

## Proposal for a feasibility study for a new approach to performance improvement

### Introduction

Creating a Third Sector 'Suffolk Passport' provides groups with a simple way of demonstrating core competencies, policies and processes. Essentially a quality mark, the 'Suffolk Passport' is a term designated to represent a satisfactory assessment of a Third Sector group that demonstrates that it is robust in terms of its policies and procedures across a range of areas.

Third Sector groups would be able to offer externally assessed evidence of having reached performance standards which are sufficient to satisfy the requirements of local funders. If successful at local level the passport could provide groups with evidence of their achievement of good practice which could be included in applications to non-Suffolk funders in further support of their application.

### Purpose

Suffolk's infrastructure providers and local funders have clear evidence and experience of the considerably varied ways that Suffolk's Third Sector groups operate. Strategic capacity building development has identified a need to offer 'health checks' to enable groups to benchmark themselves against their peers and develop good practice in all areas of their performance.

Local infrastructure providers are also aware that local funders are identifying gaps in performance standards which leave groups ineligible to have their funding applications considered.

It is anticipated that involvement in the Suffolk Passport scheme would have a two-fold effect for Third Sector groups of improving organizational performance and the simplification of the grant application process.

- The passport would enable funders to concentrate on the selection and consideration of appropriate projects, knowing that the organization has reached a level of performance, externally verified, sufficient to satisfy funders that the project funding will be well utilized.
- The work undertaken by groups towards achievement of the passport will also ensure that all stakeholders can be assured of involvement with an organization working towards implementing best practice models.

### Research Findings

The national Quality Standards Task Group was a time limited project to act as a catalyst to help voluntary and community organisations to engage in quality improvement.

Some of the findings from this research are very pertinent to the proposal. Direct quotes from the paper Key Learning: QSTG 1997-2004 are set out below:

- ‘There is still a long way to go in ensuring that both funders and voluntary organizations accept a shared responsibility for developing mutually acceptable quality indicators and other measures.’
- ‘There are benefits to be gained from collaboration between funders and purchasers and the sector on quality with the aim of improving accountability and reducing the burden of multiple demands from funders on voluntary organizations. There is an opportunity for the Compact on Funding to be used by NCVO and others to influence good practice by Government funding agencies.’
- ‘The report noted there was little shared understanding of the concept of quality among the funders interviewed. There were indications that this was also the case for Third Sector organisations. Consequently, meaningful discussion between funders themselves and between funders and voluntary organizations on this subject was difficult.’
- Many of the funders interviewed felt that they lacked the resources, skills and experience to measure adequately the quality of particular services or organizations.’
- ‘Improving our Performance’ (2004) Commissioned by the Active Communities Unit, core proposals:
  - More targeted information is needed by Third Sector organisations about different approaches to performance improvement and the issues that they best help Third Sector organisations address
  - More face-to-face advice and support is needed
  - Skills development and governance are key
  - Grant givers and purchasers should as a matter of course fund the performance improvement efforts of Third Sector organisations
  - Funder and regulator evaluation should support performance improvement in Third Sector organisations

Whilst recognizing that this research relates primarily to undertaking a quality standard the report identifies some of the areas of difficulty between Third Sector groups and their prospective funders. There is a direct link between this and the ground work required by groups to become ‘fit for funding’ and the report highlights the support and knowledge required by groups to improve performance, which further amplifies the power and potential of the Suffolk Passport proposal.

## Project Description

The feasibility study is intended to be a consultation exercise both directly with groups likely to benefit from the scheme, and also funders and other stakeholders such as local infrastructure organizations. The study will run parallel and in tandem with, a new Health Check Pilot scheme in mid Suffolk.

The scheme, which is currently in preparation, will offer groups an opportunity to review their development and ensure that they are operating to the best of their capabilities and ambitions. It will also allow groups to benchmark their services, share good practice, and provide opportunities for collaborative working.

The Health Check Pilot can act as a basis for identifying a way to work with groups on their development whilst providing feedback on the level of commitment they feel able to make to achieving Suffolk Passport status.

## Objectives

- To identify the potential impacts and benefits of the Suffolk Passport scheme, assessed by the following criteria:
  - The response, acceptance and anticipated application of a Suffolk Passport concept by funders.
  - The value that Third Sector groups place on the Suffolk Passport in contributing to their fundraising activities, their performance improvement and their policies and practices.

## Methodology

- Develop methodology, questionnaires and other materials to be used in feasibility study
- Identify stakeholders for consultation process
- Participate in health check pilot and use learning from this to inform feasibility study
- Consult with all appropriate partners, funders, a range of Third Sector groups and other stakeholders
- Identify links between existing and new health check models, quality standards and the Suffolk Passport, conducted partly by desk research of other comparable schemes and, where appropriate, interviewing the developers of the most relevant model schemes
- Make recommendations for a model for the Suffolk Passport Scheme that outlines its application and working.

## Timelines

	2009			2010			
ACTION	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr
Develop methodology							
Identify stakeholders							
Health check pilot							
Consultation							
Prepare baseline model							
Write up study							

## Support needs

Post holder will need mentor to assist with development of feasibility study. Input from SAVO as 'critical friend' at various stages of the study would also be beneficial.

## Costs

Post holder is funded for core work in developing feasibility study. However, additional resources may be sought to enable consultancy support and/or to enable visits to established projects.

Gill Peat

