

The Adoption and Use of Quality Systems in the Voluntary Sector

Final Report

Report by the Centre for Voluntary Action Research

www.cvar.org.uk
19 January 2004

The Adoption and Use of Quality Systems in the Voluntary Sector

**A Study commissioned by the Quality Standards Task Group
and Charities Evaluation Services**

Authorship

This Report has been written by Ben Cairns, Romaine Hutchinson and Dr Jill Schofield with contributions from a research team at the Centre for Voluntary Action Research comprising (in alphabetical order) Pradip Gajjar, Dr Margaret Harris, Shona Reed-Purvis, Dr Paul Robins, Selena Teeling and Mike Tricker.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks are given to all of the organisations who participated in the fieldwork for this Study and who gave up their time to share their experiences and ideas about quality and quality systems. Thanks also to members of the QSTG/CES Advisory Group and Stakeholder Reference Group for their valuable comments and suggestions.

Related Publications

Three other publications have been produced out of this Study:

- Key Findings for funders of voluntary and community organisations
- Literature Review
- Getting Ready For Quality • learning from experience (a guide for staff, trustees and volunteers considering use of a quality system)

Contact Details

National Council for Voluntary Organisations

0800 2798 798 www.ncvo-vol.org.uk

Charities Evaluation Services

020 7713 5722 www.ces-vol.org.uk

Centre for Voluntary Action Research

0121 359 3011 www.cvar.org.uk

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
INTRODUCTION	1
PART ONE: OUR APPROACH TO THE STUDY	2
PART TWO: STUDY FINDINGS – ONLINE AND POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRE	2
PART THREE: STUDY FINDINGS – INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS	2
PART FOUR: KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION	5
INTRODUCTION TO THE FINAL REPORT	7
PART ONE: OUR APPROACH TO THE STUDY	8
1. METHODOLOGY	8
PART TWO: STUDY FINDINGS – ONLINE AND POSTAL QUESTIONNAIRE	14
2. ANALYSIS OF QUANTITATIVE DATA AND QUESTIONNAIRES	14
PART THREE: STUDY FINDINGS – INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS.....	26
INTRODUCTION	26
3. PERCEPTIONS OF ‘QUALITY’	26
4. DRIVERS TOWARDS ADOPTION OF QUALITY SYSTEMS	28
5. EXPECTATIONS OF QUALITY SYSTEMS.....	33
6. IMPLEMENTATION	36
7. BENEFITS OF USING A QUALITY SYSTEM	44
8. LESSONS LEARNED.....	50
9. QUALITY SYSTEMS AND SERVICES FOR USERS	57
PART FOUR: KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION.....	60
10. THE PERCEPTION OF QUALITY WITHIN THE SECTOR.....	60
11. THE DIFFERENT MODELS OF SYSTEMS USED	61
12. SYSTEM ADOPTION	62
13. SYSTEM SELECTION	63
14. SYSTEM IMPLEMENTATION	64
15. THE ‘FIT’ BETWEEN AN ORGANISATION AND A SYSTEM.....	65
16. CONSEQUENCES AND BENEFITS OF QUALITY SYSTEMS	65

Executive Summary

Introduction

This is an Executive Summary of the Final Report of the Study carried out by the Centre for Voluntary Action Research at Aston Business School for the Quality Standards Task Group and Charities Evaluation Services between July 2002 and January 2004. The Study had two principal aims:

Aim One

- *To investigate the impact of the most commonly used quality systems¹ used in the voluntary sector, including PQASSO, Investors in People and the Excellence Model.*

Aim Two

- *To produce practical tools that will help voluntary organisations to decide whether to use a system and if so which one; and to use a system effectively to improve services.*

This Report concentrates on Aim One. Aim Two is addressed in the companion volumes: “*Getting Ready for Quality – Learning from Experience*” (a guide for staff, trustees and volunteers considering use of a quality system) and “*Key Findings for Funders of Voluntary and Community Organisations*”. The earlier “*Literature Review on The Adoption and Use of Quality Systems in the Voluntary Sector*” formed the first phase of the Study, and helped develop the design of the fieldwork.

¹ We are using ‘quality systems’ as a *generic term to cover the range of ways in which organisations implement quality management, whether through known systems (like PQASSO and Investors in People) or other internal mechanisms to encourage improvement in meeting stakeholders’ requirement*, adapted from “*Approaching Quality*”, QSTG, 2001 and “*First Steps in Quality*”, CES, 2002).

The field of quality systems is still developing; new definitions are regularly put forward and others contested. A fuller discussion of the question of terminology is to be found in “*The Literature Review on The Adoption and Use of Quality Systems in the Voluntary Sector*”, CVAR on behalf of QSTG/CES, 2003, ISBN 0 7199 1627 5.

Part One: Our approach to the Study

Two main approaches were used to gather material in support of Aim One:

- i. An online and postal questionnaire completed by 165 organisations.
- ii. In depth fieldwork with staff and trustees of 24 voluntary and community organisations (VCOs), 10 voluntary sector infrastructure bodies and representatives of four 'system guardians'.

Part Two: Study Findings – Online and Postal Questionnaire

The four most commonly used quality systems were PQASSO, Investors in People, the Excellence Model and Quality Mark. Most system adoption is relatively recent (since August 1999). In terms of other significant quality initiatives, there was high use of user satisfaction surveys.

The questionnaires highlight 'good practice' as a significant driving force for introducing a quality system. In terms of anticipated benefits from use, respondents generally rated increased efficiency, effectiveness, improved quality of services and enhanced organisational image higher than securing funding. The majority of users of both off-the-shelf systems and of other quality initiatives felt that expected benefits had been achieved, and would recommend the system or initiative to other organisations.

Part Three: Study Findings – Interviews and Focus Groups

The fieldwork provided an opportunity for more in-depth consideration of seven main areas:

i. Perceptions of 'quality' (section 3)

Organisations use a wide range of different definitions of both 'quality' and 'quality systems'. Three main approaches to quality were found, broadly reflecting the findings of the literature review:

- The *traditional* approach (for prestige)
- The *scientific or expert* approach (to conform to standards)
- The *consumerist* approach (to empower consumers)

ii. Drivers towards adoption of quality systems (section 4)

Discussion with Study participants about the reasons for introducing a quality system demonstrated that:

- The choice for the adoption of a quality system both in general and in particular (ie. a specific type of quality system) is mainly influenced by guidance (sometimes pressure) from statutory funders.
- Accountability is seen as an important driver, but there are multiple and interlocking forms of accountability that revolve around funders, peers and users which can result in complexity, confusion and ambiguity.

- Some organisations pre-empt the need to satisfy the mandatory requirement of funders and other external stakeholders to have a quality system by introducing one voluntarily; some organisations develop their own systems to reflect the nature of their services and clients more closely than might be available from off-the-shelf systems.
- Internal drivers to the adoption of a quality system by an organisation are seen as a need to assure users of service quality, to demonstrate a commitment to organisational development and to improve internal consistency.

iii. Expectations of quality systems (section 5)

Study participants referred to a range of expectations of quality systems:

- Organisations expected that the introduction of a quality system could contribute towards service improvements; improved organisational efficiency and effectiveness were also expected.
- There was a strong belief that quality systems would help to improve staff recruitment, development and retention.
- The possession and use of a quality system was expected to improve an organisation's credibility with external stakeholders.

iv. Implementation (section 6)

Discussion of the ways in which organisations implemented quality systems, and the challenges they encountered, showed that:

- The early involvement of staff in the implementation of a quality system encourages their commitment to its use; the involvement and commitment of trustees has a positive effect upon implementation.
- The challenges and problems of implementation are generally operational rather than ideological.
- The use of internal working groups is a useful organisational structure to facilitate the implementation of a new quality system, as is seeking advice and support from other system users and infrastructure bodies.
- Organisational 'fit' (eg. culture, size, context, maturity of organisation) appears to be a key determinant of the success or otherwise of a quality system.
- There are problems with the implementation and ongoing maintenance of multiple quality systems, especially in terms of how they are integrated with each other.

v. Benefits of using a quality system (section 7)

Discussion with Study participants about the benefits of using a quality system led to three main conclusions:

- Quality systems can act as an organisational development tool and provide a common agenda for action, for example: action planning, continuous professional development, team building.
- Major benefits of having a quality system were seen as including increased organisational legitimacy, improved reputation and credibility with external stakeholders.
- The introduction of a system provided the opportunity for an organisation to reflect upon and review their working processes and ways of doing things; this included reflecting upon service delivery arrangements.

vi. Lessons learned (section 8)

The main lessons learned about quality systems by Study participants were:

- The optimum model for system adoption is informed choice of an appropriate system with adequate support and resources for implementation; both the implementation and the subsequent operation of a system appear to be more successful where the quality system is appropriate for the particular organisation.
- There was very little evidence that volunteers and users had any involvement in the implementation of quality systems.
- The introduction of a quality system imposes demands upon all the resources of an organisation, in terms of finance, time and effort. Often the coordination and encouragement of the introduction of a quality system is facilitated by the use of a quality champion, whose role is to steer the process through to completion.

vii. Quality systems and services for users (section 9)

Follow-up discussions with staff of 13 VCOs about the relationship between use of a quality system and improved services for users suggests that:

- Use of a quality system has helped some organisations make their services, policies and procedures more accessible to users. Use of a quality system has also enabled some organisations to work more closely with their users; this includes seeking more feedback on services provided and making changes as a result.
- It can, however, be difficult to trace direct links between use of a quality system and services for users, and it may take some time before users notice any significant changes.

Part Four: Key issues for consideration

In Part Four we reflect on the findings of the fieldwork and present a commentary on some of the key findings of the Study. These expand on ideas suggested in the literature review and provide significant new insights into the use of quality systems in the voluntary and community sector. This part of the Report discusses in turn seven areas:

- The perception of quality within the sector (section 10)
- The different models of systems used (section 11)
- System adoption (section 12)
- System selection (section 13)
- System implementation (section 14)
- The 'fit' between an organisation and a system (section 15)
- Consequences and benefits of quality systems (section 16)

i. The perception of quality within the sector (section 10)

It is clear that VCOs are operating in an environment characterised by scrutiny and measurement of organisational performance. Use of quality systems has become central to the government agenda of modernising public services and raising standards. The adoption of quality systems is generally viewed by VCOs as a positive step, but there can, however, be tensions between VCOs' own concerns with quality and the need to meet external requirements.

ii. The different models of systems used (section 11)

The fieldwork highlighted four main models of system use:

- Single off-the-shelf system use
- In-house approach
- Sub-sectoral systems (systems developed for a particular type of work)
- Multiple system use

Overall, the questions of system appropriateness and achieving consistency of approach emerged as the most significant issues to be addressed.

iii. System adoption (section 12)

Discussion with Study participants highlighted a distinction between *mandatory* and *voluntary* drivers to adoption of quality systems. Where the motive to adopt a quality system is voluntary there is more chance of a system being viewed in a positive light within the organisation than if it has been imposed – though the system's perceived appropriateness or 'fit' also has a bearing here.

iv. System selection (section 13)

The question of system appropriateness is crucial. The Study suggests that it is important for VCOs to be clear at the outset what they want to achieve from using a quality system; this might aid the process of selection and perhaps help VCOs resist demands to use a system that may not fit their size, ethos or type of work. To support this, there is a need for more readily available, clear and objective information about quality systems.

v. System implementation (section 14)

The findings from the Study suggest the importance of five key issues:

- Early involvement of both staff and trustees in discussion of the importance of quality and in introducing the system.
- The need for strong leadership – from both senior paid staff and trustees.
- An implementation plan and working group is useful, as is the involvement of people with knowledge of existing working practices across the organisation.
- Quality needs to be integrated with other processes, such as strategic reviews and work plans, rather than seen as an ‘extra’ to be worked on when time allows.
- VCOs need more information about available resources to help with implementation of quality systems.

vi. The ‘fit’ between an organisation and a system (section 15)

The importance of ‘fit’ (the ease with which the system can be implemented with current working practices, its sensitivity to the organisation’s culture and its degree of simplicity or sophistication) between a VCO and quality system has emerged as a crucial element of successful system implementation. The organisation’s capacity to manage the change process involved is also a critical success factor.

vii. Consequences and benefits of quality systems (section 16)

Our Study shows that the introduction of a quality system has the potential to make an impact on internal organisational structures and to improve efficiency. It can offer opportunities for organisational growth, staff development and improved effectiveness, as well as enhancing external legitimacy. While it can be difficult to trace direct links between use of a quality system and improved services to users (at least in the early stages), quality systems can - by providing opportunities for reflection on practice - offer a valuable framework for addressing service improvements.

Introduction to the Final Report

This is a Final Report of the Study carried out by the Centre for Voluntary Action Research at Aston Business School for the Quality Standards Task Group and Charities Evaluation Services between July 2002 and January 2004.

