

Further Education, Work-based Learning, European Social Fund projects

A guide for effective action planning

Part of a series of documents linked to supporting the effective
use of the Inspection and Self-Evaluation Framework (ISEF)

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Providing Inspection services for:
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Introduction

This guidance document is designed to support the process of effective action planning for improvement, particularly at course team level¹ in organisations. Inspection evidence shows variation in the quality and effectiveness of the action planning process at this level. Findings from the annual scrutiny of organisation's quality improvement planning submission also show that well-focused action planning with measurable targets and outcomes, across curriculum areas, is mostly a reoccurring area for improvement. This invariably leads to a reduction and an inconsistency in the organisation's overall capacity to sustain improvement. Hence, the purpose of this document is to provide course teams with stimuli and indicative content that is intended to promote greater reflection and a more systematic approach in the development and use of action planning to bring about sustained improvement.

What is an action plan?

Typically, an action plan will come about as a result of the following:

- the team's annual self-evaluation process and resulting summary of key findings;
- an external evaluation activity (e.g. inspection, awarding body audit); and/or
- an internal evaluation activity (e.g. quality and performance review).

The action plan² should build upon existing strengths to ensure they are sustained.

Key features of action planning include:

- Action planning is not an annual standalone event, but rather a continuous, dynamic process.
- An action plan is a working document, belonging to and involving all members of the team.
- Action planning flows directly from the self-evaluation process, along with any feedback from external evaluation, and is linked closely to the resulting summary of key findings and their prioritisation.
- The action plan is subject to ongoing, regular and robust review and evaluation. It should be a standing item on the agenda of team meetings.
- The effectiveness and impact of the action plan should be subject to monitoring by more senior managers.

¹ In work-based learning, for example, a course team could comprise a co-ordinator and the tutor(s) from a professional and technical area or the essential skills. In an ESF project, a team could comprise a co-ordinated group of employment engagement, family liaison officers or trainers.

² Organisations may have different titles for this, for example, a development plan etc.

Where does action planning fit in Quality Improvement Planning?

- Action planning is an integral part of the quality improvement planning cycle, as illustrated below.
- Actions plans are contingent on robust self-evaluation³.
- A course team action plan will link clearly to action plans at higher levels, such as a department action plan and whole-organisation quality improvement plan (QIP). Higher level action plans will implement improvements appropriate to that management level.
- Action plans will not have a finite life-span, for as some actions are completed, others will continue or commence, in order to sustain continual improvement.

Diagram 1: The quality improvement planning cycle



³ Guidance for self-evaluation for course teams ([hyperlink](#))

What makes action plans more successful?

- A key risk with most action planning processes is that teams are not rigorous enough in their **evaluation of the impact/outworking** of the action plan, particularly on the learners, their experiences and the outcomes they attain. Consequently, actions are ticked off in a 'checklist' approach, thereby creating an illusion that everything is progressing well. In effect, the process of completing individual actions becomes the success criteria, rather than consideration and evaluation of the impact of the improvement actions.
- Action plans are primarily for use by the course team but also by senior managers across the whole-organisation **to promote improvement for the learners**; they are for the organisation itself and not merely for inspection or other contractual, regulatory purposes.

Action planning is more effective when it:

- Links to the outworking of a rigorous, collaborative self-evaluative process and prioritised appropriately.
- Includes carried over actions, including longer-term, from previous improvement action plans.
- Is an integral part of a continuous improvement process.
- Largely specifies, measurable targets against which progress can be ascertained.
- Links strategically to higher level⁴ Quality Improvement Plans.
- Includes resource implications relating to, for example, staff development, support, time, equipment, materials and budget, are these are well-considered.
- Sets well-planned, realistic timescales for undertaking tasks, with start dates, key milestones and completion dates.
- Is reviewed and evaluated in order to answer the fundamental question: *'to what extent has the actions impacted on area(s) for improvement'?*
- Is owned and reviewed by the whole team.
- Is subject to oversight and review feedback by senior managers.

Action planning is less effective when it:

- Lacks clear linkage and correlation with the self-evaluation process.
- Ignores incomplete actions from previous plans.
- Is an annual, standalone event or a tick-box exercise.
- Uses targets that are mostly overly general and difficult to measure and monitor.
- Is disjointed, with no clear read across, to higher level Quality Improvement Plans.
- Neglects resource implications; they are not well enough thought through.
- Does not set appropriate timescales; they are not well articulated or realistic.
- Marks actions as complete without adequate consideration of the impact of the actions.
- Belongs mainly to, and reviewed by, the team leader.
- Is not sufficiently challenged and supported by more senior managers.

