

Public space lessons

Improving park performance



Just how good are parks services? Answering that question is not as straightforward as it should be. But now CABE Space has found a new way to help local authority parks services to get a clearer idea of their performance and how it can be improved

If a local authority wants to improve the performance of its green space services, where should it begin? And how will it know when it has succeeded?

These are critical questions at a time when local authorities are struggling under the combined weight of limited resources and very high expectations.

Green space in urban areas has arguably never been valued as much as it is now, as both the public and government begin to recognise its role way beyond providing local amenity. Numerous research reports over the past year have shown how investment in green space will deliver better public health, both physical and mental. It can help to bring disparate communities together. It provides critical green infrastructure in a changing climate for cooling, shading, floodwater storage and biodiversity. And it is critical to regeneration.

While this multifunctional role adds to the status of green spaces, it also adds to what is expected of those who own and operate them.

A drive led by the Audit Commission sees the new comprehensive area assessment (CAA) regime starting in 2009. Alongside this, local government must respond to the demands set by the Gershon efficiency review.

Gershon was commissioned by central government to assess how the public sector could exploit opportunities for efficiency savings so that resources could be released for front-line public service delivery.



Gershon requires local government to set significant efficiency targets, so it is especially important that parks teams demonstrate the effectiveness of their work.

But it is essential that teams can demonstrate the effectiveness or otherwise of their green space services. It is very hard to improve what you cannot measure.

It is within this context that CABE Space is recommending a new tool to help local authorities manage the performance of their parks services.

‘TAES is a free diagnostic tool that allows an organisation to define for itself how it is performing against a model of best management practice’

TAES — ‘towards an excellent service’ for parks and open spaces — has been developed with the Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA), the Institute for Sport, Parks & Leisure, the Institute of Parks & Green Space and industry practitioners.

Unveiled in 2005 and then tested by five pilot authorities, TAES is a free diagnostic tool that allows an organisation to define for itself how it is performing against a model of best management practice. At the heart of TAES is a framework that will enable parks and open spaces services to give themselves a regular, ongoing health check and to take the crucial next steps forward.

‘TAES is an ideal tool to assist in demonstrating performance for comprehensive area assessment,’ says Tony Leach of the London Parks & Green Spaces Forum. ‘It is very timely that we in parks are leading on this now.’ The tool will

Case study 1

Camden: improving frontline provision

Camden's experience of using TAES helped the north London council to improve communications between senior management and frontline staff. It prompted the two ends of the organisation to share their perceptions of problems and priorities.

The process also helped the authority to change frontline provision. Camden had introduced staff presence in its key parks in a bid to reduce anti-social behaviour. By engaging users in the TAES assessment, the parks service found that it was not interacting with its customers — the park users — sufficiently, who felt that parks were still not always safe places to be. So the authority increased staff presence further.



Camden has increased its staff presence in parks as a result of TAES findings

TAES also helped Camden to enhance a process it had already started, to refine its biodiversity action plan. TAES offered good practice from elsewhere that it could compare with its own service.

Camden has set a target of 10 per cent of all its parks to attain a Green Flag Award for quality assurance and to help drive up maintenance standards. Finally, TAES helped it to identify training as a priority.

help those using it to identify strengths and weaknesses, and lead to a better understanding of the nature and causes of problems. 'Of course, in itself it will not actually solve problems but it does support clear, workable plans for improvement,' Leach says. 'One of the most valuable things it offers is good practice lessons from other authorities.'

No less than 150 parks practitioners representing some 90 local authorities attended CABE Space's training for TAES for the winter of 2007/08. GreenSpace's David Tibbatts, who delivered the training, believes the use of TAES in the parks arena is set to take off. 'Of those who have been through our training,' he says, 'I believe that two thirds will be actively engaged with TAES proper within the next 12 months.'

Although TAES is still in its very early days, the benefits are already being felt locally. These include improved user and staff satisfaction, greater efficiency and better delivery of parks and open space services to meet community needs.

