

PQASSO[®]

quality standards for voluntary
and community organisations

a brief guide for funders
and commissioners

*'As a funder with
an interest in
strengthening the
voluntary sector,
we see PQASSO
as an important
tool for helping
organisations reflect
on their activity and
find the very best
ways of working.'*

The Baring Foundation

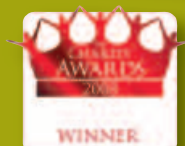


Practical Quality Assurance System
for Small Organisations

3rd edition

 charities
evaluation
services

Supported by
The National Lottery[®]
through the Big Lottery Fund



PQASSO – the Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations – is the most widely used quality assurance system in the UK voluntary and community sector. 13,000 copies of PQASSO have been sold to small, medium and large organisations in the UK. It is also increasingly being used internationally.

This guide provides some basic information about PQASSO for funders and commissioners.

What is PQASSO?

PQASSO is an 'off the shelf' quality assurance system. It offers a practical step-by-step approach to enable voluntary and community organisations to improve the way their organisation runs and to help them to improve the quality of their services. Designed as a workpack, it is written in plain English and is simple and straightforward to use.

PQASSO covers **12 quality standards**:

- Planning
- Governance
- Leadership and management
- User-centred service
- Managing people
- Learning and development
- Managing money
- Managing resources
- Communications and promotion
- Working with others
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Results.

PQASSO offers a staged approach to implementing quality through **three levels of achievement**. Very small or newly formed organisations may decide just to work towards achieving level 1. After achieving level 1, established or more complex organisations may decide to progress to level 2 and then perhaps to level 3. Each level provides guidance on what is required to run a healthy, efficient and effective organisation.

'Using PQASSO has enabled this organisation to dramatically improve its own management and the delivery of its services.'

The Octopus Project

How does PQASSO benefit an organisation?

Organisations using PQASSO can gain the following benefits:

- more effective and efficient organisational systems and procedures
- better quality of service for users
- increased motivation for staff, trustees and volunteers
- better communication among staff, trustees and volunteers
- more creative thinking which, in turn, encourages fresh perspectives and new ways of working
- increased organisational learning
- continuous improvement over time.

PQASSO focuses strongly on outcomes. As well as helping organisations to plan and implement improvements, PQASSO also gives them a framework to measure the differences that such changes actually make to an organisation and its service users.

What services are available to support PQASSO users?

Charities Evaluation Services – the author and owner of PQASSO – offers a range of services to support organisations to implement PQASSO or to consider doing so.

Training

We offer a range of training courses in London on how to implement PQASSO. Wherever organisations are based in the UK, we can also offer 'in house' training at that location.

Next Steps in Quality: PQASSO in Practice

This no-nonsense publication is a practical and detailed guide to the PQASSO implementation process.

Licensed PQASSO mentors

A UK-wide network of trained mentors – development workers, consultants and other professionals – have been licensed by Charities Evaluation Services to offer training and support to help organisations wishing to implement PQASSO.

PQASSO CD-ROM

The CD-ROM is an information management tool that can be used alongside the PQASSO workpack. It helps organisations to plan and monitor their progress in implementing PQASSO, manage the self-assessment process, record their evidence and develop action plans. It also allows organisations to print their PQASSO records in a variety of formats. The latest version of the CD-ROM includes features to support an organisation to prepare for a PQASSO Quality Mark peer review. Please note that it is not possible to implement PQASSO using the CD-ROM alone.

For more information about these services, please contact Charities Evaluation Services on 020 7713 5722 or at enquiries@ces-vol.org.uk or visit www.ces-vol.org.uk

'The Quality Audit Team at Bradford Council promotes PQASSO as a generic quality assurance framework to voluntary organisations funded through the commissioning process. To date we have introduced PQASSO to 141 groups, ensuring their ongoing development through its common sense and focused approach.'

Bradford Council

How are the PQASSO standards assessed?

PQASSO is designed as a **self-assessment** tool. This means that organisations assess themselves against the quality standards using an evidence-based method to ensure reliability.

In response to demand from our users, we introduced the **PQASSO Quality Mark** service in 2008. This is for organisations that require an externally assessed 'kitemark' to validate their progress made through self-assessment.

Organisations can use PQASSO as a self-assessment tool *with* or *without* gaining the **externally assessed** PQASSO Quality Mark. Both approaches will benefit organisations.



The **PQASSO Quality Mark** is the external assessment service for PQASSO users. It offers accreditation against either level 1 or level 2 of the PQASSO quality standards. We hope to offer accreditation against level 3 in 2009.

Achieving the PQASSO Quality Mark shows that an organisation's achievement against the PQASSO standards has been verified externally. This means that, before applying, an organisation must have self-assessed against its chosen level of PQASSO; it must be confident that it has fully met all the requirements of PQASSO at that level and have evidence to demonstrate this.