The Study had two principal aims:

Aim One

- *To investigate the impact of the most commonly used quality systems² used in the voluntary sector, including PQASSO, Investors in People and the Excellence Model.*

Aim Two

- *To produce practical tools that will help voluntary organisations to decide whether to use a system and if so which one; and to use a system effectively to improve services.*

This Report concentrates on Aim One. Aim Two is addressed in the companion volumes: 'Getting Ready for Quality – Learning from Experience' (a guide for staff, trustees and volunteers considering use of a quality system) and 'Key Findings for Funders of Voluntary and Community Organisations'. The earlier 'Literature Review on The Adoption and Use of Quality Systems in the Voluntary Sector' formed the first phase of the Study, and helped develop the design of the fieldwork.

² We are using 'quality systems' as a *generic term to cover the range of ways in which organisations implement quality management, whether through known systems (like PQASSO and Investors in People) or other internal mechanisms to encourage improvement in meeting stakeholders' requirement* (adapted from "Approaching Quality", QSTG, 2001 and "First Steps in Quality", CES, 2002). The field of quality systems is, however, still developing, and new definitions are regularly put forward and others contested. A fuller discussion of the question of terminology is to be found in 'The Literature Review on The Adoption and Use of Quality Systems in the Voluntary Sector', QSTG/CES, 2003, ISBN 0 7199 1627 5.

Part One: Our approach to the Study

1. Methodology

1.1 Online and Postal survey

Following a pilot of 9 members of the Study Advisory Group and 22 members of the Study Stakeholder Reference Group, which resulted in a 45.2% return, an online questionnaire was distributed in January 2003 to 749 members of the QSTG mailing list and a postal questionnaire was distributed to 397 members (without electronic access) of the QSTG mailing list.

The areas covered by the questionnaire include:

- Frequency and incidence of systems (and other quality initiatives, eg. user satisfaction surveys) in use
- Date of introduction
- Reasons for introduction
- Method of introduction
- User involvement in the introduction
- Difficulties in introduction
- Expected benefits
- Success in meeting objectives
- Achievement of expected benefits
- Future plans

The original closing date for replies was extended from April to July and three separate reminders were sent out to the original contacts, to encourage greater participation. A total of 107 completed online questionnaires (14.3%) and 58 completed postal questionnaires (14.6%) were received.

The analysis of the online and postal survey is set out in Part Two of this report.

1.2 Fieldwork participants

A selection of respondents to the online and postal questionnaire were selected for follow-up study. The sample was designed to include voluntary and community organisations (VCOs) of different sizes and types, based in different locations around England, using different quality systems. In order to ensure that the sample was as broad as possible, and in particular that it reflected BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) organisations and very small organisations, we sought advice from QSTG staff and followed up suggestions made by respondents to the online survey.

We conducted interviews with:

- One or more key people (paid staff or trustees) from 24 VCOs
- One key person from each of 10 voluntary sector infrastructure bodies (local, regional and national)

- A representative of four quality systems ('system guardians') - Excellence Model, Investors in People, Quality Mark and PQASSO.

We also conducted focus groups with between two and six staff / volunteers / trustees in 14 of the VCOs.

A total of 38 interviews and 14 focus groups were carried out during June and July 2003.

In addition, we carried out follow up telephone interviews with 17 staff of 13 VCOs (13 of our original interviewees and 4 focus group participants) during October and November 2003.

1.3 Data sample

We have been disappointed by the response to the online and postal questionnaires. We are, though, happy with the very rich data from the interviews. The original design of the research included the input of the advisory group, a pilot study and several iterations of the questionnaires and interview schedules. This does, we believe, add to the robustness of the findings.

List of Fieldwork participants

Name of organisation	Organisation type	System(s) currently in use	Number of paid staff (VCOs only) [Not including sessional staff]
Age Concern	VCO	liP	21
Alcohol Concern	Infrastructure body	Developed <i>QuADS</i> for use in drugs and alcohol field	
Archway (Leeds)	VCO	Mixed approach	30
Banbury Young Homeless Project	VCO	Quality Mark	28
Barnet Voluntary Service Council	VCO*	PQASSO and liP	17
bassac	Infrastructure body	Advises members on use of various systems	
Birmingham Voluntary Service Council	Infrastructure body	Developed <i>Quality First</i> , advises members also on liP and PQASSO	
Black Health Agency	VCO	Mixed approach	38
Black Training and Enterprise Group (BTEG)	Infrastructure body	Signposts members to CES re use of PQASSO	
British Quality Foundation (Voluntary Sector Networking Group)	System guardian	<i>Excellence Model</i> guardian	
Breast Cancer Care	VCO	In-house approach	80
Campaign for Learning	VCO	liP	30
Charities Evaluation Services	System guardian	<i>PQASSO</i> guardian	
Connection (Oxford)	VCO	Mixed approach	35
Cumbria Voluntary Sector Training Network	VCO (N.B. Representatives of VCOs)	Various	Various
CVS Kendall	Infrastructure body	Advises members on use of various systems	
East Suffolk MIND	VCO	Mixed approach	111
HITS (Hope Inclusion Time Success)	VCO	Quality Mark and liP	20

Name of organisation	Organisation type	System(s) currently in use	Number of paid staff (VCOs only) [Not including sessional staff]
Homeless Link	Infrastructure body	Encourages use of adapted PQASSO	
Investors in People UK	System guardian	<i>liP</i> guardian	
KIDS	VCO	In-house approach	250
Legal Services Commission	System guardian	<i>Quality Mark</i> guardian	
Look Essex	VCO	PQASSO	0
Mental Health Matters	VCO	In-house approach	10
MS Society	VCO	In-house approach	500
NACVS	Infrastructure body	Association with CES / PQASSO	
Partners of Prisoners and Families Support Group	VCO	Quality Mark	31
Raphael House (LB Barnet)	VCO	PQASSO	1
Refugee Council	Infrastructure body	Devised <i>QUASRO</i> in conjunction with other agencies	
Sandwell Council for Voluntary Organisations	VCO*	<i>liP</i>	22
St Mungos	VCO	Mixed approach	600
South Yorkshire Funding Advice Bureau	VCO*	PQASSO	12
Trust Links (Southend on Sea)	VCO	PQASSO	9
Village Playgroup (LB Waltham Forest)	VCO	PQASSO	5
Vista (Leicester)	VCO	Mixed approach	233
Voluntary Action Sheffield	VCO*	PQASSO	46
Volunteer Development England	Infrastructure body	Developed <i>QSIS</i> for members	
Youth Action Network	Infrastructure body	Developed <i>Reach</i> for members	

* These organisations operate as 'infrastructure' bodies. However, for the purposes of this study they were only interviewed about their own use of quality systems, and not about their role in relation to members. Therefore, they have been classified as VCOs.

1.4 Quality systems in use by fieldwork participants

The 24 VCOs were currently addressing quality in a structured way, using a wide variety of different systems and approaches:

- 6 were using PQASSO only
- 1 was using PQASSO and Investors in People
- 3 were using Investors in People only
- 2 were using Quality Mark only
- 1 was using Quality Mark and Investors in People
- 7 were using multiple systems or 'mixed approach' involving either: several off-the-shelf systems; a mix of off-the-shelf and sub-sectoral systems; or a combination of an in-house system and off-the-shelf or sub-sectoral systems (this includes two organisations using the Excellence Model and one using ISO 9000)
- 4 were using an entirely in-house approach to quality (eg. internal processes for monitoring, evaluation and development).

It should be noted that the high incidence of PQASSO amongst our study sample reflects its position as the most widely used quality system in the voluntary and community sector.

Some organisations had used and abandoned other systems, or considered using another system but decided not to. Several were thinking of adopting an additional system.

Six of the 10 infrastructure bodies had either developed their own system for members' use or adapted an existing system. Three of the others offered some support or advice on use of at least one system, while the remaining organisation signposted members with quality enquiries to one of the system guardians (CES).

1.5 Interview and focus group questions

Voluntary and community organisations

VCO interviewees were asked about:

- The background to their organisation adopting a structured approach to quality
- Their reasons for choosing a particular system
- What they hoped to achieve from using it
- How they introduced the system
- Problems experienced and how they were (or might have been) overcome
- The perceived benefits and impact of using the system(s)
- Any lessons to be learned from the process.

Focus group participants were asked a broadly similar set of questions.

Infrastructure bodies

Infrastructure bodies were asked about:

- Their members' use of quality systems
- The drivers for using a system

- Members' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages both of quality systems in general and of particular systems
- Whether they had developed a system specifically for the use of their members
- What support they offered in relation to quality systems
- Their ideas about action needed to address some of the difficulties in introducing and implementing quality systems.

System Guardians

We asked system guardians about:

- The use of their particular system
- Its purpose and applicability and reasons for using it
- The problems and benefits of the system
- Support offered in using it
- Its compatibility with other systems
- Any plans to change it
- Wider problems in the field of quality systems.

All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

1.6 Analysis of data and presentation of findings

We have attempted to reflect the breadth of views presented under each of the themes discussed and not to over-generalise, but, with such a diverse group of Study participants and range of experiences, we cannot fully represent the detail of all the comments made. We have highlighted in particular where similar points were made by a number of Study participants, or where issues relate to a unique combination of organisational factors. At the end of each section we present a summary of key points.

The data has been analysed thematically using a system of open coding of the interview and focus group transcripts. These codes were then analysed in relation to each other and have resulted in the eight key emerging findings to date, set out in Part Three of this report.

As is the usual case, we are presenting the findings anonymously; we simply refer, where appropriate, to comments as emanating from VCOs, infrastructure bodies or system guardians. Where it is relevant to do so, we distinguish VCO Study participants as 'interviewee' or 'focus group participant'. Where such distinctions are not necessary we use the more general term 'Study participant'.

Summary

- Three approaches to data gathering were taken:
- a questionnaire that was distributed by post and also online
- one to one and focus group based interviews
- additional, follow up interviews to explore the benefits of a quality system to services provided to users
- 165 questionnaires were completed and analysed using cross tabulations
- 38 interviews and 14 focus groups were completed and analysed thematically
- 17 follow up interviews were completed

Part Two: Study Findings – Online and Postal Questionnaire

2. Analysis of Quantitative Data and Questionnaires

2.1 Introduction

The organisational classification used within the questionnaire was based upon the NCVO classification used in their membership data base. Circulation of the questionnaire was based upon the QSTG mailing list and the data presented here is drawn from those questionnaires completed both on-line and through the post.

The terminology used is “Off-the-shelf systems” and “Other Significant Quality Initiatives”; this data is represented separately in the tables. Respondents may use a combination of off-the-shelf systems and / or other significant quality initiatives; hence their answers are not mutually exclusive.

2.2 Most Commonly Used System

TABLE 1

System In Operation From	PQASSO	Investors in People	Quality Mark	Quality First	Social Audit	Excellence Model	Charter Mark	ISO 9000 / BS 5750
Since Oct 2002	20	10	4	1	0	4	0	0
Between Oct 01 & Oct 02	15	10	4	0	0	5	1	0
Between Sept 00 and Sept 01	9	12	3	0	0	3	1	0
Between Aug 99 and Aug 00	8	12	3	3	1	4	0	1
Before Aug 99	5	18	1	0	0	4	0	5
Don't know	2	2	0	0	0	1	1	4
System Adapted to Organisation								
System adapted to Organisation	15	24	6	4	1	13	0	5
System not adapted	41	36	11	1	0	7	3	2
System Adapted By								
The supplier	3	3	1	0	0	0	0	0
Volunteers	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Paid staff	9	12	4	1	0	8	0	6
Paid consultant	1	10	0	0	0	4	0	2
Other	4	5	2	3	0	3	0	0
Reason(s) For Introducing Quality System								
Pressure from funders	9	5	4	0	0	4	1	1
Considered it was good practice	54	65	16	4	1	20	2	10
Other	11	8	3	0	1	3	0	2

TABLE 1a

Initiative In Operation From	User satisfaction surveys	Benchmarking against standards	Benchmarking against other organisations	Accreditation from professional bodies
Since Oct 2002	11	7	4	7
Between Oct 01 & Oct 02	19	9	3	5
Between Sept 00 and Sept 01	18	6	4	1
Between Aug 99 and Aug 00	5	2	3	2
Before Aug 99	25	10	7	8
Don't know	8	6	3	4
System Adapted To				
System adapted to Organisation	not available online			
System not adapted	not available online			
System Adapted By				
The supplier	not available online			
Volunteers	1	1	0	0
Paid staff	74	31	18	18
Paid consultant	6	1	4	1
Other	1	0	0	3

The data from our respondents indicates that the four most commonly used quality systems are PQASSO, Investors in People, the Excellence Model and Quality Mark. It appears that Investors in People has been used for longer than PQASSO, with PQASSO having a more recent adoption, mainly since October 2001. However, nearly all the system adoption reported is relatively recent – ie. since August 1999 - with the exception of ISO 9000/BS 5750.

There is no dominant picture of system adaptation but there is a suggestion of a slight preference not to adapt PQASSO, Investors in People or Quality Mark. Users of the Excellence Model appear to have been involved in more adaptation of the system to suit their needs; where a system was adapted this was carried out by paid staff or by paid consultants.

In terms of the Other Significant Quality Initiatives, the use of User Satisfaction Surveys dominated the response (the three other categories demonstrate equal use with each other). There is evidence that User Satisfaction Surveys were in use before 1999; the other three initiatives show more recent adoption.