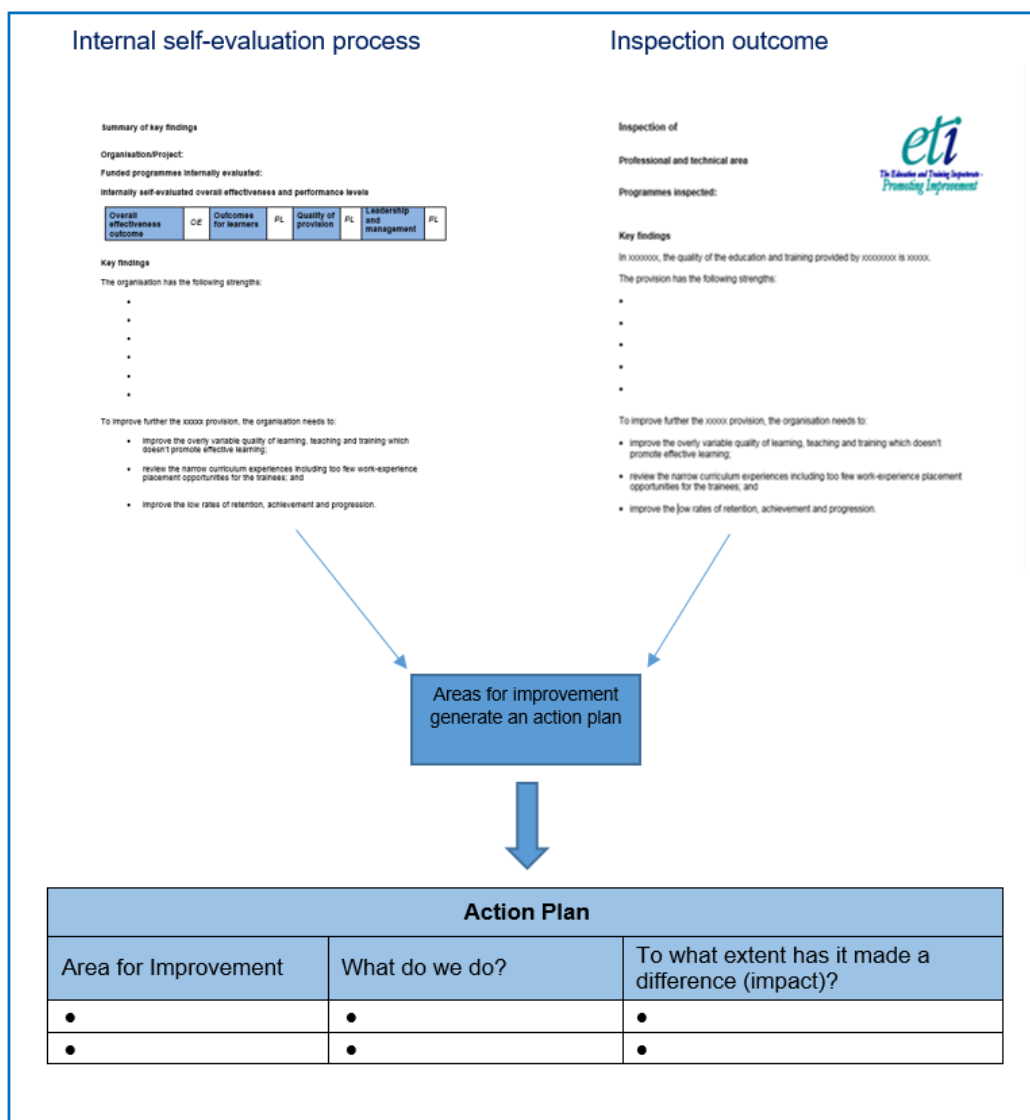
⁴ Quality Improvement Plans at higher levels, for example, departmental and whole-organisation.

What does an effective action plan look like?

The following is an example of a suitable action plan⁵.

Exemplar:

- The outworking of internal and external evaluations (illustrated in diagram below) showed the following areas for improvement needed to be addressed:
 - overly variable quality of learning, teaching and training which doesn't promote effective learning;
 - narrow curriculum experiences including too few work-experience placement opportunities for the trainees; and
 - low rates of retention, achievement and progression.



⁵ Please note that for illustrative purposes, the formatting is truncated and the content is indicative, and not prescriptive.

