

Striving
Towards
A
(k) Knowledgeable
Diverse
And
Responsive
Delivery
System

Raising the standard

Section 2

Self-assessment and quality planning guide

January 2002

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1 Introduction

This guide is designed to assist your organisation to self-assess its performance against the generic standards *Raising the Standard - Good practice standards for continuous improvement in community service organisations* and develop a quality improvement plan.

The guide is divided into the following sections:

- Understanding standards and quality
- Deciding to use the standards for quality improvement
- Organising the self-assessment process
- Planning for quality improvement.

The guide was tested as part of the piloting process and some of the experience of these organisations is included as case studies to demonstrate the importance of planning and adapting the process to suit the particular context of your organisation. Further case studies will be included in future training.

In addition to this guide a number of tools have been developed to assist services in the self-assessment and quality improvement process.

Tools to assist in the self-assessment process include:

- Guide to running client focus groups (Section 3)
- Client surveys (Section 3)
- Sample survey to gain member feedback (Section 3)
- Sample survey for community development project (Section 3)
- Sample focus group questions and survey for community education and training projects (Section 3)
- Sample questions for gaining feedback from other agencies (Section 3)
- Client file audit (Section 3)
- Self assessment workbook (Section 4)

Tools to assist in the quality improvement planning process include:

- Suggested program for planning workshop (Section 3)
- Strategic priorities matrix (Section 3)
- Quality improvement planning workbook (Section 5)

2 Understanding standards and quality

About the standards

Raising the Standard - Good practice standards for continuous improvement in community service organisations is a set of generic good practice standards developed to assist community service organisations improve the quality of their services for clients and communities. Local service providers, peak community sector organisations and government human service agencies were directly involved in the development of the standards. The standards are considered relevant to a wide range of organisations and service types in the ACT.

Many service-specific standards are available and are used to varying degrees by service providers in the ACT. For example, standards exist in areas such as community health, home and community care, mental health, community housing and disability services.

The generic standards focus on those areas of management and practice that are common to most community organisations. They cover leadership and management of the organisation and various functions that different organisations will be involved with: service delivery, community development, policy development and advocacy, membership services and sector development.

They can be used in conjunction with other service-specific standards or alone.

Quality as part of organisational culture

Quality is something all organisations aspire to and many claim they deliver. Yet judgements about quality tend to be subjective and difficult in the human services field. Views about quality are often based on different goals, assumptions, values and experiences. Standards are useful because they serve as more impartial criteria that can guide assessment of practice and management and assist in identifying planning priorities.

For most organisations the goal of quality improvement is a consideration in everyday management. They will have a range of management processes and systems in place to guide and monitor performance and quality. For example, most organisations seek to improve the quality of what they do through:

- planning, monitoring and evaluation
- staff and management team meetings
- staff selection, supervision and development
- client feedback
- policies, systems and procedures to guide work practices.

Organisations that have a reputation for quality have usually developed a culture that promotes critical reflection on what they are trying to achieve – both externally, with clients or communities and internally, with respect to the way the organisation works. Such organisations tend to have strong leadership that promotes participation of staff (and others), and encourages action learning, innovation and some risk taking. They are often described as learning organisations.

Use of standards in quality improvement

Using standards provides a systematic process to support internal efforts at quality improvement. The self-assessment process is intended to support and encourage a culture of ongoing reflection, review, planning and action. Quality improvement processes such as these need to be internalised as part of ongoing management and not seen as separate from the main business of the organisation. The goal is to build a cycle of assessment and planning that supports continuous improvement over time.

Another valuable aspect of using standards for assessment is that organisations can reflect on their practice and management against a good practice framework that has been developed and endorsed by a wider peer group in the community sector. This takes some of the subjectivity out of the evaluation process. One of the positive outcomes of the process is that it can affirm what the organisation is doing well. Equally it can highlight the areas that need improvement or a rethink. This is very useful information for an organisation that seeks to be a quality provider.

Accountability and contract monitoring

Quality of service is also a key factor in accountability to government purchasing agencies. In the ACT the purchasing contract will, in most cases, specify that organisations need to show evidence that they are using relevant standards in quality improvement. If the generic standards are the most relevant or useful standards for your organisation, participating in this assessment and planning process will help demonstrate your commitment to quality to the government agencies that purchase or fund your services.

Some organisations will already be using other standards or participating in external quality systems. This self-assessment and quality improvement planning process is not intended to replace other standards and systems that are already serving organisations well. It is important to remember that participation in the assessment and planning process is voluntary. The primary motivation should always be that you see benefit in working with the standards to support your internal quality efforts.