2.3 What Sort of Organisation and What Sort of System

TABLE 2

Beneficiaries of Organisation	PQASSO	Investors in People	Quality Mark	Quality First	Social Audit	Excellence Model	Charter Mark	ISO 9000 / BS 5750
Children/young people	14	29	5	1	1	11	2	4
Elderly/old people	10	19	4	2	1	9	1	3
People with disabilities/special needs	11	29	3	1	1	12	1	4
People of particular ethnic/racial origin	4	13	4	1	1	4	0	1
Other charities/voluntary bodies	22	25	4	1	2	8	0	1
Other defined groups	9	14	5	1	1	2	2	3
The general public/mankind	6	11	3	2	1	4	1	2
The environment (eg. heritage)	2	7	0	0	0	2	0	0
Field of work of Organisation								
General charitable purposes	17	25	5	2	2	6	1	2
Education and training	20	38	8	2	2	11	1	6
Medical/health/sickness	8	16	3	1	0	4	1	4
Disability	9	20	1	0	0	6	1	2
Relief of poverty	7	9	5	1	0	2	0	2
Overseas aid/famine relief	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Accommodation/Housing	6	15	1	0	0	4	1	4
Religious activities	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Arts/culture	6	9	2	0	0	3	0	1
Sport/recreation	6	6	0	0	0	1	1	0
Animals	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0
Environment/Conservation/Heritage	3	6	0	0	0	3	0	0
Economic/community	13	19	5	1	1	8	0	2
Other or none of these	9	4	0	0	0	0	0	0
Social care and development	12	28	4	1	0	10	0	5
Business associations/unions	0	4	0	0	0	1	0	1
Law, advocacy and politics	4	6	2	0	0	3	0	0
Function of Organisation								
Makes grants to individuals (inc loans)	3	6	0	0	0	2	1	2
Makes grants to organisations (inc schools)	11	13	3	2	1	4	0	3
Provides other finance (eg. pensions)	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	0
Provides human resources (staff/volunteers)	9	24	6	2	1	2	2	4
Provides buildings/facilities/open space	12	19	6	2	1	4	1	4
Provides services (eg. care/counselling)	17	30	7	2	2	9	2	6
Provides advocacy/advice/information	23	33	11	2	2	10	0	4
Sponsors or undertakes research	8	16	5	2	1	5	0	2
Acts as an umbrella or resource body	22	22	6	2	2	6	0	1
Other or none of these	5	8	1	0	0	4	0	2
Number of Volunteers								
0 - 4	27	25	6	2	2	7	1	2
5 - 9	4	4	2	0	0	0	0	0
10 - 19	5	6	2	0	0	3	0	0
20 - 49	6	9	2	0	0	3	0	2
50 +	16	28	5	2	0	11	2	5

The Adoption and Use of Quality Systems in the Voluntary Sector

Final Report, 19 January 2004

Number of Paid Staff	PQASSO	Investors in People	Quality Mark	Quality First	Social Audit	Excellence Model	Charter Mark	ISO 9000 / BS 5750
0 - 4	36	29	8	3	3	8	2	3
5 - 9	10	5	2	0	0	2	0	0
10 - 19	22	13	5	1	1	4	0	0
20 - 49	22	30	8	1	0	8	0	3
50 +	26	67	11	3	0	26	4	12

TABLE 2a

Beneficiaries of Organisation	User satisfaction surveys	Benchmarking against standards	Benchmarking against other organisations	Accreditation from professional bodies
Children/young people	36	18	10	17
Elderly/old people	27	12	4	7
People with disabilities/special needs	37	18	12	14
People of particular ethnic/racial origin	18	11	9	12
Other charities/voluntary bodies	36	16	12	12
Other defined groups	25	12	8	10
The general public/mankind	17	9	8	6
The environment (eg. heritage)	9	3	1	6
Field of work of Organisation				
General charitable purposes	32	14	8	10
Education and training	46	22	13	17
Medical/health/sickness	22	9	6	8
Disability	24	10	7	8
Relief of poverty	17	8	6	5
Overseas aid/famine relief	2	2	1	0
Accommodation/Housing	14	9	9	6
Religious activities	4	1	0	1
Arts/culture	13	6	7	4
Sport/recreation	8	3	1	4
Animals	1	0	0	1
Environment/Conservation/Heritage	11	3	2	6
Economic/community	27	13	9	12
Other or none of these	9	1	0	1
Social care and development	31	14	12	11
Business associations/unions	4	3	2	2
Law, advocacy and politics	9	5	4	4
Function of Organisation				
Makes grants to individuals (inc loans)	10	2	1	4
Makes grants to organisations (inc schools)	20	9	6	6
Provides other finance (eg. pensions)	1	0	0	1
Provides human resources (staff/volunteers)	25	10	8	15
Provides buildings/facilities/open space	22	9	7	7
Provides services (eg. care/counselling)	41	19	11	18
Provides advocacy/advice/information	46	24	9	18
Sponsors or undertakes research	17	9	6	8
Acts as an umbrella or resource body	37	16	10	10
Other or none of these	11	3	4	4
Number of Volunteers				
0 - 4	47	24	16	11
5 - 9	5	1	2	1
10 - 19	8	1	0	3
20 - 49	15	6	4	5
50 +	36	17	10	18

Number of Paid Staff	User satisfaction surveys	Benchmarking against standards	Benchmarking against other organisations	Accreditation from professional bodies
0 - 4	59	30	17	13
5 - 9	14	4	7	2
10 - 19	27	7	4	8
20 - 49	41	16	9	16
50 +	81	41	27	37

Tables 2 and 2a show the results of our respondents' sample in terms of the organisational characteristics based on the NCVO membership database. The dominance of Investors in People and PQASSO is clear, although the Excellence Model appears to have stronger usage for organisations whose beneficiaries are children & young people and people with disabilities & special needs. In respect of the field of work of the organisation, the Excellence Model is well represented in education / training and social care and development. The Excellence Model also appears to be one of the systems in use where the number of volunteers and paid staff is over 50.

Respondents who use User Satisfaction Surveys dominate the analysis of the data from the Other Significant Quality Initiatives section. Compared to the use of off-the-shelf systems there is a broader spread of organisational type for those organisations that have User Satisfaction Surveys and Benchmarking. This applies in particular for those organisations whose function is to provide human resources; buildings and facilities; care and counselling or advocacy services.

For organisations whose field of work is religious activity; arts / culture; sport / recreation; animals; the environment and conservation; there is a higher incidence of the use of User Satisfaction Surveys compared to off-the-shelf quality systems. Using Accreditation from Professional Bodies as a quality initiative was stronger for those organisations whose beneficiaries were people with disabilities; people of a particular ethnic and racial origin, or other charitable bodies; and who were involved, as a field of work, in general charitable purposes; education / training; economic and community activity or who particularly provided care, counselling and advocacy services.

The use of User Satisfaction Surveys seems to be strong regardless of whether there is a small number of volunteers (eg. 0 – 4) or high number (eg. 50+). A similar pattern is seen in respect of the number of paid staff.

2.4 Why and How the System Was Introduced

TABLE 3

Reason(s) For Introducing Quality System	PQASS O	Investors in People	Quality Mark	Quality First	Social Audit	Excellence Model	Charter Mark	ISO 9000 / BS 5750
Pressure from funders	9	5	4	0	0	4	1	1
Considered it was good practice	54	65	16	4	1	20	2	10
Other	11	8	3	0	1	3	0	2
Method of Introducing System								
Used existing in-house staff	47	52	18	1	0	18	3	10
Recruited new staff	4	1	2	0	0	0	0	2
Used seconded staff	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	0
In-house steering group or working party	29	30	3	0	0	13	0	2
Trustees' group	13	6	2	0	0	3	0	0
Other	8	8	2	3	1	4	0	0
User Involvement								
Yes	26	19	3	1	1	9	1	3
No	27	38	12	0	0	10	2	2
Experience of Problems in Introducing System								
Yes	26	12	6	0	1	10	1	3
No	21	35	7	4	0	8	1	2
Don't know	8	12	5	0	0	1	1	5

TABLE 3a

Reason(s) For Introducing Quality System	User satisfaction surveys	Benchmarking against standards	Benchmarking against other organisations	Accreditation from professional bodies
Pressure from funders	14	11	1	6
Considered it was good practice	80	35	23	22
Other	18	6	4	7
Expected Benefits				
Increased efficiency	26	21	16	8
Increased effectiveness	56	30	18	14
Improved / assured quality of services	71	31	18	22
Enhanced organisational image	42	22	11	17
Secure funding	23	15	6	14
Other	13	5	1	1
Method of Introducing System				
Used existing in-house staff	79	33	22	23
Recruited new staff	5	5	0	2
Used seconded staff	1	0	1	0
In-house steering group or working party	12	10	5	12
Trustees' group	4	3	1	4
Other	4	1	2	1
User Involvement				
Yes	63	19	6	12
No	18	16	15	13

There is a very clear picture of the reasons for introducing a quality system and this is mainly because it was considered to be 'good practice'. In terms of user involvement in the introduction of the system, PQASSO and the Excellence Model respondents reported almost equal levels of both involvement and non-involvement. For Investors in People and Quality Mark less user involvement was reported. When reporting the experience of introduction, slightly higher number of respondents reported problems in introducing PQASSO and the Excellence Model than for Investors in People.

In respect of the Other Significant Quality Initiatives the pattern of results is similar, with the main reason for introduction being 'good practice'. There is also less evidence of experiencing problems when implementing these initiatives.

For both approaches, (off-the-shelf and other initiatives), the method of introduction was similar, and dominated by the use of in house staff, the use of a steering group and, to a lesser extent, for Other Significant Quality Initiatives the use of a trustees group.

TABLE 4

Expected Benefits	PQASSO	Investors in People	Quality Mark	Quality First	Social Audit	Excellence Model	Charter Mark	ISO 9000 / BS 5750
Increased efficiency	40	33	7	1	1	15	2	8
Increased effectiveness	49	49	9	4	1	16	2	7
Improved / assured quality of services	51	46	17	4	1	18	3	9
Enhanced organisational image	43	59	15	4	1	13	3	8
Secure funding	27	22	9	1	1	6	1	3
Other	14	7	2	1	0	2	0	0
Achievement of Expected Benefits								
Completely	1	5	2	0	0	3	0	1
Largely	23	34	6	0	1	6	1	6
To a limited extent	13	9	8	3	0	8	1	0
Not at all	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	0
Don't know	14	11	2	1	0	1	1	3
Success of System in Relation to Meeting Its Objectives								
Very successful	11	19	4	0	0	7	0	3
Fairly successful	26	37	11	3	1	10	2	4
Not very successful	4	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Not at all successful	1	2	0	0	0	1	0	0
Don't know	13	5	2	1	0	2	1	3

TABLE 4a

Expected Benefits	User satisfaction surveys	Benchmarking against standards	Benchmarking against other organisations	Accreditation from professional bodies
Increased efficiency	26	21	16	8
Increased effectiveness	56	30	18	14
Improved / assured quality of services	71	31	18	22
Enhanced organisational image	42	22	11	17
Secure funding	23	15	6	14
Other	13	5	1	1
Achievement of Expected Benefits				
Completely	6	4	2	3
Largely	42	20	9	14
To a limited extent	26	11	8	5
Not at all	0	0	1	0
Don't know	8	3	3	4
Success of System in Relation to Meeting Its Objectives				
Very successful	26	11	3	11
Fairly successful	53	19	14	11
Not very successful	0	4	4	2
Not at all successful	0	0	0	0
Don't know	6	3	2	2

In respect of achieving the expected benefits from off-the-shelf systems, our respondents rated increased efficiency, effectiveness, improved quality of service and enhanced organisational image higher than securing funding. This pattern is repeated for Other Significant Quality Initiatives, with the desire to improve the quality of service again dominating, particularly in respect of those respondents who had introduced User Satisfaction Surveys. The actual achievement of expected benefits was largely met in both categories. In addition, the level of success for both categories was rated mainly "very successful" and "fairly successful".

2.5 The future and recommendation to other organisations.

TABLE 5

Recommendation to Other Organisations to Adopt Similar System	PQASSO	Investors in People	Quality Mark	Quality First	Social Audit	Excellence Model	Charter Mark	ISO 9000 / BS 5750
Yes	50	50	13	1	1	19	2	4
No	1	3	1	0	0	1	0	0
Future Plan(s) for System								
Continue to use it	50	56	18	1	1	16	2	5
Adapt it	9	6	3	0	1	4	0	3
Abandon it	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Replace it with another system	4	1	0	0	0	0	0	0
Other	11	12	4	3	0	1	1	5

TABLE 5a

Recommendation to Other Organisations to Adopt Similar System	User satisfaction surveys	Benchmarking against standards	Benchmarking against other organisations	Accreditation from professional bodies
Yes	79	32	20	20
No	1	1	2	0
Future Plan(s) for System				
Continue to use it	58	34	21	24
Adapt it	36	10	5	2
Abandon it	1	1	2	0
Replace it with another system	3	0	0	1
Other	5	0	0	1

For the off-the-shelf systems there is a very clear reported commitment to continue using the system, with quite low levels of future adaptation suggested. Furthermore, most respondents would recommend the use of the systems to other organisations. The findings are similar for Other Significant Quality Initiatives, except that a higher level of adaptation is suggested for User Satisfaction Surveys.

