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Project management – an overview



Project management: an overview

Projects are the way that organisations accomplish change and specific objectives. They differ from day-to-day activities in that they are directed to a clear and planned ending (with specific outcomes and definite start and end dates), not at maintaining a continuous activity. Projects are one-off and unique. For example, building a hotel is a project. Running it, once it is built, is a day-to-day process.

Project management and its associated tools and techniques should be uppermost in your thoughts from the initiation to the completion of a project. Regardless of the project management approach you use, eg the six stage project management approach outlined below or PRINCE2, it can be enhanced with the use of the tools detailed and referenced in this section of the *Handbook of Quality and Service Improvement Tools*.

The six stage project management approach

The six stage project management approach illustrated in figure 1 below provides a framework for managing improvement projects in the NHS. We suggest you read through this whole section before you undertake any actions relating to the stages or try using any of the tools detailed or referenced. This will help you get an overall picture of what all the stages involve. It is important to realise that this guide is a suggested approach as each project is unique.

Figure 1: The six stage project management approach



Stage 1: Start out – what is the opportunity or problem?

Desired output: clear scope of the problem and support for the improvement activity.

The first step is to identify the service, area, pathway or process that needs to be improved. This may be identified by national initiatives, eg best practice tariff, targets, an individual or team, data demonstrating that a process is not consistently delivered to expected or required levels or a quality improvement enhancing patient experience.

TOOLS: [identifying frustrating problems](#), [stakeholder analysis](#), [active listening](#)

Identify a few key individuals, including those at a senior level, eg sponsor, clinicians, executives and those on the frontline delivering the service, eg porters and healthcare assistants, who it would be worth sounding out regarding the area of focus. If you are unsure who these individuals are, use stakeholder analysis to help you identify them.

This will help you begin to establish the merits of focusing on this area and identify any important considerations. These individuals may form part of your project structure in future stages such as the project team and project board.

Gather ideas from patients by talking to them and using information from compliments, complaints, concerns, experience questionnaires, friends and family test, and from staff in team meetings, 'walls of opportunity' and staff experience questionnaires on how this particular service may be improved. This qualitative information can help you establish which ideas to take forward, starting with those that will have a high impact, which the team can influence and whether these could be improved or extended to have a larger impact.

TOOLS: using an [affinity diagram](#)

To get support for your improvement project, it is essential that the aims are aligned with the overall organisational aims and priorities. The aims should have measurable targets to determine whether they have been achieved. Articulate potential short-term quick wins and long-term benefits with a focus on patient experience, quality and clinical outcomes.

TOOLS: [driver diagrams](#), four columns: link your project to the organisation's aims (see [developing your aims statement](#)), [measurement for improvement](#)

By outlining the opportunity or problem in a simple document, you can gain buy-in and support for the improvement work (eg from a senior sponsor) and initiate the project.

Depending on the complexity of the project, this document can take different forms. For example, you may use a project charter. More technical and complex projects may use a project initiation document. At this stage you may only be able to complete elements of the project charter, such as overall aims. You may want to outline other sections, but these will need to be refined later as you understand more about what the project will actually entail and deliver.

Get agreement from the project sponsor that the project can move to the next stage. In future stages, a more formal gateway process will be implemented.

TOOLS: [project charter](#), [project initiation document](#), [gateway criteria](#), [active listening](#)

Stage 2: Define and scope – what is the current situation?

Desired output: the current situation is understood and shared in a format appropriate to the size of the project.

Undertake root cause analysis to help identify the underlying issues creating the current situation to be improved. To achieve this, gain an overview or map the current situation and use appropriate diagnostic tools to determine the root causes of the situation. You will need to involve the stakeholders who provide and use the services that are being improved.

TOOLS: [mapping the process](#), [stakeholder analysis](#), [identifying problems](#), [cause and effect \(fishbone\)](#), [root cause analysis using five whys](#), using an [affinity diagram](#), [gaining insights from/working in partnership with health service users](#)

Once the true underlying issues have been defined, you can establish more detailed objectives. This can help determine what is in scope and ensure that the project focuses on what have been deemed the most important things to tackle. All other issues are out of scope. In your work area, you may like to outline on display boards the aims and objectives of the project that have now been determined. This can help engage everyone with what the improvement project is trying to achieve.