3 Deciding to use standards for quality improvement

Being clear in your purpose

Organisations will have a variety of reasons for wanting to use standards for quality improvement. The primary consideration is that you see that the process can benefit your organisation - people in the organisation need to believe that the process will help the organisation serve its clients, constituents or communities better.

Specific reasons for embarking on the process might be:

- gaining a snapshot of where the organisation's management and delivery of quality services are in relation to agreed external criteria
- drawing on the standards to assist future planning
- using the standards to guide establishment of a new organisation
- assessing against standards as a part of
- a wider reform and organisational change process
- starting self-assessment to identify areas for improvement prior to having an external evaluation undertaken
- being required to report on quality improvement to funding bodies.

Making the decision to proceed

Some frequently asked questions when staff and management are making the decision to use a standards approach to quality improvement include:

- When is the 'right' time to start self-assessment?
- How much time is needed?
- Will it make a difference to the way we work?
- Will it just highlight the need for extra resources that we don't have?
- Will it expose the organisation to outside scrutiny?
- What happens after the self-assessment and planning is completed?

When is the 'right' time to start self-assessment?

The experience of most organisations conducting self-assessment and quality improvement planning is that there is no right or wrong time to start. Many organisations opt to proceed with this process in the midst of massive organisational change such as restructuring. In these cases the process of self-assessment can help to give staff something positive to focus on, increasing team commitment and morale. Other organisations faced with the same issues may decide to delay self-assessment until things have stabilised.

Many services have found it most useful to embark on this process prior to strategic planning as it assists the organisation to highlight areas to be included in the plan and to prioritise the most important things to address. Others delay the process to use it as an evaluation tool for how well planning has occurred.

It appears that the issue of timing is less important than being clear about what the organisation wants to gain from self-assessment.

How much time is needed?

Most organisations will need to spend between three and six months undertaking the process described in this guide. Taking much longer than this will develop a sense of weariness and 'quality improvement fatigue', while a period of less than three months is likely to produce stress in trying to get everything done well.

The actual time needed will depend on issues such as size and complexity of the organisation, styles of working, time and resources committed to the process and other demands facing the organisation.

Will it make a real difference to the way we work and outcomes for our clients?

A common concern from organisations that have not undertaken this type of process before is that no added value will result from all the work. However, organisations that have actually undertaken a process like this have found the results generally do justify the effort. Common outcomes of this process reported by these organisations include:

- a greater focus on clients and the reasons for the organisation's work
- greater coherence around the organisation's values and purpose
- increased team work and staff morale
- better coordination of services and less fragmentation
- improved policy and procedures to support practice
- an increased culture of evaluation and outcomes focus within the organisation.

Organisations that report best outcomes are those that have engaged staff and management in the process and have gained their commitment to it. Commitment is more easily gained when:

- the organisation is clear about why it is undertaking the self-assessment process and what it is aiming to achieve
- expectations of the work impact of doing the assessment have been discussed widely
- the process is given importance by management and staff
- it is not an imposed process.

Experience from the field: Involving the whole organisation

It will help the process in a particular service or work area if the whole organisation is aware of the self-assessment and what it is trying to achieve. We did send the standards to the management of our organisation, but if we were doing it again we would provide some awareness training for relevant stakeholders such as the Board and other management.

LASA Youth Centre, Salvation Army

Will it just highlight the need for more resources?

Many managers and staff start the self-assessment against good practice standards with a concern that it will just raise everyone's expectations for more resources and eventually lead to a loss of morale if these are not forthcoming. When first looking at the standards many people start from an assumption that quality improvement or working to meet the standards necessarily requires additional resources. After all, if it didn't why wouldn't the organisation already be meeting the standards?

Self-assessment highlights two main things including:

- things that are already being done well – where organisations are meeting some of the standards
- areas where the standards are not being met and improvements can be identified.

Where self-assessment points out what is already being done well everyone's morale is boosted. In our experience it is a rare organisation that does not find it is meeting some standards. Why standards are not being met yet is complex. In the majority of

cases this is a combination of factors such as the organisation not having clear leadership and direction, a lack of comprehensive policies and procedures, or lack of trained staff to support good practice. A common finding is that practice is inconsistent across the organisation.

In a very few organisations the lack of resources will make a big difference to how well standards are met. However the majority of organisations find that resources are not the main stumbling block to good practice and neither is the size of the organisation. Other quality improvement systems have consistently found that size is also not the key to meeting good practice standards.

The important factors are a culture of critical reflection and openness to change. This culture can be encouraged through the self-assessment process if the organisation uses the standards as an opportunity for inquiry rather than as a checklist. Although they will require additional thought, effort and time, most of the improvements identified can be achieved using existing resource levels.

