloted in one of the local authorities contributing financially to the project. The pilot process informed the final versions of the four toolkits and this guidance.

1.4 Principles

The Steering and Practitioner Groups consider that there are a number of principles on which the use of the toolkits should be based. These are:

- engagement - engaging staff, tenants/residents/service users, stakeholders, and other local authorities in the process;
- openness – as to why the toolkit is being used and how the results are going to be used; and
- constructiveness – to build on existing strengths and deliver improvements where they are needed.

1.5 The structure of each toolkit

The toolkits are each arranged under the following common headings:

- **Part A: Assessing the service:**

1. User focus
2. Key service issues
3. Ensuring value for money
4. Strategic fit
5. Diversity and equality

- **Part B: Assessing continuous improvement and sustainability:**

1. Track record
2. Corporate, service and member vision and leadership
3. Dealing with change
4. Aims, priorities and plans for the future
5. Assessing and responding to risk
6. Assessing and managing performance
7. Learning

8 Capacity and capability

- **Headline Questions**

Each heading in the toolkit is addressed via a series of headline questions covering what a local authority needs to do to provide a good quality service. Under each headline question the toolkit outlines:

- Key questions - which address the key things an authority should be doing in respect of that headline question;
- What to look for – which lists in more detail the questions an authority needs to ask itself, or issues it needs to look at; and
- Where to gather evidence – which suggests where an authority needs to look for answers to those questions.

- **Evidence Schedules**

Each toolkit has an accompanying evidence schedule. This groups the 'what to look for' questions from the toolkit under each activity listed under 'where to gather evidence'. The evidence schedules have been provided as a framework for use by local authorities. However, local authorities should feel confident to add/omit questions as they see fit.

Evidence schedules are provided for each activity to be undertaken, for example:

- Documentation to be examined
- Face to face interviews
- Focus groups
- Telephone interviews
- Visits
- Observation

2 Using the Toolkits

2.1 Deciding what sections of the toolkit to use

Each toolkit has been designed so that it can be used in its entirety to generate an assessment of the whole service, or so that one or more sections can be used to assess parts of the service. Because each section has been designed to be used independently if required, there is some repetition within each toolkit. However the evidence schedules have been designed to minimise repetition by grouping similar questions together.

The links between the toolkits mean that they can also be used horizontally for thematic cross-examination. For example, it may be helpful to assess diversity and equality across all four service areas where toolkits have been developed.

A brief risk assessment can be carried out if necessary, to help decide which parts of services could benefit most from use of the toolkits. Each toolkit has a risk assessment questionnaire.

It is recommended that risk assessment questionnaires are completed by more than one officer, as a more rounded view of strengths and areas for improvement is of greater benefit. We would recommend that risk assessment questionnaires are completed, for example, by a sample of:

- local authority officers;
- front line staff;
- tenant representatives;
- members; and
- other internal and external stakeholders.

The results can then be analysed to identify those areas which may benefit from the attention of assessment using the relevant sections of the toolkits.

2.2 Using a team approach to assessment

It is recommended that a team approach is taken to the use of the toolkits. Involving a range of stakeholders as assessment team members should be regarded as one of the principles of using the toolkit.

A team approach helps to ensure the objectivity of the assessment by bringing to bear a cross-section of views, and can promote valuable two-way learning between the service and its stakeholders. The experience of the toolkit pilots showed that the use of staff from other organisations as assessment team members can be particularly enabling in terms of the cross-fertilisation of positive practice.

It is important that assessment team members have good inter-personal skills. It is also important that several members of the team have detailed knowledge of the service area or function being assessed (eg. service managers, managers of similar services in other organisations). You may wish to make use of practitioners who have had some peer review training or experience.

2.3 Step by step approach to self-assessment

Step 1: Appoint a co-ordinator

One person will need to coordinate use of the toolkit. That person will need to organise evidence-gathering activities, liaise with members of the assessment team, and draw together evidence gathered by assessment team members into a final assessment of performance. The coordinator may be the lead officer for the service, but could, if the local authority chooses, be an external person or consultant. There may be advantages to using an external person or consultant, for example, where the local authority has limited capacity, where an independent view may be particularly useful (eg. to help make the case for additional resources), and to ensure the robustness and objectivity of the assessment.

Step 2: Arrange administrative support

The coordinator is likely to need administrative support to collect and copy documentation, arrange interviews, etc. as required.

Step 3: Appoint the assessment team

Assessment team members can include:

- front line staff;

- service managers;
- elected members;
- service users;
- internal stakeholders (eg. staff from departments/teams outside the service being assessed);
- external stakeholders (eg. representatives of partner public, voluntary and private sector organisations); and
- staff from similar services in other organisations (eg. managers of similar services in housing associations or other local authorities).

