

Section 04:

Creating Action Plans and Objective Setting



An important outcome from your regular performance meetings with the people within your team is the formation and updating of the individual's Action Plan. Some areas use the term 'Development Plan', however, an Action Plan should include far more than development needs.

This section of the toolkit looks at:

- Action Plans
- Setting SMART objectives
- Agreeing the Action Plan and the Way Forward

TIP...

In your Line Manager role there will be certain functions that are mandatory and other functions that, although not mandatory, are considered good practice. Each section of the toolkit will summarise these areas on the final page. Please note – the must do's at the end of this section are those from section 4 only. A summary of all 'Must Do's' and 'Recommendations' from all Sections can be found in Section 9.



Action Plans

What is an Action Plan?

The Action Plan is a working document that records current performance objectives and agreed development opportunities and is owned and updated by the individual and counter-signed by you, the Line Manager. The Action Plan is established initially at the formal review meeting, but continues to be updated and reported upon throughout the year, as and when appropriate, at your regular performance meetings with the individuals within your team.

The Action Plan includes:

1. Some reference to team and service objectives
2. SMART Objectives – that are agreed
3. Areas that may have an impact on achieving objectives
4. Strengths that can be utilised to fulfil objectives (behaviours / skills / knowledge)
5. Weaknesses that need to be developed to fulfil objectives (behaviours / skills / knowledge)
6. Management support required and agreed
7. Identification of possible development opportunities (project work, on the job training, coaching, formal qualifications etc)
8. Agreed areas of development with dates and responsibilities
9. Area for notes – issues, evidence, successes
10. Area for signatures of the individual and the Line Manager

TIP... You may already record the above information in a format that works for you. If so, continue to use what works for you as long as it captures all you need it to. If you do not have a means of capturing this information, templates can be found in Section 10 that may be adapted to suit your team, department or the individual.

Why do we need Action Plans?

The plan, in its simplest form, provides evidence of meetings, conversations and agreements between you and the individuals you manage. It makes a direct link between

the objectives of the individual and their team, their strengths and weaknesses and areas for development and support.



When should you use the plan?

Use the plan at any time. It is a working document and should be completed as and when progress is made, needs are identified, development is undertaken, objectives are changed, performance issues are addressed. This could be during a 1-2-1, formal performance meetings or any occasion when you meet with the individual.

How is the plan completed?

Completing the plan is a two way process and must be as the direct result of the discussion between yourself and the individual you manage. All entries on the plan should be made in agreement. The Action Plan is the property of the individual and the individual has ultimate responsibility for maintaining and updating the plan, however, you have a role in ensuring this is being done through viewing the plan during your meetings.

For monitoring and audit purposes, when Action Plans are updated any previous Action Plans must be saved for future reference.

Use the 'Recording Progress / Notes from 1-2-1 Meetings' form at the end of this toolkit to help you prepare for your meeting, and to keep a record of the key points from your meetings. Making this a habit will be invaluable in the long term as you will be able to refer to these notes to help plan your performance meetings; make informed decisions about an employee's progress; gather evidence / examples for formal reviews. Employees also need to make notes and a template form is available in section 10 of this guide.

TIP...

The Importance of Objective Setting

All employees should be set objectives. This has caused difficulty in the past as people have been set objectives that are inappropriate or poorly set.

What are objectives?

Objectives describe what the individual is expected to achieve during the year. Competencies are important here as an individual's skills, knowledge, understanding, aptitudes and behaviours are used to achieve these objectives.

Objectives are used throughout the Council, there are Council objectives, Service area objectives, team objectives and individual objectives. For Managing People and Their Performance to work effectively there should be linkages between all these objectives – no individual employed by the Council should be undertaking an activity that does not ultimately contribute to the delivery of the Council's long term vision / plans for the County Borough, and it is your role, as the Line Manager, to help show the individual how they contribute to the overall performance of the Council and achievement of the Community Strategy.

Benefits of Linking objectives:

- The Council does not have an endless supply of resources, linking individual objectives to Council objectives ensures that people are deployed most effectively
- Individuals will understand what the Council's priorities are and how they can contribute to them
- The Council can easily assess and evaluate performance
- Learning and development needs determined through Managing People and Their Performance will support the achievement of Council priorities.

Objectives must be SMART

Objectives should be negotiated between you and the individual, thereby ensuring that the individual has ownership of the objectives, understands the reason for the objective and will therefore be more committed in achieving objectives that they have helped develop.

Managing People and Performance becomes meaningless if the objectives being set are not SMART, that is:

- **SPECIFIC** clear and concise statement about what needs to be done
- **MEASUREABLE** uses concrete observable criteria such as cost, quality, quantity, revenue etc
- **ACHIEVEABLE** reasonable for the individual based on their demonstrated abilities and the challenge of the objective
- **RELEVANT** focused on a key outcome
- **TIME RELATED** includes a timetable for completion

A common mistake in setting objectives is to start by identifying the activities before the outcomes or desired end results. Well written objectives define expectations, not activities.

To ensure you set SMART objectives:

1. Write down the objectives for the year
2. Test them against the SMART guidelines
3. If necessary edit the objectives

It is important not to just focus on quantifiable measures, for example:

Environmental Health Officer must close 10 premises a year for bad food hygiene.