Part Three: Study Findings – Interviews and Focus Groups

Introduction

In Part Three we set out the findings from our interviews and focus groups with study participants. First, we explore six areas:

- Perceptions of 'quality'.
- Drivers towards adoption of quality systems.
- Expectations of quality systems.
- Implementation.
- Benefits of using a quality system.
- Lessons learned.

Second - in Part Three, Section Nine - we address the relationship between the adoption and use of quality systems by VCOs and their services for users / beneficiaries. This area was covered in follow up fieldwork, carried out in October 2003.

3. Perceptions of 'quality'

All focus group participants and VCO and infrastructure body interviewees were asked at the beginning of the discussion about their understanding of the word 'quality'. While almost all saw it as a positive attribute, rather than a neutral concept, a huge range of definitions was offered. This is in line with the findings of the literature review, which noted that there is no uniformly agreed definition of the word 'quality' and its related concepts, and that the term is put to different uses, to serve different purposes. The literature review discussed a range of different approaches to quality, for example the 'traditional' approach (to convey prestige and positional advantage), a 'scientific' or 'expert' approach (to conform to standards determined by experts) and a 'consumerist' approach (to empower the consumer).

Some Study participants adopted a 'traditional' approach, for example:

'delivering services to the best standard possible, and running the organisation effectively and efficiently'.

Others preferred a 'scientific' approach, for example:

'a set of standards that provide known quality'.

A third group of definitions focused more on the concept of quality being about meeting users' needs, for example:

'the processes an organisation needs to use to meet stakeholders' expectations'.

Within these broad categories were many overlaps and differences of emphasis – for example some people described quality as being about process, while others focused on outcomes.

Although the understanding of the concept amongst our Study participants was far from uniform, certain words or phrases did, however, recur in the definitions offered. Those most frequently occurring are:

- 'minimum standard' / 'measurable standards' / 'highest possible standard'.
- 'conformance to requirements' / 'fitness for purpose'.
- 'best practice' / 'good practice'.

This suggests that there is at least some broad agreement about the meaning of 'quality', even if Study participants approach it from many different directions.

Summary

- Organisations use a wide range of different definitions of both 'quality' and 'quality systems'.
- The findings from the empirical work broadly reflected those from the literature review, namely that we found three approaches to quality:
 - the traditional approach (for prestige).
 - the scientific or expert approach (to conform to standards).
 - the consumerist approach (to empower consumers).

4. Drivers towards adoption of quality systems

4.1 Drivers towards adoption of quality systems in general

Analysis of the fieldwork material suggests that drivers towards adoption of a quality system *in general* need to be distinguished from reasons for using a *particular* system.

4.1.1 The views of infrastructure bodies

External drivers

Infrastructure bodies clearly saw external factors, most notably funders, as a significant driver towards adoption of quality systems. Five of the 10 interviewees answered 'mainly funders' in response to being asked about drivers. This might not necessarily mean a particular funder demanding use of a specific quality system (though this was sometimes the case) but certainly reflected an awareness amongst VCOs of the general funding environment, and a recognition that funders have an increasing expectation that organisations they fund will have some way of measuring and ensuring quality. Infrastructure bodies also noted a growing recognition amongst their members of the need to demonstrate accountability to, and secure legitimacy with, a variety of external stakeholders:

'Use of quality systems is a significant issue for most of our members. Whatever type of organisation they are; either a membership organisation, local authority or other funder will be pushing the idea.'

Use of quality systems was seen as one way of demonstrating accountability. The other main external driver referred to was the influence of the infrastructure bodies themselves.

Internal drivers

Most infrastructure bodies referred also to the role of internal drivers, in particular wanting to assure users of service quality, a general commitment to organisational development or desire for internal consistency. Three of these agencies saw their members as motivated equally by internal and external drivers. One infrastructure body, for example, commented that:

'organisations are becoming increasingly aware that they need a form of quality system. This is partly because funders are asking more about whether they have a quality system, but also because they need it in order to progress as an organisation.'

4.1.2 The views of system guardians

The interviews with system guardians offer a slightly different perspective on the question of drivers. Guardians on the whole saw a mix of internal and external drivers, and did not point to funders as the most significant influence, though two of them very clearly felt that VCOs are too ready to respond to external pressures and often lack confidence to question the approach being suggested, for example:

'if they respond passively to external pressures and are not themselves clear what they want to do, they are less likely to benefit from the process.'

4.1.3 The views of VCOs

Of the 24 voluntary organisations, six described themselves as being motivated towards use of a quality system solely by internal drivers, such as wanting a more structured approach at a time of organisational growth; needing to restore order after a period of crisis; concern to provide the best service to users or general commitment to demonstrating best practice. It should be noted, though, that some of these six had either adopted a quality system several years ago, or did not receive statutory funding.

The majority of the remainder cited a mixture of internal and external factors as drivers, at least so far as adoption of quality systems *in general terms* is concerned. In many cases drivers were multiple and interlocking, making it difficult to distinguish cause and effect. One VCO Study participant commented that:

'The drivers were both internal and external. It became known that there would be some pressure from funders, especially statutory bodies. We therefore thought we needed to do something that demonstrates that we provide a quality service. We pre-empted quality standards; although we didn't have direct pressure from partner organisations we knew we had to deliver according to some quality standard.'

The influence of funders, or more often the general funding environment, and an awareness that funders might at some point demand adoption of a recognised quality system, was clearly very significant. There is an element in many of the interviewees' and focus group participants' comments of wanting to be pro-active and adopt a system before being forced to do so:

'we knew that at some point smaller organisations would probably be required by funders to use a quality system.'

One national body, currently using its own approach to quality based on a close relationship with users, felt under increasing pressure from funders to adopt a recognised system:

'on all the application forms, contracts and tenders there is a question which says – which quality assurance system does your organisation follow?'

For several Study participants, an external factor such as the funding environment or the influence of an infrastructure body simply gave a further push to an organisation already considering using a quality system.

Other (less common) external drivers included existing links with a system guardian or awareness raising by national bodies.

For those organisations citing both internal and external factors, internal drivers included the need to bring order and improve systems, a desire to achieve consistency, wanting to improve service quality or previous experience of quality systems elsewhere. Some of these internal drivers may also be considered as reactions to an external climate that places increasing stress on accountability, effectiveness and efficiency.

This mixture of internal and external drivers is broadly in line with the research discussed in the literature review, which noted the significant influence of government initiatives and

funders' requirements, but also a concern with self-evaluation within the voluntary and community sector (VCS).

4.2 Choice of a particular quality system

As we have noted above, VCOs' reasons for adopting a recognised quality system, or for developing their own, were influenced by a number of factors. While the drivers to adoption of a quality system *in general* cannot be totally separated from those towards adoption of a *particular* system or approach, it is useful to note the routes by which organisations came to be using a specific approach to quality.

Analysis of the VCO interview and focus group material suggests that organisations adopted a *particular* system for one of four main reasons:

- External pressure
- Being steered towards a particular system
- Organisation steering itself towards a particular system
- Weighing up the options

4.2.1 External pressure

Several interviewees referred to statutory funders now requiring use of a particular quality system. For some agencies working with vulnerable people, local authority funders required use of the *Supporting People* Quality Assurance Framework. One organisation in the advice field was now expected to use Quality Mark, another had been required by their local authority to use the Excellence Model (rather than PQASSO, which they had started working on), while another funder had demanded use of PQASSO (despite the organisation considering it inappropriate for a body of their size). Examples of comments made by agencies experiencing external pressure include:

'Quality Assurance Framework – funding dictated; no choice',

and

'The local authority offered the system as 'available' and indicated that we 'should' do it.'

External pressure may also come from national infrastructure / membership bodies, some of whom require adoption of their own quality system as a condition of membership. More usually, however, the role of infrastructure bodies seems to be to influence, or encourage members to use a tailor-made system, but without the element of compulsion.

Case study 1

Organisation 1 had adopted an in-house system which they hoped would ensure that there was a minimum standard for all casework and increased accountability in the context of an efficiently run organisation. Later, they were required by funders to introduce two additional sub-sectoral systems. This required a huge amount of time to be spent by staff and managers in setting up new systems and action plans. While staff felt that there might be some benefits for users, their main feeling was that:

'there was no choice. It required an overwhelming amount of time and work and there is a real concern about how it will all fit in with the internal system,'

and:

'there are no hopes of the system except to achieve funding.'

4.2.2 Being steered towards a particular system

While the adoption of some systems can be attributed to funders' requirements, other Study participants noted how the availability of resources and support had influenced their choice of system. The adoption of some systems was heavily resourced, sometimes in particular geographical areas, sometimes more generally. Several VCOs reported that they had considered adopting a quality system and were then approached to participate in a pilot project, either the NACVS / Charities Evaluation Services PQASSO pilot, or, in one instance, an Investors in People initiative run by a Learning and Skills Council:

'the opportunity arose to get involved with PQASSO, and to have access to free support, because of the work being done by our CVS.'

Occasionally other external factors had influenced an organisation's choice of system, for example one VCO had adopted ISO 9000 and the Excellence Model at the suggestion of a consultant.

4.2.3 Organisation steering itself towards a particular system

Three organisations developed their own system out of a desire to reflect their own culture and improve their services to users, for example:

'there is strength in developing your own system that is based within the organisation's culture.'

Case study 2

Organisation 2 felt that off-the-shelf models were too rigid and that the huge amount of work required to implement them would not necessarily have direct benefits for users. Senior staff wanted to have some broad organisational principles in place - a mission statement, values and principle - that all stakeholders would understand. The approach means that front-line staff and service managers are responsible for their own management and evaluation, and research workers ensure consistency and support the development of quality. Staff feel that the system has enabled the organisation to be more reflective of its performance and to air problems:

'The organisation wants to be dynamic and never achieve satisfaction and never become complacent, so the quality system needs to give us the opportunity for constant development and reflection.'

4.2.4 Weighing up the options

A further group of organisations described themselves as considering the merits of several systems before deciding either to adopt an off-the-shelf system or developing their own as most effectively meeting their needs. Some of those who selected a particular system after careful consideration of the alternatives seem to have based their decision on the fact that the chosen system offered something specific that met their requirements, for example:

'Quality Mark felt far more appropriate to our work than any other system; staff liked the idea of external assessment, and the fact that CLS would assist us with the work that needed to be done,'

and

'PQASSO seemed the most appropriate because it is voluntary sector specific and is a 'whole organisation' system.'

Others based their decision at least in part on a rejection of some systems as not appropriate for them, or felt that the organisation would be unable to tackle them:

'the off-the-shelf models are too rigid and require a huge amount of work to implement,'

'we felt that PQASSO was the most appropriate; we were not then equipped to use any of the others – liP was still too complex,'

'we felt that other systems, like liP and ISO 9000, were too rigid.'

One person chose Investors in People because of previous experience of it in another organisation, and the opportunity to draw on the expertise of former colleagues.

Summary

- The choice for the adoption of a quality system both in general and in particular (ie. a specific type of quality system) is mainly influenced by guidance (sometimes pressure) from statutory funders.
- Accountability is seen as an important driver, but there are multiple and interlocking forms of accountability that revolve around funders, peers and users which can result in complexity, confusion and ambiguity.
- Some organisations pre-empt the need to satisfy the mandatory requirement of funders and other external stakeholders to have a quality system by introducing one voluntarily.
- Internal drivers to the adoption of a quality system by an organisation are seen as a need to assure users of service quality, to demonstrate a commitment to organisational development and to improve internal consistency.
- Some organisations develop their own systems to reflect the nature of their services and clients more closely than might be available from off-the-shelf systems.

5. Expectations of quality systems

We asked interviewees what they hoped to achieve, and focus group participants what they *thought* their organisation was hoping to achieve, through use of a quality system. While some of the latter group had been included in early discussions about adoption of a quality system, this was not always the case. They were generally less senior staff (or in some cases trustees), and had sometimes joined the organisation after the decision to adopt a quality system had been made. Their views about the purpose of using a quality system might therefore be expected to differ from those of managers. In practice, however, the same broad range of issues was identified by both groups, the main difference being that focus group participants put slightly more emphasis on the desire to improve services, while key staff interviewees focused more on organisational and management issues such as efficiency and effectiveness.

In some cases Study participants related their comments directly to one particular system, but more often their views do not appear to be system-specific. Most participants referred to a range of different expectations, which can be described as:

5.1 Efficiency

Participants referred to a desire to achieve greater order and consistency, measure quality more systematically and create a better framework for a growing organisation, for example:

'we wanted to achieve greater order and consistency and assist with planning processes'

5.2 Effectiveness

One organisation wanted to:

'sort out how to run things effectively, have confidence that we are doing things right, with a proper plan',

while others referred to the need for:

'more consistent practice across a diverse organisation'

or to being able to:

'learn and develop effective practice'.

