Southern Health

Guide to successful health service improvement projects:

Things people should (but frequently don't) think about

Hints and tips to help you avoid common problems and pitfalls

Golden rules

1. Don't make it up as you go along.

   Seek help from experts through personal correspondence or by reading reports, papers, websites, etc.

2. Don't reinvent the wheel.

   Seek examples where others have addressed your problem, implemented your proposed solution and evaluated the outcomes. Look for those that were successful so that you can build on this information. Look for those that were unsuccessful so that you can avoid known problems and pitfalls.

General principles

▪ Make sure your project is a good use of resources. The benefits should outweigh the costs. Take some time to explore this and be confident that it is true.

▪ Take an evidence-based approach, involve the right people, identify the right solution, use the right design, measure what happened.

▪ Use validated methods and tools. If there are no validated resources, use those that have been piloted by others. If there are no piloted versions refer to Rule 1.

▪ Ensure that project team members have the appropriate skills to design, deliver and evaluate the project (or be able to access them) and have sufficient time available to undertake the project tasks.

▪ Consider whether your project could be undertaken in a research framework in partnership with university colleagues. If this is appropriate you may be able to access experts in design, implementation and evaluation who will be keen to help you and enhance your project and will facilitate publication so that others can learn from your work.

▪ Check whether there are any organisational processes or requirements related to project decision-making BEFORE you start.

People you need to involve

▪ Depending on the size and nature of your project you may have an army of people in a multilayered structure or maybe just you and a friend. Regardless of how many people are required to plan and deliver your project, there are key functions that need to be addressed. These include strategic advice, influence to make things happen, authority for decisions and expenditure, trouble-shooting for when things go wrong, communication, leadership and commitment. Make sure you have access to people who can provide these things for you.

▪ Talk to people who know about this area; external experts and colleagues with local knowledge.

▪ Talk to the people within the organisation who will be affected by the proposed changes.

▪ Talk to patients, families, carers, consumer groups or community practitioners who will be affected.

▪ Check whether there are any organisational requirements as to who should be involved or consulted.

Project governance

- Check for organisational requirements related to project governance, in particular authorisation processes for project approval and allocation of funds.

- Ensure that there is a designated person accountable for meeting project deadlines and deliverables.

- Ensure that there is/are a designated person/s responsible for all project tasks and that they have appropriate time, skills and resources to undertake them.

- Look at policies and procedures related to confidentiality, conflict of interest, intellectual property, authorship and applying for awards.

- If you intend to collect information from staff or patients, you should complete an ethics application for Quality Assurance or Low/Negligible Risk Research and address issues of consent and confidentiality in your methods.

Project management

- Ensure that the aims are clear and the project objectives are defined in SMART terms (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timely).

- Understand the different phases of a project and what needs to be considered in each. These are often categorised as Initiating, Planning, Executing, Monitoring and controlling, and Closing. If you don't know what needs to be considered, find someone who does to help you.

- Check for organisational requirements related to the project management categories above, in particular processes for documentation, financial management and reporting (eg who reports, to whom, what, when, how?)

- Check for organisational resources such as tools and templates eg project plans, timelines, memoranda of understanding, budget calculators, terms of reference, report proformas, etc. If there are no organisational resources seek out others from colleagues or websites (remember the Golden Rules!).

- Undertake a risk analysis at each stage of your project. Consider what could possibly go wrong, how likely is it, what impact would it have, how can it be prevented, if it cannot be prevented how can the impact be minimised, who is responsible for addressing these issues?

Understanding the need for change (why are you doing this project?)

- Make sure you understand the problem that the project is addressing. Is it real or perceived? Is there a gap (not being done at all) or a mismatch (need to change current practice)?

- Define the scope of the problem. Who does it involve, where are they, how many? What other parameters define this problem (eg setting, condition, professional groups, etc)?

- Measure the size and extent of the problem (or use existing data). If you don't know what it is now, how will you know if you have made a difference later?

Finding the solution (are you doing the right project?)

- Make sure the change you are implementing is the correct solution to your problem.

- Find out what is best practice in this area and what is already known about successful change for your problem. If no information is available look for what is known about solutions to similar problems.

- Consider all the options. What are the pros and cons to each one?

- Assess your proposed solution against the 'characteristics of success' ie proposals for change are more likely to be successful if they are based on sound evidence or expert consensus, presented by a credible organisation, able to be tested and adapted, of low complexity, compatible with status quo and they have an attractive and accessible format and a relative advantage that is easy to demonstrate.

- Check whether there are any legislative, regulatory, professional or organisational requirements related to your proposed change, in particular consider industrial awards and professional standards, staff training and credentialing, occupational health and safety determinants of work spaces, issues of access and equity for patients, etc.

Implementing your solution

- Identify the practices that need to change. Many elements of your proposal may already be current practice and you should focus your limited resources on the changes.

- Consider all the individuals and groups that can potentially influence implementation.

- Identify the barriers and enablers for the changes you want to make. What factors may hinder or prevent you from implementing your proposal? What factors may help or support you to make these changes? These may be factors resulting from the setting in which the change is to be implemented, the target group who need to change or the nature of the changes themselves.

- Base your implementation program on strategies to overcome or minimise the barriers and build on or make best use of the enablers.

- Seek input from relevant stakeholders such as managers, clinicians and consumers.

- Look at the literature for evidence of effective implementation strategies in the areas of change.

- Review any available local information such as project reports, evaluation plans, etc to identify previous strategies used within the organisation and why they worked or didn't work.

- Check whether there are any organisational requirements related to implementation of the changes you propose. For example, if you want to introduce a document that will become part of the patient medical record there will be procedures to follow for development and approval.

Evaluating what happened

- Develop your Evaluation Plan BEFORE you start implementing. This process clarifies what you are doing and why and you may refine your proposal by going through this process. Also, if you need baseline data you must collect it BEFORE you start to make changes.

- Review the aims and objectives and consider the purpose and audience of the evaluation.

- Evaluate the project outcomes to know if you achieved your objectives.

- Evaluate the implementation process to know if your outcomes were due to your interventions.

- Use qualitative AND quantitative measures.

- Where possible use data that is already collected within the organisation in preference to collecting it yourself.

- If you need to collect your own data, use an existing data collection tool in preference to developing one yourself (see General Principles). If you need to develop your own data collection tool, seek help from someone with the relevant expertise (see Golden Rules).

- Involve stakeholders in determining indicators, sources of data, methods of data collection and reporting.

Resources

You may find the following resources helpful.

SEAchange: Guide to a pragmatic evidence-based approach to Sustainable, Effective and Appropriate change in health services. Harris C, Turner T, Wilkinson F. 2015. http://arrow.monash.edu.au/hdl/1959.1/1225377

Guide to implementation of health service protocols, procedures and guidelines. Centre for Clinical Effectiveness. Southern Health. 2010. http://arrow.monash.edu.au/hdl/1959.1/1225381

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