

Quality and evaluation in voluntary and community organisations

Guidance paper 3

Key terms and definitions

Introduction

This is a guide to the key terms that voluntary organisations will come across when dealing with issues of monitoring, evaluation and quality assurance. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list, but rather a selection of basic technical terms that are used in voluntary sector management. The definitions represent those commonly used by CES trainers and consultants and are based on established research and expertise in these fields.

Key terms

A

Accountability: the extent to which individuals or groups are held directly responsible for something, such as spending or activities.

Aim: describes why the organisation exists and the difference it wants to make. Aims can be overall or specific. (See overall aim; specific aims.)

Auditing: checking that certain standards are met and controls are in place; this may be done internally or by an outside agency. It is not limited to financial standards and controls. A social audit links a systematic reporting of organisational activities to the issue of social impact and the ethical behaviour of an organisation.

B

Benchmarking: comparison of activities, processes or results with those already achieved by an organisation itself or by another organisation.

C

Charter Mark (The): a national, externally assessed quality standard for customer service for public or voluntary organisations.

Comparison group: participants in a comparison group do not receive the interventions of a project being tested. The comparison group is studied to provide more conclusive evidence that changes observed in the project participants are due to the project.

Control group: participants in a control group do not receive the interventions of a project, but match in all other respects the group that does get the interventions. A control group is used for comparison purposes.

E

EFQM (European Foundation for Quality Management) Excellence Model: a quality framework that can be used by any organisation to assess and diagnose its activities and performance.

Evaluation: involves using monitoring and other information to make judgments on how an organisation, project or programme is doing. Evaluation can be done externally or internally. (See self-evaluation.)

I

Impact: the change, effect or benefit that results from the services or activities on a wider society than its direct users. It is often long term, broad and sustainable and can include affecting policy decisions at government level.

Indicators: see performance indicators.

Inputs: resources put into an organisation to carry out an activity. Inputs may be human, material, financial or expressed as time.

Intermediate outcomes: also called interim outcomes, are steps along the way to end outcomes. They are often smaller changes that need to happen before the final, desired outcome can be reached.

Investors in People (IIP): a national, externally assessed quality standard which sets out a level of good practice for training and development of people to achieve business goals.

M

Milestones: particular planned achievements or key events marking a clear stage in completing a main phase of a project.

Monitoring: the routine, systematic collection and recording of information about a project mainly for the purpose of checking its progress against its plans.

O

Objectives: describe the planned areas of activity by which a project is going to achieve its aims.

Outcomes: the changes, benefits, learning or other effects that happen as a result of services and activities provided by an organisation. (See soft and hard outcomes.)

Outputs: the activities, services and products provided by an organisation.

Overall aim: describes why the organisation exists and the broad effect it wants to have. It summarises the difference that an organisation wants to make. It is often linked to the mission, vision or purpose of an organisation. (See specific aims.)

P

Participatory learning and action (PLA): approaches and methods used by researchers to enable people to collect, analyse and present their knowledge about life and conditions, and to plan, act, monitor and evaluate.

Performance indicators: well-defined qualitative or quantitative measures that show how well an organisation or project is performing. For example, outcome indicators are used to assess whether expected outcomes have occurred. Output indicators are used to assess whether outputs have been delivered.

PQASSO (Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations): a quality assurance system developed specifically for small and medium-sized voluntary and community organisations, or for projects within larger organisations. It provides a system to self assess and improve all aspects of an organisation's work.

Process: the method, or step-by-step description, of how a task or activity is to be done.

Q

Qualitative evaluation: an approach to evaluation or part of an evaluation that is primarily descriptive and interpretative.

Quality: the extent to which a product or service satisfies the expectations of stakeholders. Quality is about excellence in the way that the organisation is run, in service delivery and about achieving the very best results.

Quality action plan: a written plan showing the improvements to be made to an organisation.

Quality assurance system: the range of ways in which an organisation can implement quality management through use of a formal system to encourage improvements.

Quality Mark (The Community Legal Service Quality Mark [England and Wales]): a standard specifically designed for organisations providing legal information and advice to the public. The Quality Mark has different levels to choose from.

Quality standard: represents an agreed level of service or organisational performance that should be met each and every time.

Quantitative evaluation: an evaluation approach involving the use and analysis of numerical data and measurement.

S

Self-assessment: a process by which people within an organisation make judgements about their organisation's performance, usually against a set of quality standards.

Self-evaluation: a form of evaluation in which people within an organisation make judgements about their organisation's performance towards meeting its aims and objectives, usually against a set of performance indicators. Evaluation is integrated into project management.

Social Return On Investment (SROI): SROI is a framework for understanding, measuring and managing the outcomes and impacts of your activities. It is based on involving stakeholders in determining the relevant outcomes and puts financial values on the significant changes identified by stakeholders.

Soft and hard outcomes: soft outcomes are typically defined as intangible, a matter of degree and more difficult to measure. They are commonly used for changes in attitudes, self-perception or certain skills areas. These are often, but not always, intermediate outcomes. Hard outcomes are defined as quantitative and often more easily measurable.

Specific aims: statements about the particular differences an organisation hopes to make to its user group. These usually stem from needs of the user group. (See also: overall aim)

Stakeholders: the people who have an interest in the activities of an organisation. This includes staff, volunteers, users and their carers, trustees, funders, purchasers, donors, supporters and members.

T

Targets: specify the quantity and quality of outputs and outcomes aspired to. They are specific, measurable and time-bound results.

U

User satisfaction: involves finding out what users think of activities, products or services. For example, the location, opening hours or how helpful workers are.

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