Quality Assurance systems are a tool to help you run your organisation more effectively and efficiently. They also help to ensure that a minimum standard of quality is being met for a product, service or project.

For the voluntary and community sector, there are some recognised quality assurance systems that measure the quality of your organisation and which assure service users, members, volunteers and funders that your services perform to a certain standard.

What's out there?

There are many different quality assurance systems that focus on a single aspect of your service (such as human resources) or your organisation as a whole. You will need to decide on the right system for your organisation and find out what exactly it would involve. The following systems are familiar within the voluntary and community sector:

**PQASSO (Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations)**

Developed by the Charities Evaluation Services specifically for the voluntary and community sector, PQASSO is the leading quality standard and used most widely across the sector. Originally developed as a self assessment, the system covers all aspects of running an organisation. Its flexibility means it can be used by all types of organisations, including charities, social enterprises, and community interest companies. It is also appropriate for all sizes from small community groups with a handful of employees to larger charities with over 2,000 employees. The system now offers an externally accredited PQASSO Quality Mark which is endorsed by the Charity Commission at certain levels.

**NAVCA Quality Award**

A rigorous, externally audited, evaluation for support providers (also known as local infrastructure) such as your local CVS (Council for Voluntary Service) or equivalent. A support provider will offer guidance to local community groups, voluntary and faith organisations to help them set up, develop and grow. These services might include governance advice, guidance on funding or a volunteering function. This award is assessed against nationally approved performance standards that look at the quality of services offered to local voluntary and community groups. Once awarded, the Quality Award is valid for three years.

**Investors In People (IIP)**

This is a single focus standard, designed for any organisation and recognised across the voluntary, public and private sectors. Investors in People aim to improve organisational performance through people management and development. It is externally assessed and results in a quality mark which is valid for three years.

**ISO 9000**

ISO 9000 relates to quality management and are designed to help organisations meet the needs of customers and other stakeholders. The system looks at how you deliver your products, services and activities through the processes that you use. The standards are published by ISO, the International Organisation for Standardisation and are available through the British Standards Institution. They are part of a wider set of ISO standards, including ISO 14001 Environmental Management Systems. However,
the most commonly used ones for our sector are ISO9000 (quality management) and ISO9001:2008 (quality management systems). Their website includes particular guidance for small or medium sized organisations on how to implement the systems. Once certified, organisations can carry the ISO mark for the relevant standard that has been achieved.

**Common Inspection Framework**

This is for all organisations delivering publicly funded learning and skills projects. It is the framework used by Ofsted when carrying out inspections. It focuses on the quality of learning provision.

**Investors in Diversity**

This has been developed for all organisations in all sectors. The standard focuses on inclusion, equality and diversity. It has been developed by the National Centre for Diversity.

**How it works**

Quality assurance is achieved through continuously checking performance and demonstrating the quality of your performance through your policies and procedures.

**Step 1: Agree on a standard**

Each quality standard is different and will have its own way of measuring and developing the quality of your services. You will have to research and agree internally on what standard is most appropriate for your organisation. There are also different cost implications, which also depend on how much resource it will take to implement. For instance, some quality assurance systems may require external training and some are more rigorous than others. Whilst you can usually work towards your own deadlines, the length of time it may take may vary depending on what existing structures you already have in place, or whether you are starting completely from scratch. However, remember the tale of the tortoise and the hare it is better to take time and care to be sure of reaching your destination. You may also be able to build the implementation costs for a quality assurance system into a particular project or funding bid (based on a full cost recovery basis).

**Step 2: Carry out a self assessment**

Some standards will offer a self assessment that you can complete, or you might be able to obtain one from your local CVS (or equivalent). A self assessment is the process of critically reviewing the quality of your own performance and provision as an organisation. It is based on specific criteria or indicators to measure the delivery of your service (including any outputs or outcomes that are achieved). For many systems it is the evidence that you can provide (to show how you reach the criteria), which is important.

**Step 3: Draw up an action plan**

The next step might be to draw up an action plan to show how improvements will be made, by when and by whom. It should outline specific tasks or milestones and who is responsible for these.

**Step 4: External assessment**

Many quality systems are externally accredited. This means that someone from outside the organisation will check the evidence submitted and issue the relevant award or certification. The accreditation will often last for three years, before an organisation is externally assessed again.

**Step 5: Implement the action plan and review your progress**

A quality assurance system is a tool for continual improvement and should be reviewed on a regular basis (rather than swept away for another three years). By keeping it up to date in systematic way, you will have an excellent framework for organisational development.
Who benefits?

As service providers, organisations need to make sure that what they do is of a good standard. A quality assurance system will help you to deliver high quality services (for your service users) through a structured framework. It also helps to deliver consistently good services. For instance by having a structured induction process for volunteers, it can aid the planning process and save time and resources, as well as making a huge difference to the experience of the volunteer.

Quality standards are also good tools to demonstrate to funding bodies, service users and partners that you are committed to continual development and can offer a consistent level of quality through a recognised system.

Further links and support

- PQASSO – www.ces-vol.org.uk
- The NAVCA Quality Award – www.navca.org.uk/services/quality/qualityaward.htm
- Investors in People - www.investorsinpeople.co.uk
- ISO9000 - www.iso.org/iso
- Common inspection framework - www.ofsted.gov.uk
- Investors in diversity www.nationalcentrefordiversity.com/iid/about
- Charities Evaluation Services – the main provider of support and advice on quality and evaluation systems for the voluntary sector – www.ces-vol.org.uk
- Salford CVS have a specialist project called Quality Counts and have number of helpful information sheets on the different types of quality assurance standards – www.salfordcvs.co.uk/salford-cvs/quality-counts

Key Words

- Accreditation the process by which an organisation is given certified recognition for meeting a particular set of standards (often through an external assessor)
- Full cost recovery securing funding for all the costs involved in running a project
- PQASSO Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations
- Quality Assurance Systems a tool to help you run your organisation more effectively and efficiently
- Quality mark certification awarded by an external body showing a standard has been met
- Quality Standard an agreed level of service or organisational performance that should always be met
- Self assessment the process of critically reviewing the quality of your own performance and provision as an organisation

For more information, visit: www.cvat.org.uk