Will it expose the organisation to outside scrutiny?

Some organisations fear that by undertaking self-assessment the organisation will be open to criticism if it finds it is not currently meeting many of the standards. This may be particularly true where organisations are required to undergo a process such as this for funding purposes. (Note, the process is voluntary in the ACT.) In a self-assessment process it is the organisation itself that has ownership and control of the process and use of the outcomes.

In fact, the more open the organisation is to identifying what is not working and developing an action plan to improve, the more likely it is that confidence in the organisation will be generated among all of its stakeholders, including government.

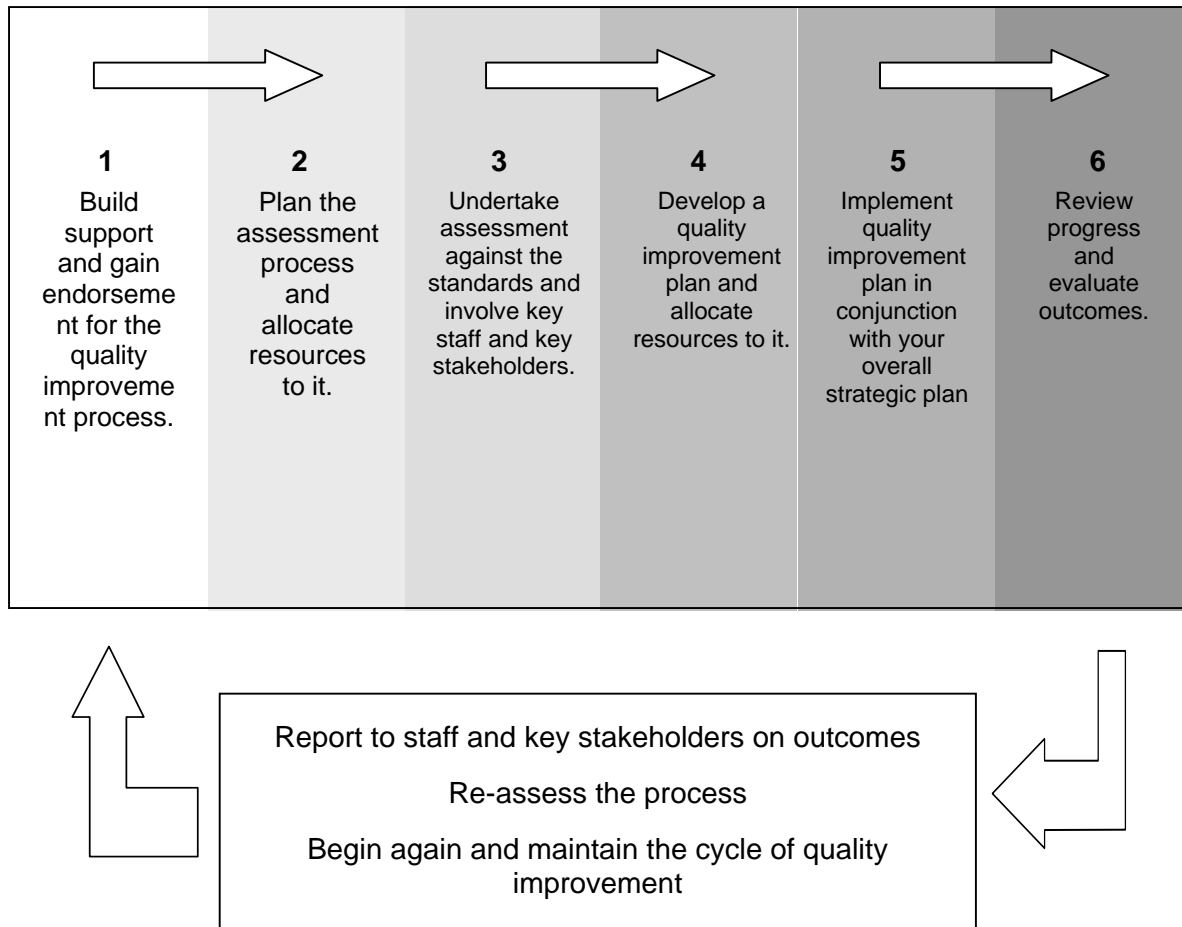
What support is available during the self-assessment process?

The process is intended to be self-managed by organisations and the guide and tools seek to make the process easy for you to carry out. However some organisations may want clarification along the way in relation to the standards or aspects of the process.

If you require information or advice you can contact ACT Council of Social Service, phone 6248 7566 or RPR Consulting, phone 6282 9811.