Nuneaton & Bedworth Borough Council was one of the pilot local authorities in the TAES scheme. Its experience led directly to its first green space strategy, by providing a foundation set of objectives and principles on which it could build. The findings also enabled the council's parks and green spaces teams to communicate in a more robust and strategic way with senior executives, and learn how to align their objectives with the corporate objectives of the council. This

means that funding can be secured more easily for key initiatives.

John Pritchard, Nuneaton's head of recreation, is clear about the resulting benefits. 'We found the TAES process very illuminating in showing the strengths and weaknesses of the parks and green spaces operation.'

This small council has had limited experience of self-assessment, and found the procedure to be a useful 'soul-searching exercise'.

CABE Space, as the developer of TAES, is confident about the value of scheme. 'If we are to continue to make the case for parks and open spaces in terms of public policy and the allocation of resources,' says CABE Space advisor Nicola Mathers, 'parks services need to be able to

'While it is about self-assessment, TAES is no exercise in self-congratulation. A fundamental part of the process is the involvement of external and internal partners'

demonstrate a commitment to improving service provision and to achieving tangible outcomes for communities. TAES can help you do this.'

How TAES works

So what is the TAES process? The TAES tool — downloadable after registering on the IDeA website via www.cabe.org.uk/taes — has self-assessment as its central tenet, using scoring determined through a series of workshops. Assessment of the service uses criteria organised under eight headline themes:

- 1. Leadership**
- 2. Policy and strategy**
- 3. Community engagement**

- 4. Partnership working**
- 5. Use of resources**
- 6. People management**
- 7. Standards of service**
- 8. Performance management and learning.**

These headline themes are then divided into more detailed sub-sections, explained by a series of statements against which the service is assessed as **excellent, good, fair or poor**. The policy and strategy theme, for example, includes the statement: 'the organisation develops a clear strategy for parks and open spaces and is delivering outcomes from it'. The TAES tool includes descriptors to support the statement, which describe what an excellent, good, fair or poor performing organisation might look like. So, the descriptors for policy and strategy include:

- poor: the organisation has no process for developing and reviewing policy and strategy
- fair: the organisation is planning a process for developing and reviewing policy and strategy
- good: the organisation has implemented a process for

developing and reviewing policy and strategy

- excellent: the organisation has an established process for developing and reviewing policy and strategy and can demonstrate the impact of this on the community.

The descriptors serve as prompts to help organisations score themselves. Guidance on the process comes as part of the free TAES package.

Partner involvement

While it is about self-assessment, TAES is no exercise in self-congratulation. A fundamental part of the process is the involvement of external and internal partners. Scoring is completed in collaboration with external contractors, service users and officers from other parts of the local authority.

Assessments are usually completed during a series of workshops that can be facilitated in house and attended by relevant members of the parks team, along with the external partners. Each workshop will cover one theme, maybe more, meaning not everyone needs to attend every workshop session.

Planning to improve

Following the self-assessment, suggestions for improvement are fed into action plans. This explains why there is a need for buy-in to the whole process from those further up the organisation. 'Doing the analysis is one thing,' says Len Croney, independent green spaces consultant and CABE enabler, 'but getting someone to agree to change that is another matter. You'll only get that agreement if they have been involved in the process.'

Action plans can be very specific, identifying work needed at certain



The most common operational skills deficiencies are in horticulture, CABE Space has found

Case study 2

Plymouth: training and communication

Plymouth City Council's experience of TAES has led to a comprehensive review of the authority's staff training needs.

The TAES process highlighted the seriousness of its ageing workforce, with staff leaving and taking skills with them. With the South West Green Space Forum, the city council has been working with Train to Gain to improve horticultural skills training. This commitment in turn has helped to instil confidence in staff to bring up problems for resolution, with an action plan to address problems and take the service forward.

TAES also helped the council to identify communication as a weakness. As a first step, the council initiated a newsletter for operational staff.

