

Health check benefits

This section reports on the benefits of carrying out health checks anticipated by infrastructure organisations when promoting this work. It also provides some examples of reported benefits to frontline groups as well as benefits accrued to infrastructure organisations themselves.

Listing the benefits to engage organisations

There was some concern expressed by one or two informants in the study that the benefits of a health check process might be limited where it was perceived as imposed – by funders, or as a part of a programme. However, there was a generally positive view about the benefits of the process. Where these were expressed to organisations before entering into the work, it was usually done informally, but was likely to include that the health check would:

- reveal areas of strengths and weakness
- help the development worker find out more about the organisation before supporting them
- provide an independent view of the organisation
- help demonstrate good practice to others, including funders
- make it easier to get funding
- have the potential to lead to quality standards or quality marks.

Promoting the health check – Congleton District Voluntary Action

CDVA publicises its *Health Check* on its website in the following way:

‘1. Spotting and tackling weakness: the Health Check is a quick and easy way for you to spot any problems or potential worries for your organisation. If you do have any areas of weakness, CDVA’s development workers can help you put the right systems and procedures in place to ensure that everything runs smoothly.

2. Showing funders that yours is a strong and reliable organisation: once you have the key policies and procedures in place, you can demonstrate to funders (and others that might be interested) that yours is a strong and reliable organisation. Funders and contracting agencies are increasingly looking for dependable organisations that can demonstrate they have good practice in place and have the capacity to take on long-term contracts. The Health Check document will provide evidence of your commitment to quality management and will show that you are an organisation ready to take on substantial pieces of work.’

www.cdva.org.uk November 2009



Benefits for frontline organisations

Apart from these more generally agreed benefits, development workers identified benefits that arose from their particular tool and approach. DTA underlined the importance of giving greater confidence in terms of understanding systems required for effective trading operation.

Going through the health check gives them [board members] the confidence that they have systems in place for an effective trading operation...Having assurance that they have been 'checked' is very important for many senior staff and trustees. Having a good degree of certainty that the right arrangements are in place, good information coming through to the board, having rigorous financial arrangements, good connection between decision making and practice in day-to-day operations, connections with the community – all are important aspects of organisational functioning and having someone externally to check those through is something boards welcome.

Others also reflected the particular emphasis of their tool, such as:

- providing a snapshot of where the group is in terms of meeting legal and good practice
- focusing on areas such as governance, which smaller organisations do not usually prioritise
- reviewing existing procedures and plans and how they can be actively used
- providing an opportunity to introduce ideas that groups are resistant to, such as monitoring and evaluation
- thinking about the underlying principles and conceptual aspects of managing
- getting underneath appearances in terms of the health of the organisation.

The health check process in itself could have a beneficial effect on the way the organisation communicated internally. In one case it was found that a group that did not have a culture of discussion had developed a more collaborative way of working after working on the health check together.

A number of development workers spoke of providing a kick start, or a trigger for action, and one said simply that it 'helps change to happen'. This was echoed by the three client groups interviewed as part of the study.

The questions made me stand back and reassess. Unless we are forced into doing this we won't because we are too busy to take that time out.

Have it done! You don't know if you are doing anything wrong until someone tells you. If you are new, you can see if you are doing it right before going too far down the path. Lots of organisations set up in the back room of a pub. If you are handling public money you do need to be careful and need experienced advice.

Development workers cited a number of examples of organisational development resulting from the health check, such as:

- all grassroots organisations having basic policies and some additional money
- new groups developing constitutions and acquiring their first funding
- an organisation securing additional funds and a new worker after working on its strategic and fundraising plans
- an organisation addressing capacity issues, and being prompted to apply for additional funding
- considerable follow up to address a relationship issue between staff and volunteers.

Common areas for improvement

Asked about areas most commonly prioritised for improvement, there were varied responses, possibly reflecting the differences in targeted client groups, but also the nature of the checks. For example, the CVA development worker, supporting groups working with children and young people, picked up on safeguarding issues, whereas where development work was with smaller organisations, the emphasis might be on finances, and other policies and procedures. Although some interviewees stressed that questions on a form were a 'starting point' only for health check discussions, nevertheless the focus of the tool and its topic areas appeared to influence the areas likely to be prioritised for action.

Adopting further performance improvement approaches

Quality

Most of the health checks reviewed did not include direct questions relating to quality standards. However, several infrastructure participants in the study promoted the health check as potentially leading on to a quality mark.

We say that working with the capacity checking toolkit is the first step for organisations on the way to formal quality assurance. Once they have gone through the capacity checker they would feel a lot more confident about taking part in other quality assurance frameworks. It is about gearing up.