Yes, this is a SMART objective but what if:

Environmental Health Officer must produce and deliver a programme to inform and educate food premises owners and deliver 140 inspections over the next 12 months with the aim of reducing incidents of bad food hygiene.

This is still measurable but allows the individual to focus on prevention strategies and community engagement rather than just on closing down premises.

Objectives should also be sufficiently challenging as an individual's objectives form a key component of their motivation to perform. If objectives are too easy the individual will not value them nor see them as worthwhile. If too difficult then they are not SMART – the individual is likely to ignore them or feel demotivated.

How many objectives should be set?

Good practice suggests no more than 6 objectives should be set. The individual and the role that they have must be considered when setting objectives.

Diversity and equality

The diversity of our employees is a great asset. So it's vital that we don't ignore it or waste it. When it comes to setting objectives, this means having an open-mind. Consider other viewpoints and different perspectives to your own. Be prepared to have your assumptions challenged. For example, if an employee suggests an objective that you initially think is unrealistic, ask yourself 'why?' If your reasoning is sound, express your doubts. But make sure that you put into practice our equal opportunities policy by checking that your practices do not contain hidden barriers that disadvantage anyone. For more information see the Council's Equality and Diversity page, and all related documents, on the Council's intranet.

Identifying Development Needs

Identifying areas for development is a critical part of the Action Plan, and regular 1-2-1s, and these development needs can fall in to 3 categories:

- **Development needs identified so that the individual can achieve their work objectives**
- **Development needs identified so that the individual can improve their performance**
- **Development needs identified to help the individual achieve their career development aspirations.**

The Council reinforces the position that the need for development is part of everyone's role and all staff have development needs – the need for development should certainly not be viewed as a sign of failure. Development is necessary to enable continuous improvement, both in an individual's performance and the performance of the Council as a whole.

An individual may achieve their objectives but still have development needs; they may need to learn to do their work more efficiently, quickly or differently due to a change in legislation for example. Conversely, an individual who does not achieve their objectives may not have development needs – as they may have been affected by circumstances beyond their direct control.

The identification of development needs can be quite straightforward providing the following are in place:

- You and the individual know and understand the objectives that need to be achieved
- You and the individual know and understand the individual's role and specifically the critical behaviours and skills (competencies) required to achieve the objectives
- The individual recognises and understands their own strengths and weaknesses and is willing to share these with you
- You have an understanding of the individual's strengths and weaknesses.

Assessing Development Needs – An Ongoing Process

Development needs should be identified throughout the year and raised during the regular meetings around performance, this way they are identified dynamically and addressed in a timely manner so as not to affect the achievements of the individual.

Failure to address development needs as they arise could impact on the individual's ability to achieve their objectives and hence impact on the Council's overall performance.

Also, if a development need is not addressed the individual can become demotivated because they do not feel valued and do not feel they have the necessary skills to achieve their objectives.

Meeting Development Needs

Development needs can be met in a variety of ways and do not necessarily have to be expensive, methods include:

Experience Learning through Doing	Experience Learning through Resources	Experience Learning through Others
Activities such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenging on-the-job assignments • Job rotation • Mentoring others / being mentored • Project teams / working groups • Conducting research 	Activities such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training / development courses • e-learning • Formal qualifications • Professional qualifications / certificates • Action Learning Sets – facilitated problem solving workshops through discussion, enabling challenge, idea sharing etc – encourages reflective learning (real life work problems) 	Activities such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coaching and mentoring • Visibility through project teams / working groups • Networking

Any development identified needs to be linked to the achievement of the goals / objectives of the individual, your team and the Council’s long term vision, and you should discuss with the individual the impact any development has on their performance in their role.

TIP...

For advice on identifying development needs, addressing areas for development and learning and development opportunities, please contact Human Resources.

Agreeing the Action Plan

All the areas on the Action Plan should be agreed upon by you and the individual and there should be reasons behind them all. This is critical, if the individual does not agree with an objective they are being set they will feel that this is being imposed upon them and will not have ownership of that objective.

Similarly, if the individual were to put an area for development that you were not in agreement with, you may be unlikely to support the individual in that development.

The reasons behind objectives and development should be discussed and negotiation plays an important part when managing performance.

Where agreement can not be reached it is recommended that other parties are called upon to support the individual and yourself in reaching a compromise – for example, other team members, senior management, Human Resources, Trade Union representatives.

Manager Checklist

Must Do's

Action	Completed
Use and promote the use of Action Plans as a means of continuously managing performance / assessing, monitoring and recording progress against targets	
Monitor your team to ensure that individuals are using Action Plans as a live document and complementing this with the Notes of 1-2-1 Meetings Form, for example, following 1-2-1s / formal reviews / completion of development etc	
Pass the ownership of updating Action Plans to the individual but monitor to ensure this is being carried out	
Set individuals and teams targets and objectives that are SMART	
Regularly review and update the objectives of those you manage through regular 1-2-1s	
Ensure Action Plans are agreed by you as Manager and the individual employee	
Discuss and identify the development needs of those you manage and set up development plans that address the development needs that impact upon the delivery of objectives	
Action Plans (past and present) to be made available as evidence that regular reviews and 1-2-1s are being held (as and when required for internal audit purposes)	

Recommended

Action	Completed
Use different types of learning to address relevant development needs (for advice and guidance speak to Human Resources)	