



How do you ensure Quality?

A Brief Guide to Quality

All organisations want to do the best possible work, and provide the best possible services. Quality Assurance (QA) systems provide the means whereby these organisations can set up and maintain the highest standards of quality in their work and services. This 'quality process' enables them to assess what they are doing and to work out how to do it better.

There are broadly two ways of achieving quality assurance systems:

- By building an internal quality system—a process of monitoring, evaluating and developing the work within the organisation
- By adopting an existing *quality assurance* system—a formal, nationally recognised, process.

A number of quality assurance systems are currently being used by community and voluntary organisations. This information sheet outlines these systems, and looks briefly at what you might get out of introducing one.

What do you want to achieve?

There are many reasons for using a quality system, whether your own internal process or a recognised quality assurance system. For example, you may be looking to:

- Improve services.
- Make the organisation more efficient.
- Become more accountable to users.
- Achieve credibility in the wider world, particularly with funders.

It is important to work out in advance what you want to achieve. The key question is 'What is our organisation's purpose (our central aim or objective), and how will we achieve it.

Where there are many aims, they may prove to be incompatible or very difficult to achieve simultaneously. It may be helpful to review your aims before setting out on the 'quality process'.

Is a quality assurance system right for you?

Your organisation may already have in place procedures for monitoring, evaluating and developing your work. If you are satisfied that these are enabling you to do high quality work and manage your organisation effectively, then you may not feel that a quality assurance system is necessary. If you have doubts about your procedures or standards, then a quality assurance system may be just what you need.

However, organisations often come under external pressure, especially from funders, to demonstrate the quality of their work and their management efficiency.

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Which System?

There are a number of systems developed for, or used by, voluntary and community organisations. Each will involve your organisation in different levels of expense and staff time. Here are some examples of those systems which are most common:

PQASSO (Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations)

This is designed specifically for small to medium-sized voluntary organisations. It helps you to assess and improve almost all aspects of your work. It is fairly easy to use, you can introduce it at your own pace and it is not externally assessed. The PQASSO pack costs can be determined by visiting the website for Charities Evaluation Services:

www.ces-vol.org.uk

Quality First

This is design specifically for small to medium-sized organisation without any paid staff. It is very cheap, easy to use, can be introduced at your own pace and is not externally assessed. (www.bvsc.org)

Investors in People

This scheme concentrates on managing and supporting staff to help achieve your aims. It does not look at all aspects of your organisation. You can work towards the standard at your own pace, or undergo external assessment. Financially and in staff time the costs could be very high. (www.investorsinpeople.co.uk)

EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) Excellence Model

This is not strictly a QA system, but a framework for continuous improvement. It helps you a) map out stages for assessing every aspect of your work, b) identify where improvements are needed, and c) compare your organisation with others. It is demanding and usually takes an organisation a year to work towards external assessment.

(www.quality-foundation.co.uk)

Social auditing, reporting and accounting

These processes help your organisation to improve its ethical and social approach by increasing its accountability and the involvement of different 'stakeholders'. The processes are fairly complex and time-consuming, but you introduce them at your own pace. (www.neweconomics.org)

Charter Mark.

This is a QA system for organisations which provide services to the public. It helps ensure that those who use your services are placed at the heart of everything you do. You carry out self-assessment before applying for external assessment, with re-assessment every three years. The cost varies. (www.chartermark.gov.uk)

Quality Mark

This system is for organisations providing legal information and advice to the public. It is free to those in receipt of public, local authority or charitable funding. There are standards relating to a) Information, b) General Help and c) Specialist Help. The system is fairly easy to use, but potentially time-consuming and involves external assessment.

(www.legalservices.gov.uk/qmark)

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Note on Costs of implementing a QA System

- Systems which require external accreditation tend to be the most costly.
- Systems which are the most time-consuming to set up and maintain, tend to be more costly in financial terms.
- The system which you choose will need to be suitable for your organisation, so cost is not necessarily the most important factor.
- The cost of **not** implementing a satisfactory QA system may result in funding delays or no funding being forthcoming.
- Choosing the right QA system for your organisation will be less costly in the long run, since you will have acceptable standards and procedures for the work you are undertaking.

Before you start—a few tips

It is vital to plan carefully before introducing a QA system. Following are some tips which you will not want to overlook!:

- Assess the time and money your organisation has available.
- Decide whether it is best to use a recognised system or to improve your internal processes.
- If you opt for a recognised QA system, find out as much as you can about the most appropriate ones before deciding which is most suited to your requirements.
- Decide what you want to achieve before you start the process.
- Make sure **everyone** in the organisation is involved and supports the process, from the planning stage through to introduction of the system.
- Set up a small working group to ensure that the process is carried out effectively.
- Draw up a plan and realistic timetable for introducing your QA system.

To find out more there are TOOLKITS available so that you find out more about what is involved and how your organisation will need to be prepared or what it will have to work on.

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