It is also useful to share experiences with other organisations who are using the self-assessment and quality improvement process. You may wish to do this on a formal regular basis or informally as the need arises. This kind of sharing does not necessarily involve the content of your self-assessment, it can be just as useful to share experiences about how you planned and went about the assessment or some of the ideas for improvement it generated.

An overview of the self-assessment and quality improvement process



4 Organising the self-assessment process

Establishing a positive environment for self-assessment

Before embarking on self-assessment, staff and management should take the opportunity to discuss the standards, the process and the outcomes the organisation is seeking. A useful start might be to brainstorm together:

- achievements of the organisation to date
- perceived strengths of the organisation
- 'if we could change anything about the organisation what would it be?'
- 'in 5 years time this organisation ideally would be.....'
- will the standards help us to think about improvements and future directions?

Make sure those involved have time to become familiar with the content and structure of the standards. Small groups could each take an area of the standards to look at and discuss. Then they could report back to the main group to outline what the standards cover and anything that they found interesting or useful. Finally, there could be a discussion on the goals of undertaking the process and what it would take to make it a positive learning experience for individuals and the organisation as a whole.

Setting the right atmosphere for self-assessment is important. If it is approached as a test, with a pass/fail attitude, the process of self-assessment will be reduced to a superficial checklist. As a result the opportunity to build knowledge, to reflect and improve will be lost and there will be little impact on the outcomes the

organisation is striving for. Allow people to voice concerns, encourage discussion of what might be gained and also what pressures might be added to the current workload.

The process outlined below encourages those involved in the process to meet as often as necessary because self-assessment is mostly a process of discussion and dialogue. Studies on quality improvement and organisational learning have found that:

- learning within an organisation involves group participants describing their individual experiences and what they observe and feel
- people learn from each other by working together on real problems in a collaborative way
- personal, implicit assumptions and beliefs must be examined
- learning can be facilitated by providing a systematic process that supports reflection to occur
- participants identify what needs to be changed and make suggestions for improvement
- looking at the 'big picture' and how the problem fits in is an important part of learning.¹

Some useful additional questions to consider before starting the process might be:

- who is the self-assessment for?
- can we commit to taking a fresh look?
- who has a stake in achieving better outcomes and how might they be involved?

1 From *Reviewing for Quality*, P Ryan and D Michels, 1994 ACHA

Overview of the self-assessment process

When it is done well, self-assessment can help to build a stronger service or organisation. If the service approaches self-assessment as an opportunity to help fine tune management and practice and encourage new solutions to old problems, it is likely that staff and management will feel good about the service and about working together.

Self-assessment involves three main activities:

- meeting in groups to look at the standards, think about what is currently being done, decide whether improvements could be made and recording what has been discussed
- finding out from clients, communities of interest and other stakeholders about what is important to them about what the service does and if they have suggestions for improvement
- looking at the way things are documented in the organisation such as client files, activity data and policies and procedures to see if they reflect the standards.

To get the most out of the process organisations need to:

- set aside enough time for doing it
- involve people in different ways
- have at least one person within the organisation motivating and encouraging the process to keep on track
- look for ways to improve rather than treating it as a way of fulfilling external requirements.

At a minimum, the self-assessment process used should be able to demonstrate that:

- all staff and paid management were involved in looking at the standards relevant to them and had the opportunity to discuss what is working well and what could work better in relation to the standards
- members of the governing body had the opportunity to look at the standards relevant to them and discuss what is working well and what might be changed in relation to the standards
- where organisations use volunteers, input has been sought from them in relevant areas
- a variety of clients have been asked about the service (what they like and what could be improved)
- communities/groups/other organisations have had an opportunity to give feedback on the service
- policies have been reviewed
- a sample of client files has been audited (where relevant)
- the process has been documented and areas for improvement have been identified.

Working in groups to assess against the standards

First, you will need to decide as an organisation which standards are relevant and which are not.

The standards are divided into two broad sections.

1 Governance and management

The standards in this section relate to different aspects of leading and managing organisations and are considered relevant and applicable to all community sector organisations, including service providers, consumer organisations, peak bodies and organisations involved in community development. They also have applicability across different sectors such as community services, health, community housing, environment, community arts and multicultural affairs.

There are two areas where the management standards are optional:

- Volunteer management (where the organisation does not use volunteers).
- Project development and management (where the organisation is not currently planning or managing any projects).

All other standards in this section are intended to apply to all organisations.

2 Working with clients and communities

This section is divided into a number of different areas relating to the type of work organisations are involved in:

- providing client-centred services
- client rights and participation
- community development
- policy development and advocacy
- membership services
- sector development.

Your organisation should look at these standards and decide which standards correspond most closely with the work you do.