The external assessment is carried out by **peer reviewers** – members of the voluntary and community sector who have been specially trained by Charities Evaluation Services. Peer reviewers have the credibility that comes from working within the sector and from having used PQASSO themselves.

The fee for a PQASSO Quality Mark peer review depends on the size of the organisation and the level at which it is being reviewed.

Organisations may contact you to seek **grant funding** to pay for a PQASSO Quality Mark peer review. The full cost of a peer review will include the review fee and peer reviewers' travel and subsistence expenses. Organisations may also seek funding to assist with their implementation of PQASSO and preparation for a review.

For more information about the PQASSO Quality Mark, and details of the costs involved, visit www.pqassoqualitymark.org.uk or email pqm@ces-vol.org.uk

The next four pages illustrate one of the 12 quality areas covered by PQASSO: this example focuses on **monitoring and evaluation**.

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monitoring and evaluation

the standard

The organisation systematically collects and analyses relevant information. It uses monitoring and other information to evaluate organisational practice and results. Findings are used to develop the organisation and improve its services and outcomes.

benefits

The organisation needs evidence of its achievements, and of what is working well and not so well, to enable effective learning and planning, and improved performance. This standard deals with how you gather and assess that evidence.

Working on this standard will help you:

- assess how well you keep track of what you are doing and achieving
- achieve your planned outputs and outcomes
- keep track of unexpected and unwanted effects
- improve your ability to demonstrate what you have achieved
- learn from what you are doing.

what the standard covers

Monitoring means regularly and routinely gathering information and recording it systematically.

Monitoring information includes information on:

- the number and profile of users – for example, gender, age, ethnicity and disabilities
- feedback from users and other key stakeholders – for example, suggestions, complaints, surveys or feedback on satisfaction
- inputs, outputs, outcomes and impacts
- results against plans and targets.

Evaluation involves using monitoring and other information to assess the performance of the organisation and learn from this. It can be done externally or internally. It includes:

- assessing how efficiently and effectively the organisation meets its aims and objectives
- assessing outcomes for users and impacts on the wider community
- learning from what works well and not so well
- making judgements about how well the organisation's achievements and working practices reflect its values
- examining trends, averages, differences, unique events, and progress, and comparing performance with other agencies or internally.

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Each of the 12 quality areas starts with **the standard** and the **benefits** of the standard, and then describes the elements of **what the standard covers**.

11

monitoring and evaluation

The standard: The organisation systematically collects and analyses relevant information. It uses monitoring and other information to evaluate organisational practice and results. Findings are used to develop the organisation and improve its services and outcomes.

level 2

The organisation gathers and analyses a range of information about its activities and its results. The information is used for operational and strategic purposes, as well as for demonstrating accountability.

Indicators

	Not met	Just started	Progressing well	Fully met
1 There is a plan and framework supporting a systematic approach to monitoring and evaluation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Monitoring and evaluation is built into project plans at an early stage, and the necessary time and resources are budgeted.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 The organisation develops a range of output and outcome indicators, and specific targets. Indicators and targets address equality and diversity.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 The organisation uses regular feedback from key stakeholders, and information from other sources, to help assess its effectiveness, and any unwanted effects.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 People have the skills required to analyse and evaluate monitoring information effectively. IT systems are used effectively to support monitoring and evaluation.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 Some evaluation and audit processes are carried out by independent specialists.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7 Performance and benefits for users are regularly reviewed against targets. Monitoring and evaluation findings are used to inform strategy and plans, and to support bids for funding and contracts.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

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Indicators show broadly what an organisation should be doing to meet its desired level of PQASSO. Self-assessment involves different people in the organisation discussing how well the organisation is doing against the indicators and whether any improvements are needed. This example shows indicators for **level 2**.

The standard: The organisation systematically collects and analyses relevant information. It uses monitoring and other information to evaluate organisational practice and results. Findings are used to develop the organisation and improve its services and outcomes.

level 2

The organisation gathers and analyses a range of information about its activities and its results. The information is used for operational and strategic purposes, as well as for demonstrating accountability.

Sources of evidence

- 1 Monitoring and evaluation framework. Output and outcome monitoring system or documentation. Feedback forms.
- 2 Project plans and budgets, and records of project planning meetings. Funding applications.
- 3 Documented output and outcome indicators and targets. Case records and files.
- 4 Feedback on services and activities from key stakeholders including user feedback, staff appraisals and exit interviews, staff and volunteer surveys, and feedback from funders and partner organisations. Staff and team meeting minutes.
- 5 Job descriptions and person specifications. IT system and database. Data analysis reports.
- 6 Reports of external evaluations, reviews, inspections and audits. PQASSO Quality Mark review or other external quality reviews.
- 7 Qualitative and quantitative information and analyses. Reviews of performance against documented targets. Strategic documents, operational plan and quality improvement plans. Funding bids, reports to funders and purchasers, reports on review meetings. Marketing materials.