5.3 Improved services

Improved services were a concern for many focus group participants, especially those working with particularly vulnerable user groups. Comments included:

'meeting needs of customers'

and:

'the desire is to improve the service provided to clients'.

Case study 3

Organisation 3 adopted an in-house approach to quality, based on a very close relationship with its users. Service managers assure quality of services through mechanisms for monitoring, evaluation and feedback, and constantly making adjustments to the way in which services are delivered in the light of this. Staff expressed the hope that the system would:

'achieve consistency throughout the organisation in terms of how operations are delivered and managed'

and

'demonstrate value to users in trying to achieve good quality practices'.

5.4 Staffing issues

Participants referred variously to a desire to improve staff retention, develop a well-informed staff group, demonstrate how much staff were valued, identify training needs more systematically or improve staff motivation, for example:

'there are two strands – internal and external. The external one is about promoting this organisation as a good place to work, while the internal strand is about knowing that we provide standards for employment and development that should be in place'.

5.5 Credibility with funders

Several focus group participants felt that their organisation adopted a quality system to:

'give a good impression to funders'.

One VCO interviewee put it more starkly as:

'a paper exercise to fulfil funding requirements'.

One had hoped that adoption of an in-house system would increase the confidence of statutory bodies to refer users.

5.6 External legitimacy

Several Study participants referred to the importance of other external factors such as:

'external recognition for the way the organisation is run',

'external validation of existing good practice',

'setting an example to other organisations in the field'

or

'making the organisation a voice of authority'.

Such comments were made by users both of externally accredited systems and of systems based on self-assessment.

Summary

- Organisations expected that the introduction of a quality system could contribute towards service improvements.
- Improved organisational efficiency and effectiveness were also expected.
- There was a strong belief that quality systems would help to improve staff recruitment, development and retention.
- The possession and use of a quality system was expected to improve an organisation's credibility with external stakeholders.

6. Implementation

6.1 Introduction

6.1.1 Who was involved?

Most VCO Study participants referred to the involvement of trustees, at least in the initial discussions about whether to use a quality system (and sometimes which one). This was the case particularly amongst the smaller organisations. In the larger organisations, discussions mainly took place amongst senior staff.

Most Study participants described considerable involvement of staff at all levels in the early stages of implementation. Ten organisations referred to setting up a staff or staff and trustee working group as a structure for implementing the chosen system; this includes most of those using PQASSO, but one or two using each of the other systems or approaches. The two large organisations that established a working group included only senior staff in the group. Two organisations, of very different sizes, referred to the involvement of volunteers in early discussions about use of a quality system; none mentioned users.

Case study 4

Organisation 4 adopted a process of extensive consultation before implementing a quality system. Following discussion at management committee meetings staff were consulted through staff meetings, supervision and individual team meetings. There were extensive discussions about what the system would involve in terms of changes to workload and work practices. Staff commented that:

'It was talked about constantly and then introduced gradually. Staff were well briefed; we all knew what was happening and were on board with the system. It has been a positive thing for the organisation'.

Many organisations of all sizes had some form of external help either with choosing, designing or introducing a system. A small number used a consultant; many others had help from system guardians or people acting on behalf of the guardians. Help from other (especially national) infrastructure bodies was mainly restricted to receiving information about available systems.

6.1.2 Securing staff and trustee commitment

Several VCO Study participants had experienced difficulties convincing some staff in their organisation that introduction of quality systems would serve a useful purpose. In some cases resistance to use of quality systems was general (that is, not related to any particular system), while in others it related to a specific system. Some Study participants referred to colleagues being resistant to organisational change in general (with quality systems seen as one aspect of this):

'there can be a reluctance on the part of some administrators to use a corporate system, because everyone has their own ideas about systems and standards'.

A more common reason for resistance seems to be that staff questioned whether use of a quality system would actually make any difference in terms of services for users:

'they thought it was just a form of window dressing with no substance',

'a bit of dry paper that doesn't mean much',

'they did not see how it would affect their day to day work'.

Sometimes this resistance was based on past experience:

'one staff member has always made it clear that she is totally opposed to the idea of quality systems. She previously worked in an organisation that had LiP status, but treated its staff very badly'.

A few others commented that it would have been easier to introduce and implement quality systems if trustees had been more directly involved or more committed to the idea. Those holding this view felt it would have given the issue greater priority or would have helped trustees have more insight into the daily work of staff:

'they would have been saying to senior managers – do this as a priority – rather than – do this on top of other things'.

Case study 5

Senior managers in Organisation 5 felt that a more consistent approach to quality was needed; they were also aware that others in their field were putting more emphasis on quality systems. Having decided which systems to adopt, responsibility for implementation was then divided between different middle managers, with limited resources and minimal back-up from senior management. While considerable progress has been made, the view was also expressed that senior staff:

'did not stress quality as a priority sufficiently, and did not realise that the organisation needed a Total Quality Management approach rather than just looking at specific areas of work'.

This, it was suggested, had limited the effect that quality systems had had on the day to day work of staff.

6.2 Challenges of implementation

We asked interviewees and focus group participants about what difficulties they had encountered in introducing and implementing quality systems. Infrastructure bodies were asked about their own and their members' perceptions of the challenges, both of using systems in general and of particular systems. We asked system guardians about feedback from users and about their broader perceptions of difficulties in the field of quality systems.

It is noteworthy that the difficulties highlighted by Study participants are of a different order from those discussed in the literature review, which referred to problems with evidence, difficulties with measurement, questions of equity and lack of relationship to users' needs

and concerns. The challenges described by our Study participants are far more practical in nature, reflecting the day to day experiences of practitioners. As such they complement the more theoretical perspectives of earlier researchers, who focused on broader concepts and theories underpinning the use of quality systems.

In general there are no major differences of perception about challenges of implementation amongst our different groups of VCO, infrastructure body and system guardian Study participants; their views are therefore presented together under two main headings:

- Difficulties with the systems themselves
- Resource problems

It should be noted also that the difficulties described manifest themselves at the stages of both introducing and implementing systems; there was little evidence of any of the problems being restricted to a particular point in time. There was also minimal evidence of any of the problems described relating more to one system than any other.

6.3 Difficulties with the systems themselves

6.3.1 Finding out about the systems

A small number of VCOs that had made a strategic choice to adopt a recognised quality system reported difficulties finding out what systems were available. A further small group commented that they might have chosen a different system if they had known at an earlier stage what was available:

'if we had known more about other systems we may have chosen a different one; we may not be so cautious next time'.

Some felt that the system they were using (generally Investors in People or Quality Mark) was perhaps not the best system for them because it did not consider all aspects of the organisation's work:

'with knowledge of PQASSO, I'd go with that first'.

Several infrastructure bodies noted a lack of clarity amongst their members about the availability and purpose of different systems:

'some groups do not understand the difference between systems'.

Guardians too commented that system selection can be problematic; noting for example that:

'there is confusion over the multitude of systems, what value each one has and how to decide which one to use'.

Guardians felt that it is crucial for organisations to know what they are looking for in a particular system. Since each is written for a particular purpose or sub-sector, organisations need to be clear about what they want to focus on in addition to the basic principle of being a well-run organisation. Working out in advance what they want to achieve is a crucial part of system selection. One of the guardians commented further that too much importance is

attached – by both VCOs themselves and funders – to the idea of a *system* – when organisations can make improvements without necessarily adopting a formal quality system.

6.3.2 Fitting the system to the organisation

Several VCOs described problems that appear to be about lack of ‘fit’ between the chosen system and the organisation. Some were being required to use a particular system by a funder, but felt that it did not relate well to their objectives, way of working or size. One had grappled unsuccessfully with the language and concepts of the Excellence Model after being forced by their main funder to abandon PQASSO. Their difficulties in understanding the system were compounded by lack of organisational capacity to address the problems.

Case study 6

This organisation had been required by a major funder to use PQASSO, which they found totally inappropriate for an organisation of their size:

‘PQASSO has been used as part of the contract with the council, but does not work for us’

Although the organisation has subsequently introduced other systems more appropriate to its size and the nature of its work:

‘being forced to keep PQASSO in the background creates problems, and conflicts between the local authority’s culture and our own can cause conflicts between systems’.

Others experienced slightly different problems fitting the system to the organisation. One VCO that had developed its own system some years ago had had difficulty deciding what aspects of its work and organisation should be included:

‘we had problems around what should be included, not included; evaluation systems – which ones to use; we had questionnaires for staff, service users etc and it was all very time-consuming’.

Another VCO had experienced difficulties deciding what parts of its work would be covered by Quality Mark:

‘the main problem was establishing whether our work was too narrow to cover the full breadth of Quality Mark requirements’.

6.3.3 Language

Both VCO respondents and infrastructure bodies had experienced problems with the language and concepts of the various off-the-shelf systems and of some sub-sectoral systems. In the main these comments focused on lack of clarity, for example one focus group participant described Investors in People as:

'like knitting fog'

while others described themselves as taking some time to work out what the language of PQASSO meant. Similar comments were made by infrastructure bodies about their members' experiences of all the off-the-shelf systems.

6.3.4 Making the system meaningful

Some VCO Study participants commented that there could be a risk, particularly with PQASSO, of

'just ticking boxes'.

They were concerned to make the system useful to different internal stakeholders, or to different parts of a geographically dispersed organisation.

Users of other systems also referred to difficulties relating systems to practice, staff not understanding the need to measure what they do or staff not feeling that the system was relevant to their work:

'staff do not always understand the need to measure what we do against what we said we would do. For example, the young people's project is doing excellent work, but trying to get staff to monitor and record it is difficult'.

These latter comments were generally made by interviewees from organisations where staff had had little involvement in the introduction of the chosen system.

6.3.5 External accreditation

Some of those using PQASSO felt that lack of external accreditation was a significant flaw, though it should be noted that others were strongly in favour of self-assessment. These different views were often expressed within the same organisation.

6.3.6 User surveys

Study participants from organisations that included user surveys as part of their approach to quality all reported difficulties with securing both reasonable reply rates and honest responses. Although most Study participants felt that the feedback gained was useful, they all felt that users were reluctant to make critical comments if they were likely to be identified. This – together with the length of some surveys, inaccessible language and questions that were too general rather than specifically related to users' circumstances - was felt to reduce response rates and limit the usefulness of user surveys as part of a quality approach.

6.3.7 Multiple systems

Nine organisations from amongst the 24 VCOs studied were using more than one quality system / approach (two used only two systems, while the other seven were using various combinations of off-the-shelf and in-house approaches). All of the latter seven experienced difficulties either with establishing coherence across systems or with collecting evidence for several external bodies. One interviewee commented that:

'it can be difficult remembering the underpinning philosophy of each system'.

Six of the seven were using one or more systems imposed as a requirement of funding.

Case study 7

Organisation 7 uses several different quality systems, some chosen voluntarily and some imposed by funders. An internal system was set up some years ago and others have been added incrementally. There have been problems working out what aspects of the organisation's work fitted with each system, and with assessing the relevance of some externally imposed systems. In all, staff felt that:

'we could achieve liP and meet the demands of other systems without too much difficulty so long as there was formal passporting across systems or at least if we did not have to do different things to satisfy similar requirements. It is a real drawback to have to produce different evidence for each standard'.

All of the system guardians felt that their own system was, at least in principle, compatible with most of the other off-the-shelf and some sub-sectoral systems, yet all felt that use of multiple systems posed problems in certain situations. Difficulties of integration could be caused by organisations omitting to consider how systems complemented each other, or failing to develop a corporate overview of quality. One guardian felt that use of multiple systems would be useful only if 'passporting' was available (ie. the integration of data requirements to avoid duplication and ensure compatibility of assessment processes).

It is also noteworthy that 11 VCOs were considering introducing a further quality system, either for reasons related to the funding environment or because an additional system seemed more appropriate to their work.

6.4 Resource problems

Most VCO Study participants, especially those from smaller organisations, said that they had experienced inter-linked resource problems of time, amount of paperwork and staff availability. One Study participant, for example, felt that:

'we would have made more progress if we had more organisational capacity'.

System guardians also noted that problems can arise because organisations identify the need for changes, but then either lack the resources to make those changes or are faced with unrealistic deadlines imposed by external bodies for taking action. Both of these difficulties reduce the impact of using a quality system.

6.4.1 Time

Many smaller organisations had at the outset been concerned about the amount of time implementing a system would take, in terms both of time to attend meetings and time to do work such as developing new policies. This was a concern of almost all PQASSO users, but also of some users of other systems. In general, VCOs had managed to address the problem, by sharing out the work, employing staff for extra hours or by not setting unrealistic deadlines, for example:

'The Chair and Honorary Secretary went through the papers and developed activity sub-groups; guardians were appointed and they worked to get appropriate evidence.'

Time seems to have been an initial problem overcome, or at least accepted, as work on implementing the system developed. A number of Study participants, however, pointed out that work on quality systems would never be seen as a real priority while staff and trustees treated it as an 'add-on' rather than as integral to the organisation's work. One infrastructure body interviewee noted that:

'time is a particular problem if people see quality as something separate; this makes them begrudge the time or reluctant to devote resources to it.'