In some organisations the standards relating to providing services to clients and client rights and responsibilities may be the only sections you look at in the self-assessment.

Other organisations will be involved in service delivery and other activities, for example community development and membership services. Some organisations, for example peak bodies do not provide client services and they will focus on the sections that deal with policy work, representation, member services and sector development.

The organisation then needs to decide which standards should be looked at by different groups of staff and management, which standards need to be considered by the governing body (Board/Committee) and which should be looked at by all. The following may help in deciding how to break up the standards.

The first section of the standards covers managing the organisation and its people. This includes leadership and governance, effective management, planning, evaluation and quality improvement, human resource management, safety and office environment and project development and management. A cross section of staff, management and Board/Committee members will need to look at specific standards within these sections. There may be some, such as leadership, that all should consider. The governing body should certainly look at standards relating to governance. A rule of thumb is to include a cross section of people directly involved with or affected by the different aspects of management.

The first part of the section on work with clients and communities covers 'providing client-centred services' and 'client rights and participation'. These sections cover how individual clients have contact with the service (access, referral and entry, assessment and service delivery) and how clients are treated and can be involved (rights, privacy and confidentiality, participation, feedback and complaints). All those staff and management involved in dealing with clients should be involved in looking at these standards. However some Board/Committee members may also want to look at the standards on complaints and participation.

The remaining sections (covering community development, policy development and advocacy, membership services and sector development) should be allocated on the basis of who is involved or has a stake in the quality of work in this area. Depending on how responsibilities are allocated Board or committee members may look at specific standards such as Partnerships and coalitions or Ethical leadership and representation.

Feedback from clients, community members and other stakeholders will be particularly important to assessment of the standards relating to work with clients and communities. The suggested tools to support these processes link the feedback to content of the standards. (See Section 3)

In small organisations it is likely that the same group of people will look at all standards. In larger organisations the standards will be divided up as suggested above, with emphasis on achieving a cross section of views from people in different parts of the organisation. Not everyone will be involved in looking at all standards.

The training will assist organisations plan the best way to look at different parts of the standards in their organisation.

Ways of using the standards

There are several ways that groups can look at the standards. At its simplest, groups can meet to look at a single standard or groups of standards and work their way through, discussing the features of good practice and how they apply to the organisation. Each group would record what they find on each standard in the relevant part of the Self-assessment workbook. (It is designed so that you can copy sections or standards for different groups to work on.)

An overall coordinating group might collate the results or a combined meeting of all groups could be held to report back what is found. This process could be linked to normal staff or team meetings. The Board/Committee might allocate time at one of its regular meetings. An alternative is to run a small number of workshops involving as many people as possible across the organisation. Using this method can facilitate a clear way of recording findings and ensuring all standards are systematically examined.

Another option some services have found useful is to follow a hypothetical or real client through the process of engaging with the agency via the standards. Taking a real or hypothetical example of a client's experience helps to highlight what actually happens during contact with the agency. To do this you would work through a range of standards relating to clients.

For example, a generalist youth service might take the example of a young boy making contact with the service by asking for help in finding housing. The boy is also thin and complains of people being out to get him. How would he be assessed and by whom? Would the assessment identify a range of issues such as employment/education, family relationships, income support and mental and physical health? Would staff be clear as to how to arrange further assessment and assistance from other agencies? How would the boy be involved in this process and how would he be informed of his rights? What information would be recorded, how would confidentiality be kept or consent sought for sharing information beyond the service? What services might be offered by the agency and how would his situation be evaluated for outcomes?

Similarly, this approach can also be applied to exploring the way an organisation serves its membership by looking at the experience of a particular member organisation or to a hypothetical new staff member, volunteer or Board/Committee member, working through the standards relating to human resources.

This will not ensure all standards are covered so allocations of standards to specific groups would still need to occur.

How to organise the process

Some useful tips for organising the process are discussed below.

A coordinating team/coordinator

In most medium to large organisations, setting up a small group to coordinate the process has been found to be very useful. The team should be drawn from a cross section of staff and management and have clear accountability to someone such as the overall manager or the Committee/Board. The coordinating team sets the timeline and plan and monitors progress. It is important that senior manager/s are involved in this team so that decisions needed to ensure the integrity of the process can be made.

In a smaller service a team might not be needed. Here an individual might take on the coordinating role. Again, if this is a staff member it is important they have the backing of management to ensure the process is implemented well.

Making a work plan for the process

It is very important at the beginning to map out a work plan for the different steps in the process and to have explicit time frames for completion of each key stage. Having everyone aware of the process and timeframe helps share the responsibility for keeping the process on track. This should be developed as part of an initial meeting that decides how the assessment will be undertaken in the organisation.

