

Quality in Public Health

How it all fits together in Local Government

1. Introduction

Quality improvement within public health is widely supported and there have been many initiatives and publications aimed at helping teams in local government to deliver this. While these initiatives and publications are welcome, the large number of tools and the potential overlap of systems and frameworks can be overwhelming and can even slow down the drive to improve quality. Even understanding terminology and approach can be a challenge, although simple titles such as “What Good Looks Like” are helpful.

Quality in Public Health: A Shared Responsibility was designed to summarise the overall approach to quality improvement across the public health system. Its high-level nature means that it is important to be clear how it can be implemented at a local level and especially how measurable improvement can be delivered. It is also important to see how it fits into sector led improvement and works across the system and place.

2. Quality in Public Health: A Shared Responsibility

The Public Health System group provides a single national forum for public health system leaders and partners to discuss and act on priority strategic questions and issues in protecting and improving the public’s health. Since public health quality improvement is a priority for all partners, the System Group produced a comprehensive framework, *Quality in Public Health: A Shared Responsibility*¹, which was published in March 2019. The framework is aligned with other quality improvement work and is directed at commissioners and providers, both locally and nationally.

3. Sector Led Improvement

Sector led improvement (SLI) is at the heart of quality improvement across local government and can be seen simply as leadership for quality improvement. SLI is based on the underlying principles that councils:

- are responsible for their own performance and improvement and for leading the delivery of improved outcomes for local people in the area;
- are primarily accountable to local communities (not central government or the inspectorates), and stronger accountability through increased transparency helps local people drive further improvement;
- have a sense of collective responsibility for the performance of the sector as a whole (evidenced by sharing best practice, offering member and officer peers and so on)².

Quality improvement in public health within local government is part of overall SLI. In its *Public*

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/quality-in-public-health-a-shared-responsibility>

² LGA, ADASS, ADCS, Solace, 2012, Sector-led improvement in local government - www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/sli-localgovernment-pdf--f4c.pdf

*health sector-led improvement framework*³, the Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) indicates that the purpose of SLI is to:

“Provide confidence both to internal and external stakeholders and the public as well as demonstrate continuous improvement to public health practice.”

For SLI to work effectively, it is crucial that there is local ownership of the process and local enthusiasm to make it work. It is also important to remember that inspection regimes are still in place and have a high profile for many services delivered or commissioned by councils and their partners; examples include the Care Quality Commission and OFSTED.

4. How Does Everything Fit Together?

Quality initiatives fit together through outcomes, context and leadership. Improved outcomes are crucial and must be the overall aim of quality improvement. A shared focus on improved outcomes will help concentrate quality improvement initiatives in the right areas and will also help ensure that improvement is monitored and realised. A focus on outcomes for individual projects will also make it easier to see how they fit into the bigger picture.

Context is set through *Quality in Public Health: A Shared Responsibility*, showing how quality improvement relates to the whole public health system but also how the elements of quality improvement activity are common across the health and social care system. The characteristics of quality and the steps to achieve quality improvement are explicitly common across different areas. Within public health systems, quality improvement is important for all elements, including community engagement and tackling wider determinants of health as well as for delivered services. *Quality in Public Health: A Shared Responsibility* sets out the characteristics of high-quality public health services as safe, effective and a positive experience for those who use them, while for commissioners and providers they should be well-led, equitable and sustainable. Very similar characteristics are set out for social care services in *Adult Social Care: Quality Matters*⁴ and for the NHS in its *Shared commitment to quality*⁵. Likewise, the model of seven steps to improve quality is the same in all three documents. Using these common elements within a programme of quality improvement should help to demonstrate the links.

Leadership within local government is provided through sector led improvement. This is the mechanism for quality improvement across the range of local government functions and public health is part of that. The principles outlined in the framework documents such as the seven steps to improvement can be used as part of SLI just as they can be used as part of clinical governance and in responding to the findings from inspections.

Individual quality improvement tools are the delivery mechanism in this system. Within local government they will be implemented as part of SLI programmes and they will fit into the systems and processes set out in *Quality in Public Health: A Shared Responsibility*. Mapping the fit between individual tools and the framework will help set them in the appropriate context. It will also be important to see how individual tools contribute to improvement in outcomes.

January 2020

³ ADPH, 2015, Public health sector-led improvement framework - www.adph.org.uk/category/phsystem/sli/

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/adult-social-care-quality-matters>

⁵ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/nqb-shared-commitment-frmwrk.pdf>