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Sources of evidence offer some ideas about where an organisation might look for evidence to demonstrate that it has met the indicators. This example shows sources of evidence for **level 2**.

action plan

This template may help you devise an action plan to improve the way something works within your organisation and to meet one of the PQASSO indicators.

Quality area:	Level 1 <input type="checkbox"/>	Level 2 <input type="checkbox"/>	Level 3 <input type="checkbox"/>					
Indicator:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Action What is the specific change, improvement or new development that you are going to make in your organisation?	By when? You may want to say when each of the stages of the action will happen.	By whom? You may want to list everyone who will be involved in the action and what they will do.
Resources needed:		
Review date for the action plan:		
Action plan approved by:		Date action plan agreed:

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Where self-assessment shows that an organisation needs to make some organisational improvements, it will need to develop an **action plan**. PQASSO includes a range of templates to help organisations to carry out an initial self-assessment, record their evidence and devise an action plan.

What costs and resources are associated with implementing PQASSO?

The PQASSO workpack costs £95 and the CD-ROM costs £54 (including VAT, excluding postage and packing). Organisations should also budget for the cost of staff time needed to implement PQASSO, as well as possible associated training or support costs. Organisations also need to allow for the costs associated with making the necessary organisational improvements that arise out of PQASSO implementation. There are additional costs if an organisation wishes to gain the PQASSO Quality Mark.

Is PQASSO only appropriate for small voluntary and community organisations?

PQASSO has been used successfully by small, medium and large voluntary and community organisations, including small volunteer-run organisations and large multi-sited organisations with over 100 staff.

How long will it take an organisation to implement PQASSO?

The time taken to implement PQASSO will vary among organisations. A well-functioning organisation may be able to meet the standards at their desired level of PQASSO within a few months, whereas for other organisations requiring more improvements it may take much longer. Research suggests that organisations which allow plenty of time to engage properly in the PQASSO process are more likely to gain significant organisational benefits (Paton 2003).

How can funders tell whether an organisation is implementing PQASSO properly?

PQASSO is an evidence-based system. Organisations need to document the evidence to demonstrate that they have fully met the relevant PQASSO standards. In gauging whether organisations have made meaningful progress in implementing PQASSO, Charities Evaluation Services encourages an open dialogue between organisations and their funders. There are a number of ways that organisations can demonstrate their progress to funders, including progress reports, evaluation reports, feedback from users and so on. If they wish, organisations could also show funders the records of their sources of PQASSO evidence. Organisations may also wish to gain the PQASSO Quality Mark as a way of demonstrating their achievement.

Is PQASSO the right quality system for all voluntary and community organisations?

PQASSO is a very flexible quality system written specifically for the voluntary and community sector and is therefore the most widely used 'off the shelf' system in the sector. However, research conducted by Aston Business School advises funders of 'the critical importance of allowing and encouraging VCOs to make informed choices about quality systems (in particular whether they are likely to fit with organisations' mission, culture and capacity)' (CVAR 2004). Furthermore, 'there is clear evidence from the

study that the adoption and use of quality systems is more likely to be a positive and beneficial experience if the process is negotiated jointly between VCOs and their funders' (ibid). It is important that a quality system integrates with an organisation's work, rather than being viewed as an 'add-on'.

At what level of PQASSO is an organisation fit to deliver contracted services?

For smaller and less complex organisations, the achievement of PQASSO at level 1 demonstrates that the organisation is healthy, efficient and effective for its level of activity. However, achievement of one of the three levels of PQASSO will not correspond directly to an organisation's ability to deliver commissioned services. At the same time - bearing in mind the nature and size of the organisation - the use of PQASSO will be a useful consideration alongside the remit and experience of the organisation, and the evidence it produces of its ability to fulfil the contract requirements.

How does PQASSO fit with other quality approaches?

There is inevitably cross-over between PQASSO and other quality systems, so the previous or current use of another quality system should assist with implementing PQASSO. However, organisations and funders should be aware that the use of multiple systems will impact on staff time and resources.

References

CVAR at Aston Business School (2004) *The Adoption and Use of Quality Systems in the Voluntary Sector: A Briefing for Funders*. On behalf of the Quality Standards Task Group and Charities Evaluation Services.

Paton, Rob (2003) 'Using Quality Models in Self-assessment'. In *Managing and Measuring Social Enterprises*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

For more information about PQASSO and its related services – or to purchase copies of the PQASSO workpack, CD-ROM or other publications – please contact:

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This guide was developed with support from Tracey Chadwick (London Borough of Tower Hamlets) and Matthew Smerdon (Baring Foundation).

Company limited by guarantee in England and Wales, number 2510318
VAT registration number 564 5833 16
Registered charity number 803602
Registered office address: CES, 4 Coldbath Square, London EC1R 5HL
Designed by Wave Published July 2008