

Quality Assurance

1: What is quality assurance?

Quality assurance is a way for your organisation to make sure that it is always striving to do the best it can for its service users, members, volunteers and funders. A quality assurance system is a way of checking, through continuous monitoring and evaluation of your performance and through the collection of evidence, that your organisation is continuously improving what it does and how it does it. Quality assurance can also be a way of measuring what your organisation does against other organisations doing similar work or against set, recognised standards. The systems of checking your organisation's quality are on-going processes to help you ensure that you are always meeting the new standards that are continually being developed.

2: How does it work?

This depends to a very large extent on the quality assurance system that you choose to use (see over for details of a variety of systems). However, most quality assurance systems will have a series of specific areas that they will focus on. Most will have a range of standards that your organisation is expected to meet. These standards will cover a wide range of areas of your organisation's work and operations. In most quality assurance systems how you achieve those standards is down to you. There is no set methodology and it is the evidence that you reached the standards that is of concern.

Most quality systems are externally accredited. This means that there are people from outside your organisation who will come in to determine whether or not your organisation is meeting the standards required by the quality assurance system in order to be deemed a quality organisation. A few systems are not externally accredited. This means that the responsibility for meeting the standards and the thoroughness and levels to which your organisation meets set standards is down entirely to your own organisation.

3: Which one should we use?

There is no right or wrong quality assurance system. There are simply a variety from which you can choose. The right one for your organisation will depend upon what you want it to achieve, and how you want to work. You also need to think about what kind of evaluation processes your organisation wants and needs and what you can afford. A useful point to remember is that external evaluation will have an associated cost. Systems that are not externally evaluated however may not be seen to be as rigorous as other systems.

4: Why do we need it?

As a service provider especially, but also as an organisation that is membership-based, you need to make sure that what you do for your service users and for your membership is up to a good standard. "Up to standard", however, can mean many different things, from meeting basic legal minimum standards, through the standards expected by service users, to the standards that you are funded to achieve. One thing that often prompts many voluntary sector organisations to begin to implement a quality assurance system is that a funding body requires it of them. This is usually because the funder needs to make sure that the organisation they are funding has the systems to both handle the money itself and also to spend it efficiently and effectively. For funders a quality assurance system is a good way of making sure of this.

5: What is there to choose from?

There are many different quality assurance systems available to groups. Below we have given brief details of a few which are popular and/or well known in the voluntary sector.

Investors In People (IIP)

Investors in People is probably the most well known of all quality systems or standards in the UK. It is externally evaluated and is based entirely on an organisation's people base, i.e. its staff and/or volunteers. The system has several basic principles to which an organisation must subscribe along with standards which then need to be met and against which evidence must be collected. This is mostly used by relatively large organisations where the staff are the primary resource of the organisation. However, it has been successfully applied in the voluntary and the public sectors.

EFQM/Business Excellence Model

This is a very popular model for businesses and not for profit organisations throughout Europe. The Excellence model is based on the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) model of quality management. It is a method used mainly in large business organisations and rather less so through the voluntary and community sectors (though it has been shown to have possible applications in this area). The model is seen by those who develop it as a tool for continually improving your own organisation through understanding where you're at, where the gaps are and enabling you to develop solutions. The Excellence Model is externally evaluated.

PQASSO

PQASSO stands for Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations. As the name suggests it has been developed specifically for smaller organisations for which many of the other Quality Assurance systems are not appropriate. It was developed by the Charities Evaluation Service and was developed specifically for the voluntary sector and as a result it is widely used across the sector. It is internally evaluated, though there are costs associated with buying the work pack. While this has been developed with many of the problems associated with other quality assurance systems in mind it is simply a model and therefore cannot be entirely suitable to every organisation; the decision about which quality assurance system to use depends on the needs of your group and the type of organisation that you are.

6: Further help

For further information you can find details of all the above systems on their websites:

Investors in People - www.iipuk.co.uk

European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) - www.efqm.org

British Quality Foundation - www.quality-foundation.co.uk

Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations - www.pqasso.org.uk

or call **Voluntary Action Manchester** - 0161 236 3206 or www.vamanchester.org.uk

Green Fish Partnership - www.green-fish.org.uk