Exemplar | Action planning for improvement:

Area for improvement and contributing baseline (evidence of where we are now) evaluations:

Overly variable quality of learning, teaching and training which doesn't promote effective learning

{Supporting ISEF sections: Outcomes for Learners; Quality of Provision; and Leadership and Management}

- 70% of the sessions observed by ETI were good or better, with only 10% being very good or better.
- ETI reported the strengths to be:
 - the well-structured practical sessions, providing sound opportunities for the learners to develop their occupational skills;
 - the positive relationships between the tutors and the learners;
 - the mostly good standards of vocational work, especially in practical sessions, where the learning is linked well to the workplace.
- ETI report the areas for improvement to be:
 - the theory sessions were too long, leading to learners' loss of engagement and motivation;
 - too many passive learners due to insufficient use of active learning strategies;
 - the lack of planning for differentiation, limited stretch and challenge to meet the needs of more able learners;
 - the underuse of ILT to support learning, including only limited use of the VLE by learners and staff;
 - the monitoring of the quality of learning and teaching by middle and senior managers lacked rigour;
 - the insufficient monitoring of the quality of the work of part-time staff.
- Peer observations show insufficient planning for differentiation to meet changing profile of the learners:
 - of the 12 peer observations, the areas for improvement were more effective questioning, active learning, and better use of ILT;
 - most of the areas for development from the previous year had been addressed.
- Trainee feedback shows: theory sessions too long and insufficient engagement in practical activities.
 - 70% of trainees report that they don't enjoy the theory sessions, they find them boring and lacking in relevance.
- Average attendance at theory sessions is too low, at 64%.
- Tutor feedback shows: lack of CPD on pedagogy, including effective planning to promote more active learning.
- Only 50% of staff and 40% of learners make use of the VLE over the period of an average week (more than one hour).

Roles and responsibilities of staff effecting improvement:

The course team leader/co-ordinator will:

- Monitor and record progress against milestones/targets, collate and analyse relevant data.
- Ensure key actions are being addressed in a timely and impactful manner.
- Arrange, chair and minute progress/team meetings to review progress and action/address gaps.
- Keep senior managers informed and involved, ensure articulation with whole-organisation QIP.
- Arrange support and development as necessary.
- Collate feedback from key stakeholders (learners, employers, parents/carers, external support agencies etc).

Team members (full-time and part-time staff):

- Engage constructively with the improvement process, attend and contribute to team meetings, take ownership of specific actions.
- Participate in staff development, to address self-identified development needs.
- Work to improve planning, differentiation, active learning and better timetabling.
- Provide feedback and data as appropriate (attendance, retention, standards of work, peer observation).

Quality Manager (Next level manager):

- Provide detailed feedback (support and challenge) on draft action plan.
- Provide constructive feedback (support and challenge, affirm) on progress against milestones, check collated data, benchmark internally.
- Attend team review meetings regularly.
- Ensure consistency with other teams/sites, liaise with whole-organisation quality unit.
- Facilitate and resource team capacity-building (staff development, sharing of good practice, links with other providers, links with Associate Assessors etc).
- Update senior management, including management committee.

Improvement milestones and timeframes:

Longer-term (3 years)

- 100% of the learning and teaching is at least effective.
- At least one-third of the learning and teaching is very effective.
- All staff are observed at least once, with constructive feedback to promote continuous improvement.
- Over 95% of the learners feedback positively on their learning experiences, sustained consistently over the period.
- External evaluations affirm improvement and highlight good practice in learning and teaching.
- Improved outcomes for learners (retention, achievement, progression) in line with or above targets.
- A VLE presence for all modules/key course components, with usage tracked and recorded by staff, high levels of beneficial usage.

Short-Term (within the next year) *[Medium term targets are not illustrated in this exemplar]*

Milestone 1 (within next 3 months)

- Review and address timetabling to improve attendance, learner engagement and motivation.
- Identify and arrange relevant professional development of staff to improve the quality of learning and teaching.
- Establish and agree arrangements for observations of learning and teaching and sharing of best practice.
- Initial monitoring and recording of progress.
- Initial feedback from and to senior managers.
- Staff commence in-depth review of planning for learning.
- Update action plan accordingly (as per outworking of milestone 1).

Milestone 2 (within 6 months)

- Evidence of improved planning for learning by all team members; lessons will have a wider range of active learning activities.
- Feedback from focus groups shows positive progress, over 80% will report positively on their learning experiences.
- VLE usage shows significant increase; over 75% of staff and 80% of learners will make use of the VLE on a regular (weekly) basis
- Evidence of impact of staff development will extend the range of learning strategies used competently.
- Update action plan accordingly (as per outworking of milestone 2).