Step 4: Set timetable for evidence gathering and allocate tasks

A timescale should be determined for gathering evidence. Experience of the toolkit pilots suggests that a relatively short timescale (such as a week) may be appropriate, in order to maintain a clear focus on the assessment.

Tasks from the evidence schedules (examination of documentation, interviews, etc.) should be allocated to each member of the assessment team. When allocating tasks, the following points should be kept in mind:

- the methodology may need to be varied depending on how much of the toolkit is being used. For example, if the whole toolkit is being used, face-to-face interviews are likely to be necessary; if only part of the toolkit is being used and relatively few questions need to be asked, it may be possible to use telephone interviews;
- the evidence schedules set out questions for key officer posts. Organisational structures will differ, local authorities will therefore need to consider how these questions should be distributed within their own structure (eg. if a Supporting People team does not have a contracting officer, those questions could be asked of the lead officer);
- the evidence schedules set out a range of documentation to be examined. Organisations may not have all the documents listed, or the information to be examined may be contained in other documents. Where this is the case, the local authority will need to amend the evidence schedules accordingly;
- it may be appropriate, where possible, to allocate two assessment team members to each face-to-face interview and focus group – one to ask questions and the other to take notes;
- to help ensure an objective assessment, staff members on the assessment team should not be used to assess those parts of the service for which they are directly responsible; and
- it is helpful to match the skills and experience of individual assessment team members to the tasks they are allocated. For example, where managers from other organisations are assessment team members, they can be used to look at issues within their management remit.

It is helpful to compile a task list for each member of the assessment team, to provide a clear record of tasks they have been asked to undertake and the questions they need to seek answers to. An example is included in Appendix 1.

A timetable should be arranged for face-to-face interviews and focus groups. Examination of documentation, telephone interviews, visits and observation can be fitted in around these at the convenience of individual assessment team members.

Step 5: Brief the team

A briefing for assessment team members (preferably a verbal briefing with the opportunity to answer questions) should be held well in advance, to ensure that they are clear about what is expected of them, and that they are able to set aside enough time for the assessment. Each assessor should be provided with:

- copies of the evidence schedules they have been allocated (extracted from the overall evidence schedules);
- copies of any documentation they have been asked to examine;
- phone numbers for any telephone interviews they have been asked to undertake; and
- locations for any visits and observation.

Step 6: Brief staff

Before evidence-gathering begins, it may be advantageous, to hold a verbal briefing (with the opportunity to answer questions) for all staff involved in the service to be assessed, and any other individuals who will be interviewed or participate in focus groups. As a minimum, they should be sent information explaining:

- the purpose of the toolkit assessment;
- what will be happening during the assessment;
- when the assessment will take place; and
- who is involved in the assessment team.

Suggested wording of this information is provided in Appendix 2

Step 7: Gather and record evidence

Assessment team members should gather evidence on each question in the evidence schedules they have been allocated.

The evidence schedules are designed to gather evidence on particular issues from a number of perspectives (for example, documentary evidence, service user opinion, observation). This is so that the evidence can be 'triangulated' to enable a balanced conclusion to be reached. For example, local authorities may have a detailed minimum standard for voids, but tenants may be dissatisfied with the standard of properties they have been let, and observation may confirm that the minimum lettable standard is not being met in practice. A document, an opinion, or a small observed sample may not in themselves constitute clear evidence, but, taken together, they are likely to paint a much clearer picture.

Evidence should be recorded on common evidence proformas as shown in Appendix 3. To enable it to be easily transposed into an overall assessment report as described in 2.6 below:

- evidence should be clearly linked to the key question references shown in the evidence schedules; and
- evidence proformas should, wherever possible, be completed electronically.

Assessment team members should ensure that evidence is recorded fully and accurately so that it can be used to optimum effect to inform the overall assessment. 'Yes/no' answers are not sufficient. It is important that the full evidence for answers is provided. For example, in answer to the question 'Does the council provide members of the public with information about the range of services available?' the evidence might read 'The council has a range of information leaflets available at various outlets including council offices which set out services available and how to access them. The leaflets are available in English and Welsh, and, on request, in large type and Braille. Information is also provided on the council's website. No information is available in languages other than Welsh or English'.

Where evidence does not exist (for example, if there are no clear policies and procedures) this also needs to be recorded.

Where officers from housing associations or other local authorities are part of the team, it may be appropriate for them to provide examples of how their organisation does things where they consider that this would be of assistance/relevance.

Step 8: Compile the overall assessment report

When assessment team members have completed the evidence schedules they have been allocated, all evidence collected will need to be drawn together into an overall assessment report. A proforma for an overall assessment report is shown in Appendix 4.

Evidence against each of the key questions will need to be transposed from individual evidence proformas into the overall assessment proforma. This process will be considerably simpler if individual evidence proformas are available electronically.

