Community First New Forest

Quality - Information Sheet

Information on quality standards, approaches and assessments, and how to plan and learn from them

If your organisation is to survive and thrive, you must ensure quality.

Assessing and improving quality is about learning about what an organisation is doing well and what needs improvement. It is also about using the information to do better.

A quality system is a formal management system intended to strengthen the organisation. A quality assurance system sets out standards, or expectations, that a quality organisation should meet.

Quality standards

Quality standards cover key areas such as:
- leadership
- policies, plans and strategies
- staff and volunteers

The quality cycle

Assessing and improving quality involves a cycle of activities:

1) Planning for quality: before getting started, it is important for an organisation to plan out its quality work. You need to consider:
   - why quality matters to your organisation
   - what sort of approach will best suit you
   - what resources might be needed
   - resources, partnerships and information
   - ways of working
   - the results of an organisation's work.

2) Agreeing on quality standards: this means thinking about what your organisation most needs. Different standards and approaches have a different focus. There are a number of options to choose from.

3) Carrying out a quality assessment: quality assessment is about getting a sense of your organisation's strengths and areas for improvement. It can be done:

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- through self-assessment
- by external assessment.

4) Learning and improving: following a quality assessment, the next step is to agree where improvements are most needed and to draw up action plans.

5) Understanding the language of quality improvement: there are a number of key terms that are used when talking about quality improvement.

Internal benefits of improving quality

Assessing and improving quality will help the organisation to:
- improve its planning and become more user-focused
- improve systems and procedures
- come together as a team and boost confidence
- meet external requirements
- provide increased credibility with a wide range of stakeholders.

External benefits of improving quality

There is increasing external pressure on non-profit organisations to show that they manage their organisations efficiently, that they provide quality services and are making a difference.
Many funders want to see how the organisations they fund will guarantee quality. They may ask organisations to:
- describe their approaches to quality management to establish their eligibility for funding
- introduce a specific quality system
- provide evidence of quality services through regular monitoring reports.

The importance of evidence in quality assessments

Reviewing evidence is central to self-assessment. Evidence can be in the form of:
- policies and procedures
- financial statistics
- monitoring statistics
- feedback from users
- evaluation reports.

Not all evidence will be written. Some of the evidence will be visual, for example, about the quality of the environment. Some evidence may be gathered from interviews.

Self-assessments of quality

Self-assessment is based around the questions asked by the quality standards. It can be carried out as a quick overview, or over a longer period of time. It can be done in a number of ways, for example:
- by one person, or by a small group
- through workshops or discussion groups
- by sending out a questionnaire
- through staff meetings or focused special meetings.

In each quality area, self-assessment will identify where the organisation is doing well and where improvements can be made.

The benefits of quality self-assessments

Self-assessment is a learning and development process. Going through the process of self-assessment will help people develop confidence in what they are doing well, stimulate new ideas, and develop a common purpose.

Support for quality self-assessments

Self-assessment is intended as an internal process and external support may not be needed. On the other hand, a performance mentor or quality specialist could provide answers to questions, help to develop initial commitment, and speed up the process.

External quality assessment and recognition

External recognition is when an organisation gets a seal of approval from an outside body. A person or team from another agency reviews the organisation to find out how it measures up against the quality standards.

External recognition involves an independent assessment. This generally entails:
- a review of the organisation's key documents
- an on-site visit
- a report on the organisation's progress.

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Quality awards

Organisations meeting the standards set by their chosen approach to quality are likely to receive an award – or certification. This may be in the form of a plaque or they may have the option of using a symbol (a 'kitemark') on their headed paper. They will need to re-apply for the award periodically, as it is not given for life.

The quality cycle

Assessing and improving quality is not a one-off process. It is part of the management of the organisation, involving a cycle of reviewing, learning and improving.
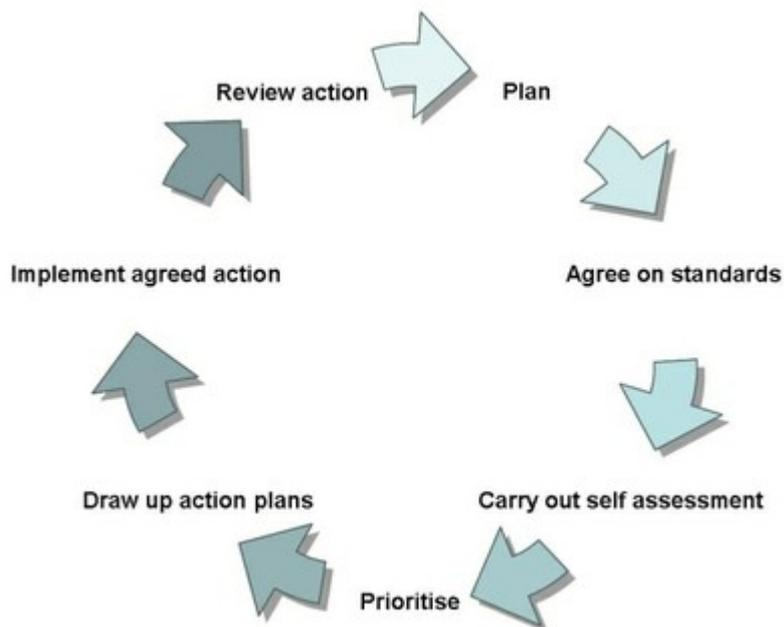
Keeping records for quality assessments