Milestone 3 (within 12 months)

- 90% of the learning and teaching observed will be effective.
- At least one-quarter of the learning and teaching observed will be very effective.
- A majority of staff will be observed at least once, with constructive feedback and tailored support provided.
- Over 90% of the learners will feedback positively on their learning experiences.
- Internal and external evaluations (if relevant) will affirm improvement and identify areas for continuing focus.
- Evidence of improving outcomes for learners (retention, achievement, progression) in line with or above targets set.
- Improving VLE presence for all modules/key course components, with usage tracked and analysed by staff.
- Update action plan accordingly (as per outworking of milestone 3).

Actions to effect improvement and evaluation of impact

Areas for improvement: a breakdown of the contributing factors

1. **Theory sessions are too long, leading to low levels of learner engagement and motivation.**

Specific actions: What will we do to effect improvement?

1. Provide two ten-minute breaks in the 3-hour theory sessions, with immediate effect.
2. Tutors to plan for, and trial, a more varied range of learning activities to enhance learner engagement.
3. From September, reduce the theory sessions from 3 hours to three one hour sessions: managers and timetablers to plan for this.

Evaluation of impact: To what extent did it make a difference?

First review (milestone 1):

1. Attendance improved by 16% to 80%.
2. Two focus groups of learners reported more enjoyment in the theory sessions, particularly the broader range of practical activities.
3. Four-fifths of the schemes of work and lessons plans have been reviewed, updated, shared on VLE, and include a range of more interactive learning approaches.
4. Timetabling review delayed due to staffing implications. Possibly can reduce to 2 x 1.5 hour sessions. TBA by senior management.

Second review (milestone 2):

Third review (milestone 3):

In this exemplar review details are not provided for milestones 2 and 3.

Areas for improvement: a breakdown of the contributing factors

2. **The quality of the learning and teaching, particularly a lack of: stretch and challenge; planning for differentiation; and active learning strategies.**

Specific actions: What will we do to effect improvement?

1. Team to engage with the teaching and learning mentor to support the development of more effective planning for learning.
2. Identify and plan for the most appropriate CPD, for the team, to address weaknesses in:
 - differentiation
 - effective questioning
 - active learning strategies.
3. Set up workshops, one per term, to share and disseminate good practice, including with other teams.
4. Commence a process of rigorous and consistent lesson/session observations, with feedback to staff, to promote and monitor better practice.

Evaluation of impact: To what extent did it make a difference?

First review (milestone 1):

1. The teaching and learning mentor has met twice with all six members of the team and reviewed the effectiveness of their planning for learning, and provided constructive feedback. Two team members require further support with planning.
2. All of the team members have benefited from two well-attended, high quality CPD events on effective questioning and active learning.
3. The team has met with another course team to share strategies on how they engage learners in more active learning and increase learner attendance and motivation.
4. Three of the four session observations indicate improvements in learning and teaching, particularly the use of ILT and more effective questioning strategies.

Second review (milestone 2):

Third review (milestone 3):

In this exemplar review details are not provided for milestones 2 and 3.

Areas for improvement: a breakdown of the contributing factors

3. Under-use of ILT to support and enhance learning.

Specific actions: What will we do to effect improvement?

1. Training for staff in the use of tablet technology in learning situations delivered to staff by external provider.
2. Good practice in the use of the VLE to enhance learning to be shared by experienced and highly ICT-competent team member.
3. Course team to take forward the creation of materials for use on the VLE to a recognised minimum standard, supported by ICT-competent team member. Team members to review access and usage of VLE materials by learners.
4. Observe and share best practice in other teams.
5. Further ILT update training, internal development and external training.

Evaluation of impact: To what extent did it make a difference?

In this exemplar review details are not provided for milestones 1, 2 and 3.

Feedback from senior managers:

First review (milestone 1):

- Timetabling matter: process underway to recruit an additional part-time member of staff to facilitate movement to 3 one-hour theory sessions.
- Two CPD sessions on effective questioning and active learning facilitated and resourced; further CPD on differentiation planned.
- Process, guidance and documentation for the consistent observation of learning and teaching devised and agreed.
- Observations of learning and teaching have commenced.
- Training in use of mobile tablet technology in the classroom sourced and provided.
- Facilitation of workshops for sharing of best practice.
- Monthly minuted feedback meetings with course team leader have taken place and are ongoing.
- Attended the team workshop on good practice in the use of VLE.
- Fed impact of actions back to whole-organisation QIP monitoring process.

Second review (milestone 2):

Third review (milestone 3):

In this exemplar review details are not provided for milestones 2 and 3.

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