Croydon Voluntary Action

Where the organisation also has some expertise or dedicated resources around introducing quality, the health check was more likely to lead to some organisations implementing formal quality standards after the check.

- DTA emphasises the importance of quality systems in the internal processes of community enterprises, for example if organisations are working with food, and may suggest benchmarking themselves against other organisations in the sector.
- IVAC has both quality assurance and community accountancy programmes, and the revised *Initial Assessment Form* goes into greater depth in these areas, potentially leading on to developing financial strategy and working on PQASSO.
- Halton Voluntary Action has two posts funded to take commissioned groups through PQASSO and ISO 9000. The *DeveloP-IT* tool is used for an initial meeting with the group.
- The Rochdale CVS *Service Needs Assessment* is based on the evidence required by PQASSO level 1, and the work also links into a programme funded under regeneration money to introduce PQASSO through PQASSO mentors. The needs assessment is used as a quick snapshot before organisations go on PQASSO training, using it as a marketing tool for the two-day training.
- The Surrey Community Action development worker recommended quality systems such as PQASSO and Investors in People to a number of organisations following their health check.
- A couple of organisations engaging in the Voluntary Norfolk *Organisation Health Check* have gone on to work with Investors in Volunteering.

Benchmarking

The online *GRIPP* and *Perform Diagnostic* tools in themselves permit benchmarking with other organisations completing the tool. Social Enterprise Works has separate detailed benchmarking tools in the areas of key performance results, people management and finance, but these are targeted at larger, more complex social enterprises. The study found

no evidence across the board that the health checks themselves had led to further initiatives by the groups to benchmark themselves.

Strategy

The division between those organisations working with smaller groups and lighter touch tools and those using the more complex health checks, or working with larger groups, is more apparent when looking at whether the process leads into strategic planning. One development worker, although often working with business plans as part of follow-up support, found that ‘strategic planning is a difficult area to get into, particularly for small groups.’ Another, working with small groups, said that basic budgeting is more of an issue for the groups they are working with.

On the other hand, the HVA development worker, working with the *Develop-IT* tool, which includes reference to plans in most of its sections, said that they always encouraged strategic planning. Being aware of a gap, HVA had invited six groups that had used *Develop-IT* to a course on strategic planning. For DTA, ‘strategic planning is key’, and staff sometimes run strategic planning sessions following the action plan, particularly following the full *Membership Health Check*.⁸

Monitoring and evaluation

As with quality and strategy, the extent to which the tools reviewed covered monitoring and evaluation varies. The new GAVCA *Outcomes Star* does not include a section on monitoring and evaluation, whereas monitoring and evaluation is a key component of the BTEG *Baseline Check* and is given considerable focus, being regarded as important for business planning, fundraising and reporting.

Unlike the case for strategic planning, the size of the organisation does not seem to be the important factor in addressing monitoring and evaluation; it is regarded as important even for small groups, although they may not have considered it. One development worker commented: ‘There was a lack of a cycle of planning, monitoring, evaluation and review. Some had next to nothing.’ EAVS, working largely with smaller groups, had identified that this was a common area of organisational weakness and one requiring additional support.

Follow-up support on monitoring and evaluation ranged from emailing resources, such as CES or Big Lottery Fund materials, to signposting to available training. The C3 EQUAL Partnership Programme, working with over 200 organisations between 2004 and 2007, found that ‘collecting results’ was a key area of weakness and developed work around this and Social Return on Investment (SROI),⁹ and also identified a bank of indicators that could be used. However, more generally, the research did not find evidence that development workers were able to provide more targeted support in monitoring and evaluation themselves as part of a direct follow-up.

Examples in the box on page 44 show how two organisations have benefited from health checks.

⁸ See page 19 in [Overview of the health check tools](#) for the distinction between the DTA’s *Membership Health Check* and its *Fit for Purpose* tool used more widely for community enterprises.

⁹ Social Return on Investment is an evaluation methodology that gives outcomes a monetary value.

Gloucester Nightstop: Using the GAVCA Outcomes Star Chart for Organisational Capacity Building

Gloucester Nightstop has three full-time equivalent staff and a team of volunteers. It provides short-term emergency accommodation for 16 to 25 year olds in the homes of trained and approved volunteers in Gloucestershire, and helps young people move on by providing links with the right support when they need it most. The organisation is also developing a scheme to offer medium-term accommodation with extra support.

The organisation's approach to GAVCA was triggered by the need to write a new business plan. Trustees and staff had completed the GAVCA self-assessment health check, but had found this had given a lot of information that they were unable to analyse easily; the project development manager felt that it would be easier for the organisation to focus using the GAVCA star tool.