TOOLS: [project charter](#)

Identify key individuals who are critical to achieving the aims and objectives defined. This can help secure the required buy-in for project success. Again stakeholder analysis can help determine who these key individuals are. Obtain agreement from a few of these key individuals to act as a project board for the progress of the work. This board should include the project sponsor and the project lead. Stakeholder analysis has the added benefit of determining those individuals who will need to have a level of communication regarding the proposed change and at what level of detail. If there are many people to communicate with, you need to develop a simple plan of how and when you will update them.

TOOLS: [stakeholder analysis](#), [communications matrix](#)

At this stage you may want to consider the stakeholders who may challenge the change you propose. It is important to remember that often a challenge to change can be positive. Make sure you consider potential reactions to the change the improvement work may inspire. Use tools and techniques to reduce to the risk that this will damage the project.

TOOLS: [enabling collaboration by working with resistance](#), [commitment](#), [enrolment and compliance](#), [bullet proofing](#), [active listening](#)

For small, simple projects you may simply pull together individuals with the skills you require and decide among yourselves progression through the stages. For larger projects, you may need a more extensive project structure. This would include an identified project team who are going to do the work. The structure would also include a separate project

board who would sign off progression from stage to stage. Ideally, membership of this board would be small and include the project sponsor.

Establish a way to identify all the issues and potential risks. Develop risk and issue logs to record these. Brainstorming is excellent for identifying potential risks. A lessons learnt log will be helpful. The logs should be updated throughout the life of the project.

TOOLS: [risk and issue logs](#), [brainstorming](#), [lessons learnt](#)

Update the project charter throughout this stage with new and updated information. Only key issues and risks should be reflected in the single A3/A4 sheet that you are using for the project charter. The information in the logs is mainly for members of the project team who require greater detail.

TOOLS: [project charter](#)

It is important at the end of this stage that gateway criteria are established for the remaining stages. The gateway criteria will help to ensure that the project only moves to the next stage if certain criteria are met. This avoids projects carrying on unnecessarily and wasting resources. Ensure the criteria for this stage are actually met as well.

TOOLS: [gateway criteria](#)

Stage 3: Measure and understand – what are the benefits and impacts?

Desired output: measures are identified to determine whether the change is an improvement.

Having established the aims and objectives of the project and the underlying issues that need to be addressed, it is important to establish baseline measures for these. Using these measures as indicators is the only way of tracking whether the project is making progress. With an indication of where you are currently and where you need to get to, you can understand and determine how far the baseline measures need to move to achieve the desired aims and objectives.

TOOLS: [measurement for improvement](#), [benefits realisation](#), [driver diagrams](#)

If the project is large and complex and there are many measures to consider, you may focus on those that will have the biggest impact. Using the Pareto principle is an effective way of prioritising your areas for improvement.

TOOLS: [Pareto](#)

Use tools and techniques such as statistical process control (SPC) to analyse the data you have collected for the indicators defined. It is important that measurements for these indicators are recorded and analysed throughout the project and beyond to ensure that changes being implemented are having a positive effect.

TOOLS: [statistical process control](#)

Update risk log, issues log, lessons learnt log, project charter, etc throughout this stage with new and updated information. Only the key measures should be reflected in the single A3/A4 sheet that you are using for the project charter. The other measures are recorded for the project team to use in their analysis.

TOOLS: [project charter](#)

With the help of the project board, confirm that the gateway criteria for this stage have been met to allow the project to move forward to next stage.

TOOLS: [gateway criteria](#)

Stage 4: Design and plan – what does the future look like?

Desired output: clear and shared understanding of the future and agreed action plan.

Having established start and end points for the project, it is a good idea to break this down into clearly identifiable tasks. Use creative thinking at this stage to discover innovative ways of delivering these tasks and to make the design or redesign improvements that are required. For each task, produce a list of all the activities required to deliver it. This is often called an action plan.

TOOLS: [action plan](#), [two steps down](#), [30/60/90 day cycles](#), [brainstorming](#), [Six Thinking Hats®](#), [using an affinity diagram](#), [driver diagrams](#)

Having produced an action plan, the next stage is to put some target dates against these actions and decide who undertakes them. This provides a scheduled plan. It may be helpful to convert this into a format that all participants can easily see. This should clearly state key milestones for the project. This may be done in a MS Word document or, if you prefer, the plan can be captured in another electronic format – for example, in project management software.