6.4.2 Amount of paperwork

Users of different systems at times found the quantity of paperwork off-putting. For some this related to the need to produce evidence for assessors, while for others the amount of work involved in working through PQASSO was daunting.

'It felt like a mountain'

was how one VCO interviewee described her feelings at the outset.

6.4.3 Staff availability

Some Study participants felt that their organisations' ability to develop work on quality systems had been hampered by limited staff availability. In some there were simply no staff whose remit was to work on quality issues; work with users took precedence and anything else was seen as an 'extra' to be squeezed in on top of other work. As one focus group participant described it:

'even though work on quality systems feels like a positive development it just becomes something else you have to do and then you lose the commitment.'

While some organisations did have staff with a brief for quality work, it was not always felt to be at a sufficiently senior level in the organisation, nor supported by adequate resources.

Summary

- The early involvement of staff in the implementation of a quality system encourages their commitment to its use.
- The involvement and commitment of trustees, especially as champions of the ideals behind the introduction of a quality system has a positive effect upon its implementation.
- Available resources and capacity in terms of knowledge, finance and time are also key implementation variables.
- The challenges and problems of implementation are generally operational rather than ideological.
- The use of internal working groups is a useful organisational structure to facilitate the implementation of a new quality system, as is seeking advice and support from other system users and infrastructure bodies.
- Organisations use varied search procedures to identify and select a system; there does not appear to be a systematic means by which a system is selected.
- The actual choice of a particular system appears, in part, to be a function of the availability of information about a system, including information about a system's functionality and the resource implications of operating the system.
- Even where information was available, organisations themselves were not always able to differentiate between systems and hence make an informed choice.
- There are sometimes externally imposed constraints on choice, for instance where the use of a particular system is the mandatory requirement of an external stakeholder.
- Organisational 'fit' (eg. culture, size, context, maturity of organisation) appears to be a key determinant of the success or otherwise of a quality system.
- There are problems with the implementation and ongoing maintenance of multiple quality systems, especially in terms of how they are integrated with each other.

7. Benefits of using a quality system

We discussed earlier (section 4) the range of benefits that VCOs had hoped to achieve from using a quality system. Many organisations expressed surprise that, in practice, the adoption of a quality system provided an unanticipated opportunity to engage in a process of self-reflection. In some cases the benefits can be linked to one particular system; where organisations were using more than one system, however, they generally found it difficult to link benefits to a specific system.

The benefits described by VCOs, along with those attributed by infrastructure bodies and system guardians to the implementation of quality systems, can be divided into three categories:

- Organisational development and sustainability
- Service development
- External relations

While VCOs placed about equal emphasis on all of the above three, infrastructure bodies generally stressed the benefits in terms of organisational development, opportunity to review structures, look at 'the bigger picture' and review services rather than highlighting the external benefits. System guardians too emphasised the organisational and service development benefits above improved external relations. They attached particular importance to the issue of *process*, of time thinking about the organisation's work and ways of doing things as at least as important as the end result.

7.1 Organisational development and sustainability

7.1.1 Process

Several participants commented favourably on the impact of the process of using a quality system and the opportunities it had provided for working together as a team to address issues of common concern, for example:

'Everyone, including the trustees, felt involved and their commitment has been strengthened'

and

'the chance to work on issues as a team has increased the sense of having a common agenda'

The chance to stand back from day-to-day concerns and reflect on changes required was felt by many to be useful:

'we have had a chance to reflect on performance, highlight areas where improvements were needed and work on them'.

In two VCOs, Study participants noted that use of PQASSO had provided opportunities to challenge existing ways of doing things:

'PQASSO creates a climate where staff feel comfortable to challenge existing ways of doing things'

and

'PQASSO offers a challenge to look at what core values mean in practice'.

For some organisations, the process of using a quality system had provided welcome reassurance that they already had good practices in place.

The benefits of the process itself were noted by many PQASSO users in particular, but also by users of in-house and other systems. It does seem, though, that PQASSO lends itself particularly well to a process of reflection by mixed groups of internal stakeholders.

7.1.2 Improved systems and structures

The opportunity to consider aspects of organisational systems and structures and make changes where necessary was seen as a benefit by many people. It was felt to be a feature of PQASSO and Quality Mark in particular; PQASSO was generally seen as providing the structure for system changes:

'PQASSO has provided a structure for things that needed to be done'

while Quality Mark was seen as more prescriptive about the detail of changes. Users of Quality Mark could point to benefits in terms of improved casework recording and better maintenance of data, while PQASSO users gave examples of having developed new policies, trustee induction procedures and improved systems of financial management. In-house quality systems too had led to benefits in terms of improved operating systems; participants commented, for example, that:

'having written procedures facilitates action planning'

and

'there is a pattern to the work and to evaluating it'.

Three organisations, all using different systems and approaches to quality, attributed their improved communications structures to the introduction of quality systems.

Case study 8

Organisation 8 hoped that, as a relatively new organisation, implementing a quality system would help them develop a clearer organisational plan and structure. Having taken part in PQASSO training they identified priority areas to address and began to work systematically through them. As a result, staff and trustees felt that:

'systems are now in place; we have a plan of work; we now have processes and a way of thinking as an organisation so that when things come up there is a way and a process of doing things'.

The self-assessment checklists and the step-by-step processes of PQASSO were felt to have been very appropriate to the needs of a new organisation, and had enabled it to:

'have all we need in terms of procedures and policies'.

7.1.3 Organisational growth

A number of users, of several different systems, felt that they could attribute their organisation's recent growth, at least in part, to their use of quality systems. One person commented starkly that:

'it (in-house system) has brought the organisation from the brink of collapse to being viable and credible'.

Others referred to the strength and stability of their organisation:

'we are a stronger organisation with a more robust future';

'it has increased our growth and sustainability'

and

'PQASSO has helped our organisation grow and evolve'.

7.1.4 Staffing issues

We have noted above the positive impact for some VCOs in terms of team building, both amongst staff and between staff and trustees. Other human resource benefits have also been attributed to the introduction of quality systems, especially by users of Investors in People and PQASSO. Users of both systems referred to staff being:

'more serious about their commitment',

'more professional in the way they do things'

or

'more focused'.

All of the organisations that had gained Investors in People accreditation felt that staff review and appraisal systems worked well, and that staff turnover was low.

7.2 Service development

When asked about the impact of use of a quality system on service development and provision, Study participants sometimes found it difficult to trace direct links, though they very often felt that there had been organisational changes that positively affected service provision. Most commonly, Study participants felt that improved procedures, better planning and the opportunity to reflect on ways of working had reaped benefits. Several participants

commented favourably on the opportunity to reflect on the way in which their organisation provided services and to make changes, for example:

'it encourages thinking about service provision and practice and how to deliver services'

and

'work on service reviews has been useful and feedback from users has led to changes'.

Case study 9

Staff of Organisation 9 felt that using a quality system had enabled them to reflect on their work and make changes. They had gained in confidence, enlarged their range of skills and begun to implement new services. As a result they felt that:

'we now offer substantially better services, more effectively. Membership has increased by 50%, which we attribute to reconsidering our publicity materials during the PQASSO process'.

The opportunity to reflect and plan had been welcomed by users of many different quality systems, who had then gone on to make changes, either in terms of actual services provided or in approach or style of delivery:

'it has highlighted areas where improvements are needed and raised standards of work'.

Others noted a change in approach to the work, which they felt benefited service users:

'Staff are more confident and able to follow procedures; this has facilitated a lot of reflection on practice and made staff more professional. Young people have benefited because issues like confidentiality have improved'.

'Day to day work has improved and we get good feedback from young people; lots of aspects of work, like user files, are better organised, but it is still hard to measure the impact on young people's lives'.

Participants from two organisations felt that their use of quality systems had changed the nature of their relationship with users. One interviewee described his organisation's relationship with users as:

'less paternalistic'

while in another the use of an in-house system had led to increased emphasis on gaining feedback from users and making changes in response to critical comments about services.

Undoubtedly, then, many Study participants felt that service provision had improved as a result of implementing a quality system, even if they sometimes found it difficult to trace direct links and give specific examples. It should still be noted, however, that these views may not always be reflected by users themselves; as one interviewee cautioned:

'Users come with a whole range of needs – practical, financial, emotional etc, and may express dissatisfaction if these are not met. They won't be satisfied by a service, however good, if it is not what they wanted'.

7.3 External relations

Study participants described two types of benefits in their relationships with external bodies: giving a good impression to funders and gaining increased legitimacy with a broader range of external stakeholders (eg. users, local authorities, LSCs).

7.3.1 Funders

When discussing the drivers towards adoption of a quality system many Study participants referred to the influence of funders and the funding environment, yet when discussing the benefits derived, far fewer referred to their relationship with funders. Several pointed out that they inform funders of their use of quality systems – for example:

'we mention our Quality Mark status in communications with statutory organisations'.

Only two, however, specifically referred to the impact on funders of this information; one interviewee commented that:

'it has increased the organisation's status in the eyes of funders',

while another noted that his organisation would, without use of an approved sub-sectoral system, have lost some of its funding.

7.3.2 Increased legitimacy with external stakeholders

VCO and infrastructure body Study participants focused on increased legitimacy and credibility with a range of external stakeholders rather than just on their relationship with funders.

Users of the externally accredited systems clearly felt that they had benefited, for example:

'everyone has heard of Investors in People and is impressed by liP status';

'external assessment increases motivation and justifies the organisation's existence to its stakeholders' (Quality Mark user).

Users of PQASSO, in-house systems and mixed approaches noted similar benefits:

'has given us external credibility' (PQASSO user);

'has given us a very good reputation in the sector and improved our relationship with partner organisations' (in-house system);

'our reputation has improved' (mixed approach).

Summary

- Quality systems can act as an organisational development tool and provide a common agenda for action, for example: action planning, continuous professional development, team building.
- Major benefits of having a quality system were seen as including: increased organisational legitimacy, improved reputation and credibility with external stakeholders.
- The introduction of a system provided the opportunity for an organisation to reflect upon and review their working processes and ways of doing things, this included reflecting upon service delivery arrangements.

8. Lessons learned

We asked VCO interviewees and focus group participants to reflect on the process of using a quality system and to consider what they might have done differently, and what lessons could be learned from their organisation's experience. We asked infrastructure body interviewees what action they felt was needed to address some of the difficulties experienced by their members in using quality systems. The comments of both groups can be considered under the headings of:

- System selection
- Implementation
- Resources

8.1 System selection

8.1.1 The need for information

Some VCOs regretted that they had not had more information about different quality systems and their purpose before embarking on work on a particular system. Two would certainly have chosen a different system if they had had more information. Two others felt that they would not perhaps have succumbed to pressure from funders to use a particular system that they felt was inappropriate for their organisation and purpose if they had had wider knowledge. Focus group participants in one organisation felt very strongly that staff need to be clear about the reasons for choosing a particular system, and suggested that they would be less likely to be committed to a system if it were selected mainly to impress funders.

Some infrastructure bodies echoed the view about need for more information on which to base a selection. One, for example, suggested that:

'the guardians are too proprietary; there is a need for a more generic overview';

while another felt that:

'we need more unbiased and up to date information about different systems'.

Some infrastructure bodies also felt that funders need to be more explicit about their expectations, giving clearer guidance about why they want organisations to use quality systems, and being more realistic about what systems are appropriate for particular sizes or types of organisation.

8.1.2 The importance of 'fit'

Several Study participants, who had often used a number of different systems (and subsequently abandoned some of them), highlighted the importance of choosing a system appropriate for the organisation, but suggested that this can be quite difficult. Comments included:

'the system needs to be as relevant to the organisation as possible, but it can be difficult to find one that relates to the whole of the organisation's work';

and:

'be wary of off-the-shelf systems because they may not work and may not cover everything'.

Case study 10

Organisation 10 had wanted a quality system that would help them formalise systems and provide them with a coherent framework to help them prioritise work. They had weighed up the benefits of various systems and felt that PQASSO was most appropriate to their situation. They felt that this had been the right decision, because:

'PQASSO is very organic and allows you to work in the real world. It enables organisations to work in a bite-sized way, and find a starting-point'.

This awareness of 'fit' seems to have been behind the decision of some organisations to develop their own system. The notion of 'fit' appears more important than whether or not a system is imposed. There are several examples amongst our Study sample of organisations resenting the imposition of systems they felt to be inappropriate (for example because they were designed primarily for organisations of a different size or not perceived as relevant to their work). On the other hand an imposed system that was deemed relevant generally excited less strong feelings.

Several infrastructure bodies appear to have developed their own systems as a result of feeling that existing models did not meet the needs of their members, for example:

'we developed our system because of the need for a quality framework linked to a particular philosophy.'

Others had adapted existing systems – primarily PQASSO and Quality Mark – to increase their relevance for member organisations.

8.2 Implementation

8.2.1 Preparation

Many VCO Study participants stressed the importance of preparation for introducing a quality system, making comments such as:

'the aims and objectives need to be very clear at the beginning';

'you need to be very clear what the organisation means by quality'.