Workshops/whole of organisation meetings

Holding three half-day or day-long workshops in the course of the process has proven useful to some organisations involved in self-assessment. The first workshop establishes the purpose of the process, gets people familiar with the standards, establishes the 'culture' of the process and decides on an overall approach and plan (length of time, who will do what and how). Processes for gathering the information and views needed are agreed and the self-assessment is then undertaken (group meetings, Board/Committee discussion, client and stakeholder feedback, policy and file audits).

The second workshop might be towards the end of the self-assessment process. This might be a longer workshop depending on progress. The workshop's purpose is to report back on what has been found to date and to discuss the implications of this for future directions. In some cases this workshop might also be an efficient way to complete some of the actual assessment against standards. At this stage it is important to acknowledge the work done to date, celebrate the things that are being done well and encourage good debate about what needs to change.

The final workshop should be at the conclusion of the self-assessment process to discuss the action plan for quality improvement. Before this workshop is held the coordinating team/coordinator would prepare an overview of what was found and identify key issues for discussion on the day. These might be circulated in advance or put up at the workshop for people to discuss and come to agreement. This workshop would prioritise areas for improvement, develop timelines for actions and plan the implementation process.

Small groups

The point of self-assessment is to use the standards to gain different viewpoints and to generate discussion about these differences. Depending on the size and type of organisation, small groups of staff or staff/volunteers should meet in different combinations to go through the standards as described earlier. However if it is decided to divide up the work, the most important thing is to make sure no one is looking at the standards by themselves. Remember the self-assessment is for the development of the organisation. It is not useful to employ it as a checklist and simply tick and flick everything.

In the process you will find things that are being done well and it will be good to record this. In other cases the standards should be a prompt to discussing what could be done differently and it is fine to record that there are problems in current ways of doing things.

Recording what you find in the Self-assessment workbook

The *Self-assessment workbook* enables you to record what is concluded about each standard. In the workbook the standards and the features of good practice are listed and space is provided to write the assessment team's findings and suggestions for improving how things are done. This is available on disc as well as hard copy. If you are working on the standards in small groups each group might have a workbook that they write in at each meeting. At the end of the process all the information could then be collated into one workbook or typed up on disc.

Experience from the field: Self-assessment planning in a medium-sized agency

Our agency has a staff of 22 people. We took a structured approach to the self-assessment and timed it to enable results of the self-assessment to be fed into our strategic planning process.

We identified a Project Director and a Project Manager (one for each of our service streams). Then we set up teams, which matched experienced workers with less experienced workers to provide a richer learning environment. Their task was to assess against specific standards. Teams were allocated tasks during weekly meetings and reported back on progress at the meeting held in the following week. Project managers reported to the Project Director on a weekly basis and received guidance and advice at this time. A timeline over three months was drawn up for the first phase of the project which was the self-assessment.

Client and stakeholder questionnaires were developed to gather feedback and a process consisting of key informant interviews, focus groups and mail-outs was implemented.

From all this, priority areas requiring development were identified through a collaborative and consultative process. Then an operational plan was developed which dovetails with our strategic plan. All staff continue to be fully involved in the process and important emergent issues are being added to the plan as they are identified.

Directions, ACT (Assisting Drug Dependants Inc)

Experience from the field: Self-assessment planning in a small agency

We are a small organisation with a voluntary Board, one paid staff member and volunteers so we are addressing the standards slowly and bit by bit. We established a plan but as the Board meets monthly, it is taking longer than the three- five months which is regarded as the ideal.

Our work plan addressed four questions. The decisions are shown below for each one:

Who will be responsible?

Evaluation and Complaints Committee

Secretary (Board)

Co-ordinator

What processes to involve the Board/staff/volunteers will work for us?

Integrate with Board meetings

Which stakeholders will we involve?

Member organisations

Representatives survey

What is our timeframe?

Preparation/informing others July

Doing Assessment August-September

Collate findings November

Do quality planning December

In reality we were not able to keep exactly to this plan. We ended up prioritising the standards and focussing on those which had the highest priority for us and which we could link into our planning process. To assist the Board the co-ordinator went through the standards and made comments for discussion at the Board meeting. A client survey which had already been planned was also included in the process. However, it has been difficult to give the standards enough time at the regular Board meeting, so a separate meeting was held to address the highest priority issues arising from the assessment.

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Looking at documents and files

Policies and procedures

The standards provide a valuable basis for reviewing existing policies and procedures and identifying how they can be enhanced. As you go through the self-assessment process it is useful to compare your existing policies and procedures with the standards to see if they reflect good practice. This enables all of the policies and procedures to be reviewed at once and means that you should not have to devote any extra time to looking at policies and procedures in isolation.