Using software like this may make the plan appear complicated so make sure you have a simple visual version for those who do not need to see the detail. You may be able to find a copy of this simple version in the single sheet project charter. Share this scheduled plan with the individuals involved in the project on a regular basis to ensure the project stays on track.

TOOLS: [responsibility charting](#)

Update risk log, issues log, lessons learnt log, project charter, etc throughout this stage with new and updated information.

TOOLS: [project charter](#)

With input from your project board, confirm that the gateway criteria for this stage have been met to allow project to move forward to next stage.

TOOLS: [gateway criteria](#)

Stage 5: Implement – action planning and reporting

Desired output: an implemented improvement plan.

You may want to test the robustness of the changes you propose by opening them up to challenge from relevant stakeholders before they are implemented. This can help to decrease the likelihood of issues occurring when you move into implementation. It is useful to build rapport and trust with those affected by the change to help the implementation go smoothly.

TOOLS: [bullet proofing](#), [role redesign](#), [enabling collaboration by working with resistance](#)

Once you implement the early steps, make sure you test them to ensure they are doing what they should do. This process can be done in continuous cycles ([PDSA](#) – plan, do, study, act) until the whole change is implemented.

When moving into the stage of full implementation, ensure all testing has been successfully carried out. Record any observed issues in the issue logs. If results are positive, the project can continue in the same way. If results are not positive, however, consult the project board or sponsor about potential corrective action. This is an iterative process that should continue until you have achieved full implementation.

TOOLS: [risk and issue logs](#), [PDSA](#)

Some popular areas that are tackled by improvement projects are [patient flow](#), [demand and capacity](#), [reducing variation](#), [reducing cancellations/did not attends](#), [discharge planning](#), [reducing length of stay](#).

Review the gateway criteria for this stage and ensure all aspects are complete before moving to the next stage. Remember to update the project plans, logs and project charter during this stage.

TOOLS: [gateway criteria](#), [project charter](#)

Stage 6: Handover and sustain – deployment and ‘business as usual’

Desired output: the improvement has become ‘business as usual’ with benefits realised, shared learning and a plan for sustainability.

Once the change is fully implemented, monitor it to ensure the original aims and benefits are continuing to be realised – with new ways of working continuing rather than the old ways being reverted back to.

TOOLS: [sustain momentum](#), [revive a stalled effort](#), [supporting people through change](#)

Being able to implement and sustain effective improvement will lead to an increase in quality and an enhanced patient/service user experience at lower cost. The sustainability model was developed to support health and care leaders to identify the strengths and weaknesses in their implementation plans and predict the likelihood of the sustainability of improvement initiatives.

Produce a brief progress report for those involved. If you have a project team, you may do this at agreed regular intervals. This is really useful in keeping the project team updated on progress.

TOOLS: [report on progress](#)

Once the project is complete, share the learning – both good and bad experiences – with colleagues and other departments. This helps the organisation make the most out of completed projects.

TOOLS: [supporting people through change](#)

A key element of this step is to carry out a post-project review to ascertain what went well and to celebrate achievements. At the same time, objectively analyse the things that did not go as well as you hoped without apportioning individual blame. Reflecting this learning in the lessons learnt log will aid future projects.

TOOLS: [lessons learnt](#), [after action review](#)

Review the gateway criteria established for this stage and ensure all aspects are complete before closing the project. Remember to update the project logs, project plans and project charter during the stage.

TOOLS: [gateway criteria](#), [project charter](#)

Project management tools

The specific details of the tools can be found in the relevant sub-sections below:

- [Developing your aims statement](#)
- [Define your project charter](#)
- [Project initiation document \(PID\)](#)
- [Benefits realisation](#)
- [Gateway criteria](#)
- [Identify your issues and risks](#)
- [Develop your action plan](#)
- [30/60/90-day cycles](#)
- [Two steps down](#)
- [Safe to fail experiments](#)
- [Report on progress](#)
- [Sustain momentum](#)
- [Responsibility charting](#)
- [Revive a stalled effort](#)
- [After action review](#)
- [Lessons learnt](#)