Finally, after TAES looked at engagement and interaction with the authority's partners, Plymouth could see that something needed to be done — leading to funding for



Plymouth is now funding friends' forums to make on-the-ground improvements, as a result of TAES

friends' forums that offers them £600 each to direct towards on-the-ground improvements in parks. This initiative empowers people to spend money in their parks as they choose.

Gareth Harrison-Poole of Plymouth City Council says TAES was a huge help. 'Using the model you will see descriptors of a good service

and think, "hang on, we need to do some of this". I think it's important to get as wide a cross-section of staff involved in the process as possible, and then organise external assessment or peer review quickly. You will find that this helps to legitimise the findings and gives greater confidence in action planning.'

sites, or they can be generic, being built into an organisation's overall improvement plan. Either way, action plans do not have to be compiled by the same team that performed the self-assessment. Other parties can be brought in at this stage and briefed on the issues arising from the assessment. There are three main elements to consider here: how to make the improvements work, who will do it and when it will be done by.

A copy of the guidance for action planning, post-TAES assessment, can be found at www.cabe.org.uk/taes.

Validating your findings

Some managers feel that the scoring process provides sufficient value in itself, but others prefer to see the self-assessment validated. This can be done through a review of the planning process, including a sample assessment of the organisation against the TAES criteria, and through interviewing staff and focus groups.

Validation helps with the improvement plan and makes implementation of the process easier. There are two options: external validation or peer review.

Of the two, peer review is what CABE and GreenSpace recommend. With the support of Communities and Local Government, GreenSpace will be promoting regional peer review groups through regional parks and green spaces forums. London Parks

'Doing the analysis is one thing, but getting someone to agree to change that is another matter. You'll only get that agreement if they have been involved in the process'



Russell Square, Camden: the London borough is one of the first to have used TAES

& Green Spaces Forum's Tony Leach is a firm believer in the merits of peer review. 'We are helping each other improve, and TAES peer review is one of the ways that we are doing it,' he says.

Reaping the benefits

Natasha Rutherford of Manchester Parks believes that TAES can help parks deliver long-term investment and assist climate change adaptation and mitigation. 'In Manchester we have a "Green City" agenda and we hope to work with the Greater Manchester authorities in developing a climate change strategy,' she says. 'We are working towards delivering 10 targets including air quality and tree management. We see TAES as helping us to assess our strengths and identify opportunities to improve in this area.'

Manchester has its own performance management section within its leisure services department. Rutherford hopes this team will be part of any self-assessment work. GreenSpace North West manager Kirsty Rhind supports the process being applied through the wider region, too: 'I am

'Get everybody on board. Some of the stuff won't be palatable. But how else do you get change?'

fully supportive of TAES. It's a very, very flexible process and I'd like to see it run out across the area.'

Other authorities with experience of using TAES to isolate and implement efficiencies are equally impressed. 'Anything that leads to improvement needs to be taken on board by senior management,' says Martin Stanton, previously head of parks at the London Borough of Camden and now at Havering. 'The advantage of TAES is that it involves more than just the parks teams so its recommendations have wider endorsement across the organisation.' *See case study 1 (p5) for more on Camden.*

Others who have been through the TAES process agree that using the tool can help bring greater recognition for the parks team across the authority, particularly if the process involves colleagues from

other departments, and corporate performance management staff.

Bristol City Council's Helen Rossington commends TAES as fostering action, even if some of the truths that emerge during the process may prove difficult for authorities to accept. 'Get everybody on board,' she urges. 'Some of the stuff won't be palatable. But how else do you get change?'

TAES brings other benefits. It can improve understanding of what excellence means. It can lead to plans that change the way the organisation works. It can offer a true measure of the present and future health of the organisation; and it can provide opportunities to improve partnerships, and decision-making based on consensus. It can lead to joint ownership of a commitment to continuous improvement.

User checklist

So what have people learnt so far about how to run TAES assessments?

- Get commitment from the top — there is little point in going through

the process unless the organisation is committed to making changes as a result; this will need time and resources.