Others commented on the importance of everyone in the organisation having an understanding of what is involved in using a quality system, and felt that they should have done more work to prepare the ground before starting work:

'we would have taken more time to introduce the system and ensure people understood it';

'we needed more communication with staff teams';

'staff need to be more aware of the requirements of liP assessment'.

8.2.2 Stakeholder involvement

Many Study participants focused on the importance of involving all internal stakeholders as part of the process of implementing a quality system.

Several key staff interviewees (especially those from small and medium-sized organisations) felt that more involvement from trustees would have been useful, either in the form of discussion or more active involvement in the process. For one organisation, lack of commitment from trustees (combined with limited involvement from senior staff) had seriously undermined the ability of staff responsible for the implementation of quality systems to make any real progress. A higher degree of trustee commitment might, it was suggested, have given the issue greater priority and made it easier for staff to devote some of their limited time to the process. Interviewees in another organisation made the additional point that, although commitment 'from the top' is crucial, it is also important that the process is not seen as imposed.

Infrastructure bodies' comments about stakeholder involvement stressed the need for trustee involvement:

'quality cannot be left to the lead staff member'.

Trustees, it was suggested, need both to recognise the importance of quality and quality systems and take note of the fact that, if their organisation makes a commitment to quality, staff time and other resources will be required.

Study participants also stressed the importance of staff involvement at all levels in the implementation of quality systems. In some cases this might be through participation in a working group; but for those not involved in this way regular information and discussion were felt to be important.

Some organisations had experienced difficulties because of apparent lack of senior staff commitment to quality issues. Where this had happened, leaving responsibility for quality issues with less senior staff was felt to reduce the overall significance of the issue. As one interviewee put it:

'leaders need to be seen to be practising what they preach'.

8.2.3 Users

As indicated earlier (section 5.1.1) volunteers had very limited involvement in the implementation of quality systems, and users none at all (though several used various forms of user surveys as a way of securing feedback on services provided).

Study participants from two of our 24 VCOs felt that users should be more involved in the development, ownership and auditing of quality systems. A respondent from one of these

two felt that staff might be more positive about using a quality system if users were more directly involved in their development. This view was, however, untypical.

8.2.4 The importance of process

Another recurring theme was the importance of *process*; as discussed earlier several organisations felt that the process of using a quality system, which stimulated debate, acted as a catalyst for discussion of systems and procedures and a stimulus for team building, was important in itself. Managing the process, by:

'working at a manageable pace so as to consolidate work',

setting realistic but not over-rigid timescales and remembering that:

'the journey is as important as the end product'

was felt to be crucial.

This issue was stressed especially by users of PQASSO.

8.2.5 'Beyond fully met'

Study participants in one PQASSO using organisation noted the importance of what they referred to as 'beyond fully met' – by which they meant that even if an organisation meets all the standards, levels or criteria of a particular system there is still room for improvement. This point was reinforced in various ways by other Study participants, including infrastructure bodies, who noted that, for example:

'it is important to get beyond the idea of box ticking';

'quality is about setting goals for the organisation, not getting an award';

'you need to be able to follow the process through, not just up to the point of assessment'.

Some people noted the risk with systems offering external assessment of relaxing after gaining the award; others referred to the need for some form of 'refresher' to maintain momentum, and to ensure that new staff were as aware of the quality approach as those who had been involved from the outset.

8.2.6 Integration of quality systems

Study participants from larger VCOs in particular stressed the importance of quality being integrated into all aspects of the organisation's work, rather than being viewed as an 'add-on'. One interviewee felt that:

'most people see quality as something that takes them away from work with clients rather than something that improves services; staff need to take ownership of quality and make links between quality and organisational purpose'.

Others in various ways suggested that, as one person put it:

'quality needs to be seen as part of the way the organisation does things'.

Interviewees from two organisations that had recently experienced substantial growth emphasised the importance of having quality systems in place as organisations develop:

'you need a system as the organisation expands, and that is an integral part of the organisation's function'.

8.3 Resources

8.3.1 Internal resources

Some organisations had clearly had difficulty implementing quality systems with insufficient organisational resources, and felt that it would have been helpful to have devoted more effort to clarifying what resources might be needed and trying to secure them at an early stage. Some had struggled with an externally imposed timetable; more had experienced difficulties through lack of personnel to carry out the necessary work.

Case study 11

Organisation 11 had found their chosen quality system fairly straightforward to use, and felt that the organisation's procedures had improved. The process had, however, been difficult to manage because of the organisation's limited resources:

'it has been hugely costly in terms of time and resources, especially administration time and support. It was really difficult getting all the stakeholders together at the same time for meetings. There is a serious amount of time input and cost which should be met externally'.

Lack of organisational capacity had placed major demands on staff and trustees, who expressed differing views about the extent to which the process had been beneficial.

Several organisations had addressed this problem by establishing a working group; two had employed existing staff for extra hours and found this a very successful way of handling the situation.

A significant number of Study participants stressed the importance of identifying one key person to steer the process forward – an internal 'quality champion'. While recognising the importance of all staff and trustees having ownership of quality, and of quality being integrated with all aspects of the organisation's work, many Study participants felt the need for a 'dedicated person' to guide the process. A number of people commented on the difficulty of concentrating on quality issues when staff might have many other demands on their time. The comments of people already employed in such specialist roles, however, implied the need for that 'dedicated person' to be of sufficient seniority to have authority to make changes.

8.3.2 External resources

Several VCOs also felt that they would have benefited from more external help with working through aspects of the systems. This was true even of those that had had considerable help already, for example as part of a PQASSO pilot. While many organisations praised the help they had received - in particular from local Councils for Voluntary Service, Learning and Skills Councils and system guardians - others were uncertain about what help was available. A number of infrastructure bodies had seen their members grapple with aspects of implementing quality and agreed that more resources in the form of external assistance or more funding would have been helpful. They noted that organisations need assistance with a whole range of aspects of quality, including one-to-one support with writing policy documents (especially important for people whose first language is not English); more IT support; help with understanding aspects of systems or funding to cover the cost of staff and trustees getting together.

It was noted that BME and refugee organisations in particular are under-resourced and very often have minimal awareness of the quality agenda. One infrastructure interviewee considered that BME and refugee organisations often perceive quality as:

'a white mainstream agenda'

and experience major difficulties with implementing quality systems in that context. For some of those organisations, sustainability is a far bigger preoccupation than quality. Infrastructure bodies who commented on the particular difficulties experienced by BME organisations generally felt that far more support, and understanding of their specific circumstances, would be needed to support those wishing to implement a quality system. It was suggested that some BME and refugee organisations operate within distinctive cultures and frameworks that provide an additional dimension and complexity to their work. All of these issues mean that many BME organisations are often likely to need intensive support over quality issues:

'without sensible resources this agenda is impossible, and will not have any impact on users'.

Several infrastructure bodies also commented on the fact that their own resource constraints limited the support they were able to give to members:

'infrastructure bodies also need support so they can offer more to members'.

While some employed dedicated 'quality' staff, the majority did not, and felt that they were well placed, but often poorly resourced, to offer support to their members.

Summary

- The optimum model for system adoption is informed choice of an appropriate system with adequate support and resources for implementation.
- Both the implementation and the subsequent operation of a system appear to be more successful where the quality system is appropriate for the particular organisation.

- There was very little evidence that volunteers and users had any involvement in the implementation of quality systems.
- The introduction of a quality system imposes demands upon all the resources of an organisation, in terms of finance, time and effort. Often the coordination and encouragement of the introduction of a quality system is facilitated by the use of a quality champion, whose role is to steer the process through to completion.
- The possibility for further improvement needs to be acknowledged – ie. “beyond fully met”.

9. Quality systems and services for users

9.1 Following discussion of the Interim Report by the QSTG / CES Advisory Group it was agreed that members of the Study Team would go back to our VCO Study Participants to ask them a further question about the benefits of their use of quality systems. We asked them specifically about the links between using a quality system and their services for users. In this sense the question was a 'closed' one, focusing only on the impact of quality systems on service provision and not on any other factors that might have led to changes either in what services were provided or the manner of their delivery.

9.2 Between 13 October and 4 November we attempted to renew contact with 23 VCO Study Participants, either by telephone or e mail or a combination of the two. After an initial attempt and two further reminders we managed to conduct brief telephone interviews with 17 staff of 13 VCOs (13 of our original interviewees and 4 focus group participants). The number of responses was limited by factors such as staff illness, annual leave and general pressure of work.

9.3 The response rate is, however broadly in line with the original cohort of Study Participants in terms of the quality systems in use. The supplementary question was considered by staff of:

- 4 organisations using PQASSO
- 1 organisation using both PQASSO and Investors in People
- 1 organisation using Investors in People only
- 1 organisation using Quality Mark only
- 1 organisation using Quality Mark and Investors in People
- 3 organisations using a mixture of several systems
- 2 using an in-house approach to quality

9.4 Fieldwork findings

Study Participants' comments about the links between use of a quality system and their services for users fall into four main categories, broadly concerned with:

- Improved accessibility of services
- Improved use of policies and procedures
- Involving and empowering users
- Changing aspects of service provision as a result of feedback received
- Indirect benefits

9.4.1 Improved accessibility of services

Some Study Participants felt that their use of a quality system meant that they now put much more emphasis on reviewing, monitoring and assessing the accessibility of their services to users. One agency, working with organisational users, had revised their publicity materials, reorganised their training courses and monitored take-up of resources such as the library to assess their usefulness. Another had concentrated on producing much clearer materials detailing the services they could provide while a third had focused on improving their

reception and telephone answering services and had had leaflets translated into the main community languages.

9.4.2 Improved use of policies and procedures

Several Study Participants (using different quality systems) commented that they have revised some of their policies and procedures to make them more accessible to users, to provide services more consistently and / or to provide a higher standard of services. Comments made on this theme included:

'The complaints procedure is much more accessible. People do not use it very much, but it is very clear and people know how to use it';

'The approach we have adopted as an organisation allows and facilitates (through the supervision and appraisal systems) issues to arise that need to be addressed about quality to service users'.

9.4.3 Involving and empowering users

A number of Study Participants described how their use of a quality system had led to increased attempts to work more closely with their users, and involve them in planning and evaluation of services. Two people referred to the ways in which their organisations now involve users in staff recruitment panels; another included staff, trustees, users and volunteers in planning days and had asked users to draw up code of conduct forms for volunteers. A fourth had consulted users before recruiting a new administrative worker to discuss what skills they felt would be needed by the post-holder.

9.4.4 Changing aspects of service provision as a result of feedback received

Several Study Participants described how their use of a quality system led them not only to work more closely with their users, but to seek more feedback on aspects of service provision and to make changes as a result, for example:

'Everyone gets a follow up review to see what is needed as their circumstances change';

and

'A new respite care service has been moulded in terms of frequency of the service provided, timing and activity according to what the service users and their families find useful and appropriate'.

9.4.5 Indirect benefits

Study Participants were thus able to give a number of practical examples of the ways in which their services to users, whether individual or organisational, have changed as a result of use of a quality system. It was also acknowledged by some, however, that benefits are sometimes indirect or take time to filter through to users. One Study Participant, for example, felt that their users have confidence in their ability to provide high quality services because of their Investors in People status, but noted that it is difficult to trace direct links between their service provision and use of a quality system. Other comments in similar vein were that:

'It takes a long time for organisational changes to work through to users, but in two years' time we must be able to identify impact';

and:

'I am confident that doing a good job is based on our quality system....we haven't documented change based on the questionnaires – but that doesn't mean that it's not happening. It's just not documented as evidence'.

Summary

- Use of a quality system has helped some organisations improve the accessibility of their services, and their policies and procedures, to users.
- Use of a quality system has enabled some organisations to work more closely with their users; this includes seeking more feedback on services provided and making changes as a result.
- It can, however, be difficult to trace direct links between use of a quality system and services for users, and it may take some time before users notice any significant changes.

Part Four: Key issues for consideration

In Part Three we discussed the drivers towards use of quality systems; the background to VCOs' choice of particular systems; implementation; the challenges experienced and the benefits derived. We concluded by outlining the lessons that Study participants felt could be learned from their experiences.

In Part Four we reflect on the fieldwork and present our commentary on some of the key findings of the Study. These expand on and take forward ideas suggested in the literature review and provide significant new insights into the use of quality systems in the voluntary and community sector.

We discuss in turn seven areas:

- i. The perception of quality within the sector
- ii. The different models of systems used
- iii. System adoption
- iv. System selection
- v. System implementation
- vi. The 'fit' between an organisation and a system
- vii. Consequences and benefits of quality systems.