Where you find a gap requiring a new policy, the standards can help by pointing you in the right direction. Other policies might need some simple updating and in a few cases you may need to completely re-think what the policy says. Where you notice that something needs to be developed or changed you do not need to do it immediately – you can simply note it, decide its priority and do it as part of your agreed quality improvement plan.

Experience from the field: Amending the client file audit

The standard client file audit tool provided in the kit did not fully meet our needs because it didn't cover all of issues we considered important - so we developed our own to pick up what we wanted to look at and what was included in the standards.

See Client file audit (ii) in Section 3 (p 28)

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Client files

The self-assessment process also includes a review of file management and recording. You can take a random selection of current files (around 5% of client files up to a maximum of 30 files) and have one or two people go through them using the file audit tools provided or a variation of them. Each file can be checked to see that information is recorded correctly. Common gaps can also be identified. Client file audits can also be useful in supervision sessions as they can provide a stimulus for discussing practice issues. They should be done regularly. See Section 3 for some examples of forms to use in conducting the client file audits.

Involving consumers, members and other stakeholders

Service delivery organisations that are committed to assessing their service delivery performance against the standards need client feedback. It will highlight the strengths of an agency's service delivery as well as the priorities for improvement. It can also reveal interesting differences between staff perceptions and clients' views.

Similarly peak organisations will usually have a membership base that is vital to their work. Communication with and services to members will be an important part of their activity and accountability. Getting feedback from member organisations is a vital part of assessing whether good practice is being achieved. The standards provide a guide to the sorts of things you should seek feedback on.

Further most community organisations have significant relationships with other organisations in the work they are doing. The standards highlight the importance of working with others. Feedback from other organisations you work with can be very helpful in the assessment process and in assisting your organisation identify ways to improve practice and management.

Over the period of self-assessment you need to find out what clients or communities of interest and other stakeholders think about the service. Your organisation may already have regular channels for receiving client,

member or community feedback. Have a look at current approaches and decide if they will give you enough information about the range of features listed in the standards to help you assess successfully. It may be that current ways of gaining feedback are limited. In this case the self-assessment provides an ideal opportunity to try some different ways of getting input and feedback from those served by the organisation. Existing processes may need to be expanded or adapted to better cover the features of good practice included in the standards.

Additional guidance and tools to support client, community, member and other stakeholder feedback are included in Section 3 of the manual to assist you to gain meaningful feedback using the standards.

It is very important that organisations consider adapting these to fit their own style and audience. You may wish to take the suggested questions and expand them to cover other issues that are important to your organisation.

Be prepared to try new approaches to gaining feedback, particularly where experience tells you that surveys are not the best approach. Be willing to learn from experience and consider ways to strengthen participation and feedback mechanisms in an ongoing way.

**Experience from the field: Gaining client feedback and involvement –
The ‘Party Party!’ project**

The Aids Action Council (AAC) wished to identify the top five issues for HIV positive people who access health or other services in the ACT and Queanbeyan so that its community education initiatives would be relevant to their needs. Because it felt that the HIV community had reached ‘questionnaire saturation point’ and that the target group was not always comfortable on the premises of an AIDS organisation, the AAC conducted an off-site dinner as the forum for consultation. The consultation used questionnaire/focus group methods to address three issues:

What do you want?

Where do you want it?

How do you want it?

The pivotal aspect of this exercise was the social event itself. Participants were invited to a fully catered event at which community consultation would occur, as opposed to being invited to a community consultation event at which food would be served. The distinction is extremely important to the ethos of the ‘Party Party!’ project. Clearly, the scale of the event is dictated by the budget available but, for the AAC, the priority was to provide a memorable evening during which participants would feel free to talk openly about what they really wanted from the organisation.

Participants were greeted as guests when they arrived. During the evening a speaker from a Victorian HIV/AIDS organisation gave three short, motivational speeches each relating to the upcoming questionnaire. A series of group work exercises was introduced between courses to keep the groups energised and interested. The first surveys were handed out before the main course and participants were given 15-20 minutes to discuss and complete the questions. The second was handed out before dessert, with the same time frame. The third was handed out during coffee along with an evaluation form on the evening itself.

Immediate feedback on the event was unequivocally positive. In response to the priorities identified by clients, the AAC subsequently launched several initiatives and others are to follow. All are badged as responses to the consultative processes of ‘Party Party!’

While not all agencies have the need or the resources to adopt this idea in its entirety, the ‘Party Party!’ campaign illustrates important principles - respect for clients, working with them in an environment which is comfortable for them, a willingness to try new ways of listening, and delivering services that clients have identified for themselves.