- Involve people from all levels within the service to get a true perspective of how the service is performing.
- Engage external partners and 'critical friends' in the assessment process.
- Be prepared — plan the process thoroughly and have all the evidence you need to hand.
- Manage expectations — have an initial scene-setting meeting.
- Prioritise — the assessment process can generate hundreds of improvement actions; concentrate on the most important.

Responding to community needs

TAES is based on the principles of continuous improvement, which involves the following pre-suppositions:

- you, your organisation and its people are committed to improvement
- it is always possible to improve
- accepting this is not a criticism, a weakness, a problem or somebody's fault
- intelligent people and organisations regularly identify areas for

Plugging the skills gap

A key component of TAES is an assessment of skills and capacity within the parks team, an area found to be seriously lacking across the country according to recent CABA Space research. The green space skills survey, by CABA Space, GreenSpace and Lantra, features results from 54 local authority green space managing departments across England. Its headline findings are that:

Another approach

TAES is a forerunner of a new generic self-assessment tool, the culture and sport single improvement tool (CSIT). The CSIT approach was promoted in *A passion for excellence: an improvement strategy for culture and sport*, published by the Local Government Association with DCMS, partner NDPBs and others in March 2008. It applies to all services including sport, the arts, heritage, museums, libraries and tourism, and parks and green spaces.

improvement in an objective, honest and positive way

- barriers can be overcome
- learning from others is vital.

TAES was developed to respond to the continually changing needs and expectations of communities. It is not a product or a scheme and there are no awards.

'TAES is a very flexible process and I'd like to see it run out across the area'

- less than 1 per cent of staff budgets are spent on training
- more than a third of significant parks have no on-site presence — due to a lack of funds
- the most common operational skill deficiencies are:
horticulture (51 per cent),
conservation (34 per cent),
arboriculture (29 per cent),
ecology (27 per cent).

The research reveals significant problems affecting green space

CSIT and TAES are very similar in format and content. However, TAES comes with a schedule of good practice that is specific to the parks sector and includes key elements such as design and sustainability considerations.

For some authorities, the CSIT is a more appropriate choice as it can create a consistent approach across all culture and sport services and helps the parks service raise its profile within the authority. But for those looking for recommendations specific to their parks service, and a more detailed self-assessment of the service, TAES is more appropriate.

'TAES is a powerful tool in seeing where you work well and building on your strengths', says GreenSpace's David Tibbatts. 'It should never be seen as a threat — it's as much about celebrating success as anything.'

In spring 2009, GreenSpace will be offering TAES training, supported by CLG and CABA Space. GreenSpace will also set up two regional pilots to create TAES peer support groups so that local authorities can help and learn from each other. For details, contact Leanne Scholey at GreenSpace: email lscholey.green-space.org.uk.

management within local authorities, including diminishing budgets, skills shortages in key areas such as horticulture, minimal funding for training staff and difficulties in recruiting new apprentices.

The survey has helped to shape *Skills to Grow*, a strategy designed to improve the skills of the UK's green space services workforce. The final strategy is set for publication in 2009. More information is at www.cabe.org.uk/skills-to-grow.

The performance of local authority green space services is under more scrutiny than ever before, with increasing expectations from both the public and the government. Planning for improvement can be tricky, but now help is at hand, thanks to a dedicated self-assessment tool from CABA Space. 'TAES' — towards an excellent service — is designed to help green space teams get a clearer idea of their own performance and how to improve. This briefing explains the value of TAES and how it works in practice. It will be useful to everyone working for and with green space services.

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Commission for Architecture
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The government's advisor
on architecture, urban design
and public space

As a public body, CABA encourages policymakers to create places that work for people. We help local planners apply national design policy and advise developers and architects, persuading them to put people's needs first. We show public sector clients how to commission projects that meet the needs of their users. And we seek to inspire the public to demand more from their buildings and spaces. Advising, influencing and inspiring, we work to create well-designed, welcoming places.

CABA Space is a specialist unit within CABA that aims to bring excellence to the design, management and maintenance of parks and public space in our towns and cities.

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