The GAVCA development worker worked with the project development manager to complete the star; the manager was then able to carry out the exercise with other members of staff and trustees. The individual assessments were then collated on a group star chart. The organisation appreciated the clear visual representation of the organisation's strengths and weaknesses, and found that carrying out the process led to a joint understanding of what needed to be done, building a foundation for working on the business plan. Staff could then focus discussions and develop the action plan around identified areas of weakness, which were user involvement and strategic planning.

Given limited staff capacity, the development of the business plan has since then taken nearly two years, with valued input from the GAVCA development worker. The support will continue through training on the implementation of the plan. Since the health check exercise, staff have also focused more on user involvement.

Gloucester Nightstop has also introduced PQASSO. The project development manager recognised that the development of the business plan and the introduction of PQASSO would probably have been introduced as initiatives anyway. However, completing the star provided a good opportunity to focus on areas that needed to be improved. The health check and the outcomes star have been a useful part of a process of improvement.

Sandbach and District Talking Newspaper: Using the Congleton DVA Health Check

Sandbach and District Talking Newspaper is an entirely volunteer-run group, funded through local sponsorship, which has provided a service to visually impaired residents in the area for over 20 years.

When the funding development officer at Congleton DVA carried out a health check towards the end of 2007, it threw up a number of health and safety issues, and showed that they needed to do more forward planning. But of more significance, the health check prompted two structural changes:

- to the management committee
- to the delivery of their service.

The organisation had not understood the implications of all members of its management committee effectively being trustees, and their legal liabilities and responsibilities. Following the health check the organisation limited the number acting as trustees and involved in decision making.

The health check also led to a major structural change in service delivery, by introducing modern technology and increasing efficiency. The health check prompted the service to move from using analogue tapes by purchasing a boom box, and recording onto CDs and USB memory sticks. The new digital service went live in February 2009, revolutionising the method of recording and providing an improved, simpler service for the user, with better sound production.

The organisation's chair feels that the changes would not have taken place without the health check: 'No-one saw anything wrong. You need a clean set of eyes'.

Benefits for infrastructure organisations



The study identified two main benefits for infrastructure organisations in using health checks in their development work:

- enabling them to better report to funders on their development work
- providing a better service through identification of need.

Better reporting on capacity building work was a key reason for the development of some of the health checks, such as the IVAC *Initial Assessment*. In others, improved monitoring is an acknowledged benefit.

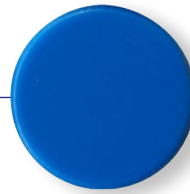
- In CVSR, referrals resulting from the use of the *Needs Analysis* are put into a central database, which helps monitoring, and also enables more joined up working across the organisation.
- BTEG provides an overview for management and funding reports, including case studies from the baseline and review data. The tool

allows BTEG to assess the outcomes of its capacity building work by recording the information in a quantifiable manner in its question 9, through a numerical rating from 1 to 7 of headline areas. (See [Using health checks – case examples](#), page 48.)

- Halton Voluntary Action uses the spider diagram to report to the Council, and will be exploring better aggregation of outcomes.

Development workers at CVP Bolsover cross check the analysis of health check results with their annual survey, helping them to prioritise areas of support. But not all organisations analysed and provided an overview of the results of the health checks as a way of assessing their own effectiveness or areas where their own practice could be improved.

Where a tool was used across a region, such as the *GRIPP* tool in Greater Merseyside and the *SCIO Health Check* in Staffordshire



and Stoke-on-Trent, it had led to greater consistency of support through the region. Greater Merseyside ChangeUp reported that one year after introduction of the *GRIPP* tool, there was greater referral between consortium members, providing a more seamless service.

A small number of infrastructure organisations or consortia had used information from health check reports to support lobbying or

applying for funding. For example, Rochdale CVS had used evidence of the need for financial management resources, and Greater Merseyside ChangeUp had lobbied for the continued funding of the community accounting project; they had been able to show that for 30 per cent of organisations, financial management was a key issue.

In this section we have identified some specific benefits for frontline organisations intended by different health checks reviewed. More generally agreed intended benefits related to identifying strengths and weaknesses, making it easier to get funding, and acting as a trigger to action and improvement. Several health checks were promoted as the first step on a quality ladder, but the extent to which this was a structured progression depended very much on the resources and capacity of the infrastructure organisation to help frontline groups forward on this. Strategy and monitoring and evaluation were areas in which a lack of support services was sometimes identified. A potential for health checks to help infrastructure organisations identify and promote services focused on user needs more consistently both within and across organisations was a wider benefit highlighted by some of the research participants.