Last, but not least it illustrates that involving clients can be fun.

AIDS ACTION COUNCIL

5 Planning for quality improvement

When the self-assessment is completed, the service will need to think about what it has found and what it plans to improve or change over time. The quality improvement plan provides a structure for the service to document the actions it intends to take.

Through the self-assessment the organisation will have identified a number of priority actions for each standard. If the service has used the assessment process to good effect there will already have been discussion about how things could be done differently. This thinking will inform the planning stage.

The quality improvement plan needs to be realistic and achievable. It may not be possible to tackle all of the desired changes at once, so it is important to prioritise the issues that need attention and develop a plan for how change will be achieved. Priorities should include those things that are likely to make a real impact on the way the service or organisation works and what it delivers to clients and communities. It is also important to avoid doing only those things that are easy or the least resource intensive.

If it is done ahead of or in conjunction with strategic planning, the quality improvement plan will provide useful input for the organisation's overall planning. In fact, internalisation of the self-assessment process is the ultimate goal. This means that reflection against the standards to identify areas for improvement becomes an integral part of ongoing management rather than something that sits outside other management processes.

Key steps in developing the Quality Improvement Plan

We have already suggested that holding a workshop after the self-assessment is completed is a useful way to encourage participation in the development of the quality improvement plan and ownership of it.

The workshop could be used to work through the following tasks:

- List the main improvements that would make the most difference to clients and communities. Try to have at least three things for each section of the standards.
 - then use the priority matrix (see Section 3, p 33) to decide what the most important issues are for the organisation as a whole.
- Identify the outcomes you want to achieve in relation to the issues you have identified as being the most important
 - for example, young people using the service will have better knowledge of their rights; the organisation will have better performance monitoring systems in place in relation to its education program. Writing what you want to achieve in a specific way makes it easier to work out whether anything has changed.
- Work out a plan for what needs to be done to achieve each of these outcomes
 - this will take some time to get right. For instance, to have young people know their rights the service may need to initiate a number of new strategies.

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- Use the planning workbook to write down what is to be achieved, by when, and who has responsibility.
 - make sure that everyone has agreed to the plan and is aware of their responsibilities.
 - Decide and agree how you will check whether the plan is being kept to and what has been achieved.
 - this should include ways of testing whether you achieved the outcome, not just whether you took the action steps set out in the plan.

A suggested program for this workshop is included in Section 3 (p 31).

The strategic priority matrix

A priority matrix can help in deciding the most important things for the organisation to improve, using the criteria of urgency and impact. An example of the matrix is provided in Section 3 (p 33).

The issues that are likely to deserve immediate attention are those that are both urgent and likely to have a big impact. They will show up in the grey boxes. This isn't easy as it will be tempting to see everything as urgent and having the biggest impact. Resist this temptation, otherwise nothing will get done.

Resources can and do come in here. There may be small changes that can be made which do not rate as the highest priority but can be done immediately with few resources. Some of these kinds of changes should be included in the plan. On the other hand, there

may be major changes that would have a big impact that can't be made a priority this year because resources will only allow work on two major change strategies. The question of resources, (that is, *can we do it?*) should be a secondary question after you have decided the relative importance of issues.

Completing the Quality Improvement Plan

The Quality Improvement Plan workbook lists each section of the standards and provides a space to write:

- the issue that was identified as needing improvement
- what is to be achieved
- who has responsibility for doing it
- the time it is to be done in
- how achievement will be assessed.

For each section there will be an action plan for the priority issues you have identified through planning. In some sections there may be issues that relate to a number of the standards. In another section there may be only one standard requiring attention.

What happens after the self-assessment and planning is completed?

The outcome of your first assessment using the standards will be an action plan around a number of priorities. Obviously this is not the end of the process. Ideally you will incorporate these priorities into your strategic plan and move forward into an implementation phase.

The process may have identified other areas for improvement that you feel unable to address in the first year. You will need to come back to these findings again once you have completed implementation of your planned priority actions. The standards can be a management resource at any time to reflect on different aspects of how well the organisation is doing. Staff should be encouraged to refer to them for guidance on issues as they arise in staff or team meetings.

You may also decide to redo assessment against some sections of the standards in the following year if there was a range of matters needing attention. Alternatively, you may judge that a further assessment using all of the standards would be useful after two or three years to check whether planned changes have been carried through. Organisations change over time and this will be another reason to revisit the standards through assessment. There may be new services and programs established, new staff and Board members and different stakeholder interests.

Remember, quality improvement is an ongoing process. As such the work of quality improvement never ends. Nor will the standards be static. Over time they will be revised and adjusted to reflect changing thinking about practice. There may be new or different standards to assess against in the future.