Step 9: Reach a judgement

When all evidence gathered has been included in the overall assessment proforma, a judgement should be made on performance against each key question, using a traffic light system.

Judgements should be made using the following as a guide:

- GREEN – the evidence in relation to this key question is largely positive, with minor areas for improvement only
- AMBER –the evidence in relation to this key question paints a mixed picture, with some areas of positive performance, but also some major areas for improvement
- RED – the evidence in relation to this key question is largely negative, with significant areas for improvement and no major areas of strength.

Key questions assessed as red or amber indicate major or minor areas for improvement which are likely to need attention. However, even areas assessed as green are likely to include some issues that need attention.

Experience of the pilots suggests that a useful method of addressing such areas is via an improvement planning session with a range of staff and stakeholders.

For the assessment to be of optimum use as an improvement tool, judgements should be made not just in relation to what an 'acceptable' service would look like, but in relation to what an 'ideal' service would be. The assessment should be viewed as the start of a process which will lead to that 'ideal' service.

It will be important that judgements made are robust. As mentioned above, assessments may be more robust and objective if made by an external person.

Step 10: Use the findings to drive improvement

Although the process of using the toolkit is intended to be in itself a positive and constructive process, it is important that the findings from the assessment are used to drive improvement.

Findings can be used, for example:

- to inform business/service planning by identifying priority issues;
- to present to relevant scrutiny committee with recommendations for future action;
- to make a case corporately for additional resources to be invested in the service area;
- to present to relevant multi-agency fora to generate ideas from a range of agencies for responding to areas for improvement;
- to present to tenants/residents fora to stimulate discussions about improving services; and
- to inform discussions and decisions about the shape of services where a major change or restructure is proposed.

Improvement planning should aim to generate priorities for action. It is likely that not all areas for improvement will end up as priorities. Priorities will need to be decided based on such considerations as risk and staff and financial resources available. However, non-priority areas should not be lost sight of. If (as outlined in 2.5 above) the assessment is viewed as the start of a process which will lead to an 'ideal' service, it is important to consider how non-priority areas will be dealt with. Some may provide 'quick wins' (ie. improvements which, though not priorities, can be quickly and easily implemented). Others may highlight the need for longer-term more strategic approaches (eg. capacity building, redirection of finances).

Improvement planning may generate a stand-alone action plan or actions to be incorporated into existing service/operational plans or into local authority/multi-agency strategies.

When considering appropriate actions to address areas for improvement, authorities should seek to identify where effective practice exists elsewhere, via websites and other ‘good practice’ sources such as:

- The Chartered Institute of Housing good practice unit (a subscription service at www.cih.org/gpu/index/html)
- Housemark (a membership service at www.housemark.co.uk)
- IDeA Knowledge (http://www.idea-knowledge.gov.uk)
- Housing Quality Network (a membership service at http://www.hqnetwork.org.uk)

Step 11: Share assessment findings and feedback

It is for local authorities to decide how widely they wish to share the results of their assessment.

As a minimum, there should be an obligation to share the overall assessment with members of the assessment team (perhaps via a post-assessment feedback session).

Local authorities are, however, encouraged to share results as widely as possible. They should consider sharing results with, for example, all those interviewed or consulted during the assessment, all service users (especially where service users have been involved as part of the assessment team), and all front line staff. There may be some circumstances where this is not appropriate, but, in general, the learning benefits from the wide sharing of assessments far outweigh any disbenefits.

Where assessments identify particularly effective practices, authorities should consider disseminating these through available networks (for example AWCHOP, the National Homelessness Network, SPIN, Excellence Wales, conference workshops), as appropriate.

Appendix 1: Example task list for assessment team member

Examination of documentation	Key question reference	What to look for
Written information/ leaflets and website information available to the public	A1 1.1	• Does the council provide members of the public with information about the range of housing advice and homelessness services available locally (provided by both the council and other organisations) and how to access these services, (including out of hours arrangements)? • Is the information comprehensive and accurate? • Is it clear when the information was last updated? • Can service users make initial contact with housing advice and homelessness services by phone, text, email or in person?
	A1 2.1	• Is the information available in a range of formats? • Does the information include service standards? • Does the information include the legal responsibilities of the council in relation to homelessness? • Does the information set out what the council and other organisations can do to prevent homelessness? • Does the information include the range of housing options that are available in the area?
Decision letters	A1 2.1	• Do decision letters: o clearly state the decision that has been made in relation to the case and the reasons for the decision o explain what will happen next o set out the applicant's right to request a review of the decision and what they have to do to request a review o provide information about sources of independent housing advice

