

# Improvement Cymru Academy Toolkit Guide



## Understanding your Problem

## Introduction

This toolkit guide is focussed on supporting you to understand your problem, which is the starting point of any improvement project. To support you, this guide helps you create a problem statement, a vital tool that will support you, your project team and your stakeholders as you initiate your improvement project.

## What is a Problem Statement?

A problem statement is used at the start of any project so that those involved are all aware of what the project is about. It is a short description of your project and is a clear and concise way of letting your stakeholders know what project you are about to embark on. It is typically about 18 words long and will often convey what the current 'pain' is and the consequences of the problem. It can contain information about the issue and the impact on the organisation or individual. It needs to be clear enough so that anyone reading it is aware that this is something that requires attention. It is important to note that problem statements do not describe the solution or root causes.

Once the problem has been defined, the aim of the improvement project can be developed. An aim compliments the problem statement by summarising what you intend to achieve once you've identified your problem. Please see our 'SMART aim' toolkit guide for more information.

## Rationale

Problem statements are vital for any project or organisation as they require stakeholder attention and engagement. Without a problem statement stakeholders can be left feeling confused and not sure what to prioritise or what is happening. They are powerful tools that create influence and team engagement to ensure everyone is aware of the issues or 'problem' that needs to be addressed. As the project is being carried out in real time, it creates relevance and purpose to what's happening within the organisation.

## How to create a problem statement

It is important to involve your project team in helping you to identify your problem and write your problem statement.

Data plays a vital role in understanding your problem; without evidence of your problem, you are left with opinion. Whilst this is often based on observation and subject knowledge, it is important to gather data to gain an accurate representation of the problem. You can use data that already exists or collect data on the process that you want to focus on.

Every problem should identify the impact of the situation at hand. This will form the basis of your aim – what you want to achieve.

### When to use a Problem Statement

A problem statement is written at the start of any project and seeks to answer the question **‘What issue needs to be addressed and why?’** Once you and your team have decided on your problem, you can then share the problem statement with your stakeholders. This gives the stakeholders clarity of the problem. You can then refer to your problem statement as a point of reference to keep momentum and engagement throughout your project.

### Next Steps

Once you have completed your problem statement and developed your SMART aim, you need to understand your system to make improvements. There are a number of tools that can help:

Pareto chart; Process Mapping; Spaghetti diagrams, Measles chart, Fishbone and 5 Whys. We have Toolkit Guides for each of these tools in our Resource Library on our webpage. <https://phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/improvement-cymru/improvement-cymru-academy/>

### Problem statement example

Variability in the standard of history taking on admission to a mental health unit are resulting in risk assessments that do not inform which safety measures are required for children and young people presenting with deliberate self-harm and overdose.

## Helpful tips

- A successful problem statement will contain context of what the problem is.
- A problem statement is a clear description of the issue(s).
- It outlines what the problem is and what we need to know about it.
- A problem statement states the relevance of the project, it justifies why the issue is important and the value it has by the stakeholder knowing about it.
- It should be short (around 18 words)
- It should include the impact of the problem on people receiving or delivering care

There is also an accompanying template on page 6 of this guide to support you in writing your problem statement

## Additional resources

<https://phw.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/improvement-cymru/improvement-cymru-academy/> or email us at [improvementcymruacademy@wales.nhs.uk](mailto:improvementcymruacademy@wales.nhs.uk) to find out about the improvement courses we offer.

## Further reading

What is a Problem Statement? [online] [What is a Problem Statement? With Examples | Author Services Blog \(elsevier.com\)](#) [Accessed 9<sup>th</sup> February 2023]

Halvorson, H,G. (2017) *Nine Things Successful People Do Differently*. Harvard Business Press: USA

Langley, G.J et al. (2009) *The Improvement Guide: A Practical Approach to Enhancing Organizational* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. Jossey-Bass: USA.

# Problem Statement Template

The 18-word problem statement is a technique for summarising a lengthy, vague description of a problem the service is experiencing.

It does not have to be exactly 18 words, but condenses the description and, where possible, quantifies the issue.

## Guidelines for a good problem statement:

- ✓ Lay person needs to be able to understand it.
- ✓ Demonstrates a specific symptom/problem. (e.g.high DNA rate)
- ✓ Lay person needs to be able to understand it.
- ✓ Demonstrates a specific symptom/problem. (e.g.high DNA rate)
- ✓ Doesn't indicate a solution or a cause.
- ✓ Explains impact of the problem (e.g. 'patients wait too long')

Use this space to write your problem

## My Problem Statement