It will be important to have the evidence needed for a quality assessment easily available. Some organisations keep a quality assurance folder for all their key policies and procedures. Copies of other monitoring information can also be filed together so that it is accessible when needed.

Getting the right approach to quality standards

- Off-the-shelf approaches: there is a wide range of off-the-shelf quality standards that can be very useful in providing a quality benchmark that will be understood and valued.

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- The in-house approach: organisations may want standards that reflect particular activities. Developing an individualised set of standards can be a potentially complex task. One solution is to use an off-the-shelf system, and to develop some additional standards that address particular areas.
- Sub-sectoral standards: these are systems developed for a particular field of work or for networks of organisations, and some are a requirements of funding. Organisations adopting sub-sectoral systems generally use them as part of a multiple system approach.
- Multiple system use: some organisations use multiple systems. This can involve several different off-the-shelf systems, a mix of off-the-shelf and sub-sectoral systems, or a combination of an in-house approach and an off-the-shelf system.

Externally accredited systems

Here is a list of the main off-the-shelf quality approaches that provide external accreditation.

Customer service

Customer First is designed for all organisations in all sectors, the standard focuses on customer service and is a certification model. Customer Service Excellence (formerly Charter Mark) is the UK Government's national standard for excellence in customer service, originally designed for public sector organisations, now available to all sectors and organisations. The quality mark is valid for three years.

People
Investors in People is focused on staff management and development and requires an organisation to submit documentary evidence of its practice. The award is valid for three years.

Investing in Volunteers is the UK quality standard for volunteer management. The award is valid for three years.

Procedures

The ISO 9001 is a generic international standard focused on an organisation's procedures. An external assessment followed by twice-yearly audits ensures the standards are being maintained.

The Matrix Standard is a certification standard for organisations delivering information, advice and/or guidance on learning and work.

General quality

PQASSO was specifically designed for the voluntary and community sector. It encompasses all aspects of an organisation. PQASSO is a self-assessment model, but has an optional Quality Mark, awarded following a process of peer review and which lasts for three years.

The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) Excellence Model is an over-arching and challenging self-assessment framework for continuous improvement. It is designed for any organisation in any sector. External assessment and awards are also available.

Sub-sectoral quality systems

The AA1000 Assurance Standard is a process standard for assessing and strengthening the credibility and quality of an organisation's social, economic and environmental reporting and related management and accountability processes.

Becoming VISIBLE is a standard for multi-purpose community organisations, and community organisations running community centres, developed by Community Matters. Self-assessment with optional certification is available. The VISIBLE Standards are nationally accredited standards particularly relevant to the needs of community organisations. Supporting resources include online guidance and self-assessment tools. External assessment is also available.

Co-operativesUK Key Social and Co-operative Performance Indicators (KSCPIs) comprise quantitative indicators intended to capture the co-operative, social and environmental performance of a co-operative. The indicators are provided to co-operatives for self assessment and the co-operatives are asked to report their findings back to Co-operativesUK.

The NAVCA Performance Standards for local infrastructure organisations focus on outcomes. They must be used in conjunction with a holistic generic standard such as PQASSO to achieve a quality mark.

Quality First is a quality system based on PQASSO but designed by Birmingham Council for Voluntary Service for very small, predominantly volunteer, organisations.

Quality Assurance System for Refugee Organisations (QASRO) is a holistic, self-assessment standard for refugee organisations and infrastructure organisations providing development support to them. It is adapted from PQASSO.

Health checks

Health checks are sometimes used by infrastructure organisations to work with frontline groups to identify areas for improvement. They use questions or indicators to raise thinking about the organisation and its development. They are often used for organisations not opting for formal quality systems. The Charities Evaluation Services have produced a review of health checks used by voluntary and community sector organisations.

References:

http://knowhownonprofit.org/organisation/quality/quality
Useful links
- Charities Evaluation Services
- Institute of Quality Assurance
- Learning and Skills Council
- Proving and improving - a quality and impact toolkit for social enterprise.
- Charities Evaluation Services has produced a new edition of First Steps in Quality.
  - Mentoring and Befriending Foundation http://www.mandbf.org/

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