Observation	Key question reference	What to look for
Observe front line staff dealing with housing advice and homelessness queries at xx office	A1 1.1	• Are phone calls, callers responded to promptly? • Are individuals treated courteously and with respect? • Are waiting times kept to a minimum? • Are the offices accessible to people with disabilities? • Is a hearing loop available? • Is it possible to receive the service in a language other than English or Welsh (eg through Language Line provision) • Are a range of information leaflets available for people to take away? • Is a range of information easily accessible to people visiting the office?
Observe homelessness assessment/ prevention interviews x 2 at xx office	A1 2.3 A2 3.1 A2 4.2	• Do staff communicate well with service users? • Are interviews/discussions that involve personal information carried out in private interview rooms? • Is clear information about options available provided to service users? • Are service users clear about what they need to do next/what will happen next when they leave an interview?

Interviews	Key question reference	What to ask
xx Key officer, Housing Benefit	A2 2.1 A2 2.2	• Did you/any colleagues have any involvement in the development of the homelessness strategy? • Are you/colleagues involved in the homelessness forum? • Has the housing advice and homelessness team approached your department in order to develop any protocols/specific actions to prevent or tackle homelessness?
	A2 3.2	• Does your team work in partnership with the housing advice and homelessness service to prevent homelessness? How? Is this effective? • Is there a policy of linking DHPs directly to the prevention of homelessness?
	A4 1.3	• Do you consider that you are well informed about what housing advice and homelessness services can contribute to corporate objectives?
	B2.2	• Do you consider that you have a clear understanding of our vision and ambitions for housing advice and homelessness services?
	B2.3	• Do you consider that there is effective leadership of the housing advice and homelessness service (from members and officers)?
	A2 2.1 A2 2.2	• Did you/any colleagues have any involvement in the development of the homelessness strategy? • Are you/colleagues involved in the homelessness forum? • Has the housing advice and homelessness team approached your department in order to develop any protocols/specific actions to prevent or tackle homelessness?

Appendix 2: Note for staff and interviewees

(Insert name of council) Council is about to undertake a self-assessment of its ***(insert name of service)*** using a Service Improvement Toolkit published by the Welsh Local Government Association.

The assessment is being undertaken to:
- improve our understanding of our own performance and what we need to do to improve;
- make a valuable contribution to managing performance, improving services and managing risk.

The assessment will:

- take place during the period ***(insert date)***
- be carried out by the following people:
  - ***(insert names of assessment team members)***
- look at aspects of the ***(insert name of service)*** service as it is currently provided and at how the service ensures that it will improve in the future
- use a range of techniques, including:
  - examination of documentation
  - face to face interviews
  - focus groups
  - telephone interviews
  - visits to properties
  - observation

  (delete as necessary)
- result in a report about how the ***(insert name of service)*** service is performing, with evidence supporting the judgements made.

If you would like to know more, please contact ***(insert name and contact details)***

Appendix 3: Evidence proformaAppendix 3: Evidence proforma

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Name of assessor	
Evidence schedule used	***eg:*** • ***Housing equality action plan*** • ***Interview with (insert name and title)*** • ***Focus group of front line staff***
Key question reference	**Evidence**
eg: ***A1 2.1***	***Assessor's notes***

Appendix 4: Assessment report proforma

This report provides feedback from the self-assessment of ***(insert name of service)*** carried out on ***(insert dates)***.

The assessment was carried out using a Service Improvement Toolkit published by the Welsh Local Government Association. The sections of the toolkit used were:
(insert sections used)

The authority's performance in relation to each key question is reported below using a 'traffic light' scoring system, where:

- green indicates that the evidence in relation to this question is largely positive, with minor areas for improvement only;
- amber indicates that the evidence in relation to this question paints a mixed picture, with some areas of positive performance, but also some major areas for improvement;
- red indicates that the evidence in relation to this question is largely negative, with significant areas for improvement and no major areas of strength.

The assessment team comprised:
(insert names of assessment team members)
We would like to express sincere thanks to every member of the assessment team for their work.

The evidence for the assessment was derived from:
(delete as necessary)

- examination of documentation
- focus groups with: ***(insert evidence schedules used)***
- visits to: ***(insert evidence schedules used)***
- observation at: ***(insert evidence schedules used)***
- telephone interviews with: ***(insert evidence schedules used)***
- face to face interviews with: ***(insert names and titles)***

We would like to express sincere thanks to all staff, tenants and other stakeholders involved in this assessment for their time and active participation.

Part A. Assessing the service			
A1 User focus			
Headline Question **A1.1 Are our services accessible for users?**			
Ref	**Key question**	**Evidence for Judgment**	**Judgment**
A1 1.1	***(insert key question)***	***(insert summary of evidence)***	***(insert green/amber/red)***
A1 1.2			
A1 1.3			

(insert other headline and key questions used)