10. The perception of quality within the sector

- 10.1 It is clear from the Study that VCOs are currently operating in an environment characterised by scrutiny and measurement of organisational performance. 'Quality' and quality systems in the VCS can be seen as part of a broader government agenda of raising standards and modernising public services. Central to this agenda are the notions of '*capacity building*' and *accountability* - to external bodies (such as funders and regulators), to the general public and to the users of services.
- 10.2 Although the external pressures to address quality in the VCS are considerable, the Study confirms that, overall, both the pursuit of quality improvement activities and the use of quality systems are seen as positive and as an ideal to be attained by many VCOs. However, 'quality' in itself is regarded as a difficult concept whose operationalisation is likely to incur significant transaction and opportunity costs.
- 10.3 This raises the possibility for tensions between, on the one hand, exploiting real opportunities to address the sector's own concerns with quality and, on the other, incorporation by government (and, more specifically, statutory funders). Whilst there is widespread understanding within the sector of the importance and permanence of the quality agenda, it seems that further attention to implementation is required to ensure that VCOs are able to preserve their independence and ensure beneficiaries experience tangible improvements, at the same time as meeting external requirements.

11. The different models of systems used

The fieldwork has highlighted four main models of system used:

11.1 Single off-the-shelf system use

This approach is adopted mainly by smaller organisations. Amongst our Study sample, the smallest organisations (0-12 paid staff) were all using PQASSO, as were some slightly larger VCOs. Others with paid staff numbering between 20 and 30 were using Quality Mark or Investors in People. The systems most commonly used by questionnaire respondents are PQASSO, Investors in People and the Excellence Model

These organisations had on the whole chosen a system without strong external pressure, though many were aware of the funding environment and the fact that funders were increasingly requiring use of a recognised quality system as a condition of funding. Some had been 'steered' towards a particular system through the opportunity to participate in a pilot project. Only three single system users had experienced more explicit pressure: one was 'strongly encouraged' by a local authority funder to adopt PQASSO and another to introduce Quality Mark. One organisation had been forced by a funder to abandon work on their chosen system (PQASSO) in favour of the Excellence Model (which they had subsequently discarded for Investors in People).

With the exception of that last organisation, organisations using a single system tended to have had a relatively problem-free experience. While they had all had some difficulties over resources, or stakeholder involvement, they had not had significant problems with the systems themselves, and were in most cases very positive about the benefits of using a quality system.

11.2 In-house approach

Four of our Study sample used an entirely in-house approach to quality (eg. internal processes for monitoring, evaluation and development). These ranged from an organisation with only 10 staff to one with 500. The three largest organisations using an in-house approach all operated on geographically dispersed sites and felt that there were some problems achieving consistent quality of service across the whole of their operations. All four had, to varying degrees, experienced resource problems, but few difficulties with the systems themselves or with securing stakeholder commitment. One of the four, however, felt under increasing pressure to adopt a recognised system to satisfy statutory funders, even though they doubted that this would improve the quality of their services.

11.3 Sub-sectoral systems (ie. systems developed for a particular type of work)

All of our VCOs using sub-sectoral systems were using them as part of a multiple system approach (see below). Their comments, taken together with information from infrastructure body interviews – who discussed use of sub-sectoral systems more generally – present a complex picture. Use of some sub-sectoral systems, for example *QuADS* (Quality in Alcohol and Drugs Services) and the *Supporting People* Quality Assurance Framework, are now requirements of funding. Other sub-sectoral systems, such as Volunteer Development England's QSI (Quality Standards Implementation and Sustainability), are requirements for membership of the national infrastructure body, while others, for example the Youth Action

Network's *Reach*, are currently optional. The perceived advantage of these systems is usually their appropriateness, or 'fit', with the organisation.

For some VCOs, however, the fact that a system is compulsory may be a problem, both in itself and if organisations are under-resourced and working with vulnerable users in a complex policy environment.

11.4 Multiple system use

The fourth model is multiple system use: we found organisations (with staff sizes varying between 30 and 600) using several different off-the-shelf systems; a mix of off-the-shelf and sub-sectoral systems, or a combination of an in-house system and off-the-shelf system. While most of these organisations experienced similar problems of resources or stakeholder involvement to those using one of the other models, they also suffered from lack of a consistent approach to quality across the organisation.

11.5 Summary

Overall it appears that the questions of system appropriateness, and of achieving a consistent approach to quality across the organisation, are matters of extreme importance.

12. System adoption

There is a wide range of reasons behind the decision for an organisation to adopt a quality system; these drivers can be seen as both multiple and interlocking. It is important to note that many organisations are likely to experience different types and sources of pressure at different times. Generally, however, one can draw a distinction between *mandatory* drivers and *voluntary* drivers.

Our research indicates that where the motive to adopt a quality system is voluntary, there is more chance that the quality system will be viewed in a positive light than if it has been imposed upon an organisation. However, this finding is also mitigated by the degree of organisational fit and appropriateness of the quality system. An important driver is the desire on the part of voluntary organisations to demonstrate their legitimacy, accountability and evidence of good practice to a range of external stakeholders. It therefore seems important for organisations to be very clear about why they have decided to have a quality system and to select one that meets these expectations. The Study confirms that there is a direct relationship between external pressures to use quality systems and the nature of their subsequent experience of implementation (eg. disruptive process and limited benefits).

The external environment in which the organisation operates and the nature of its internal environment also has an impact not only on what type of system is adopted but also on the effectiveness of the implementation process and the manner in which the system is subsequently used. Voluntary organisations inhabit a very complex external environment, comprising multiple stakeholders that include users, infrastructure bodies, funders, regulatory bodies and government. It may therefore be useful before selecting a quality system to spend time assessing stakeholders' expectations and requirements and considering other relevant political and economic factors. The Study suggests that some organisations are more pro-active and have more influence over their environment. This then gives them more choice about their future direction and, in turn, more latitude in determining whether they wish to adopt a quality system.

The majority of respondents to the questionnaire highlighted 'good practice' as the principal reason for the adoption of a quality system. This is consistent with our general finding that quality systems are rarely adopted to 'empower consumers'; instead, quality systems are seen as a way of addressing efficiency and/or regulatory requirements. Whilst the nature and origin of the perception of 'good practice' is not clear, the fact that VCOs consider this to be the case is noteworthy, and an important factor in the increasingly widespread use of quality systems and initiatives.

13. System selection

As indicated earlier and in the literature review, some VCOs adopted a structured approach to quality without external pressure. Others, to varying degrees, reacted to the external environment, to pressure from funders or to a growing awareness that at some point use of a recognised quality system might become mandatory. We have also seen evidence of some VCOs being required by funders not only to adopt a quality system *in general*, but a *specific* off-the-shelf or sub-sectoral system. While some of these systems have been appropriate to the size and objectives of the organisation, others have not. Most Study participants forced to use a specific system experienced problems, in particular gaining staff commitment to work on the system. In these cases there was a perception that the system did not fit with the needs of the organisation.

As we noted earlier, VCOs need to be clear at the outset about what they want to achieve from using a quality system. This might aid the process of selection and perhaps help VCOs resist the demands of funders to use a system which will be perceived as inappropriate.

13.1 Information about Systems

As was noted in the summary to section 5 those organisations which do have a choice about which system to use, rarely go about their selection in a comprehensive manner. Some organisations we studied were unaware of the purpose and appropriateness of different systems.

While many organisations were happy with the benefits derived from their selected system, others felt that they would have liked far more information about the available choices. They would have welcomed more detail about the content of different systems, their purpose, resources needed to implement the system and so on. As indicated earlier, some infrastructure bodies also pointed to a need for more objective and comprehensive information about available systems.

It appears that the need for clear and objective information about quality systems is ongoing. Access to such material still appears patchy, particularly for VCOs operating outside a well-developed network of similar organisations. There would also appear to be a potential role for infrastructure bodies here to act as advisors and repositories of information about different systems.

14. System implementation

The findings from the Study about the process of introducing quality systems suggest the importance of five key issues:

- Stakeholder involvement
- Leadership
- An implementation plan and structure
- Integration with other processes
- Resources.

14.1 Stakeholder involvement

The involvement of trustees, at least in discussion of the issue, and (more particularly in smaller organisations) in the process of introduction, appears crucial. Without their commitment the issue is less likely to be accorded priority and resources and to be integrated into the general work of the organisation.

Likewise paid staff involvement, in discussion of the broader importance of quality and then of choice of system, is important in securing 'buy in' to the concept. While, as we have seen, implementation of a system required by funders is not always a problem if there is 'fit' with the organisation's needs, there can be problems securing staff commitment if they do not understand why quality is important.

14.2 Leadership

Strong leadership, from senior staff and trustees, sets an example and aids the process of integrating quality into all aspects of the organisation's work. Those organisations whose senior staff had not taken a lead on the subject felt that quality had not been accorded sufficient priority. In contrast, those whose Chief Executives or trustees had set the tone and devoted significant effort to quality issues appear to have experienced fewer problems with integrating quality. It is clear from the fieldwork that the introduction of quality systems is dominated by paid staff; this is a further indication of how the quality agenda has been professionalized within the sector.

Several Study participants suggested that having one person to take the lead on implementing quality systems had helped, or would have helped, their organisation make progress. That person need not necessarily be the most senior staff member, but should, it was suggested, be sufficiently senior to command both respect and resources. While the importance of quality being integrated into all aspects of work is clear, the experience of a number of our Study participants suggests that it can be difficult to make steady progress with the work without someone to take on the role of 'internal quality champion'.

14.3 Implementation plan and structure

A pre-implementation plan is seen to be useful, as is the use of external consultants and experts. Also, because the challenges of implementation are very practical it is helpful to involve those staff and volunteers who have a good working knowledge of the specific work routines within the organisation. This can often be achieved by the setting up of a short-term implementation working group (comprising people from different parts of the organisation).

14.4 Integration with other processes

Some of our Study participants raised the question of quality issues being seen as an 'add on' to other work rather than integral to all systems and processes. It appears from their experience, and from comments made by some of the system guardians, that quality will only be meaningful if it is integrated into strategic planning processes, work plans and organisational reviews. Organisations where quality remained an 'extra', to be discussed and worked on as time allowed, generally struggled with the concept and experienced only limited benefits in terms of improved services and greater sustainability.

14.5 Information and resources

Many of our Study participants had, to varying degrees, experienced problems with resources, especially staff time, but also availability of staff with relevant skills to find out about quality systems and to make progress with implementing them. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that organisations need to be prepared for the foreseen and unforeseen consequences of a quality system upon established work practices and processes.

Some had addressed the problem of lack of time by means such as dividing work amongst several staff and / or trustees (often as part of a working group) or employing existing staff for extra hours. Some had sought external help, though mainly with securing advice on aspects of the chosen system rather than with actual implementation. Many Study participants had limited knowledge of available resources that might have helped them.

This suggests that there is a need, not necessarily for more external resources, but for more information about what is available, and for more help, perhaps from infrastructure bodies, to enable VCOs to access available assistance. Many infrastructure bodies are well-placed - with their detailed knowledge of members' objectives and needs - to assist VCOs with selection and introduction of quality systems and, where appropriate, to point them in the direction of relevant external assistance. The annual CES/NCVO Quality Conference is frequently over-subscribed and evidence of the potential for infrastructure bodies to inform and support organisations.

15. The 'fit' between an organisation and a system

The successful adoption and subsequent use of a quality system is positively related to the degree of organisational fit between the system and its host. By "fit" we mean how easily the system can be integrated with current working practices, how sensitive it is to the culture of the organisation especially in the language used and the degree of simplicity or sophistication that the system demonstrates. This concept of 'fit' relates to elements of the current 'capacity building' agenda within the sector. Our study suggests that a critical success factor for the use of quality systems in the voluntary sector is the extent to which an organisation has the skills, abilities, resources and 'readiness' to manage and address the change processes involved.

16. Consequences and benefits of quality systems

Our findings have demonstrated that the introduction of a quality system has the potential to make an impact upon internal organisational structures and hence to improve efficiency. It also offers an opportunity for organisational growth, increased effectiveness and staff

development. In addition, the presence of a quality system is perceived as giving an organisation more legitimacy with external stakeholders.

The majority of questionnaire respondents indicated that they would not only continue to use their current system but would also recommend it to other organisations.

We noted earlier that focus group participants in particular were concerned with improving services to users. Yet service improvement did not feature strongly amongst the drivers towards use of quality systems nor in descriptions of perceived benefits. It appears that it is sometimes difficult to trace direct links between use of a quality system and improved services for users, and that it may take time for users to notice improvements. Given our findings on the potential of quality systems for improving internal organisational arrangements, it may be that the introduction of quality systems can act as a precursor to other structured approaches to service improvement. In support of this, the follow-up fieldwork confirms that the use of a quality system can help organisations to improve the accessibility of their services, and their policies and procedures, to users. The adoption and use of a quality system may act as a catalyst and - by providing the opportunity for reflection and by focusing on professional practice - offer a valuable framework for addressing service improvements.

Abbreviations and acronyms used in the text

Abbreviation / acronym	Name in full
BME organisations	Black and Minority Ethnic organisations
CES	Charities Evaluation Services
CVAR	Centre for Voluntary Action Research
liP	Investors in People
ISO	International Organisation for Standardisation
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
NACVS	National Association of Councils for Voluntary Service
NCVO	National Council for Voluntary Organisations
PQASSO	Practical Quality Assurance System for Small Organisations
QSI	Quality Standards Implementation and Sustainability
QSTG	Quality Standards Task Group
QuADS	Quality in Alcohol and Drugs Services
VCO	Voluntary and Community Organisation
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector