

# Developing the New Quality Mark Consultation Findings



In the first initiative of its kind a consortium of national advice networks led by the Advice Service Alliance (ASA) is developing a new quality mark standard for advice agencies providing services at the current CLS General Help and General Help with casework level (GHQM). The project is part of the larger, multi-agency Working Together for Advice project funded by the Big Lottery.

The new quality mark aims to replace the CLS GHQM. Owned by the sector, it seeks to provide a flexible and user friendly standard, which will be relevant to all not-for-profit advice providers. Significantly, the new standard will measure the quality of advice given by providers as well as organisational standards. The quality mark is made up of a quality of advice standard and 6 service standards covering Governance, Planning, Financial, Case Enquiry and People Management and Access, Client Care and Community relationships.

Between February and April 2009 the project consulted with advice providers and other relevant stakeholders, gathering feedback on the range and content of these Quality of Advice and Service Standards and potential assessment methods. One hundred and thirty eight individuals and organisations responded to some or all of the consultation questions.

## Key Findings

**On the right track** The overwhelming message from consultation participants was that the project is on the right track. Most participants clearly felt the standards were clear and concise:

- 100% of people said that they understood what the quality of advice standard was trying to achieve
- 96% or more of participants said they understood what the service standards were trying to achieve.
- 82% of respondents said they felt the 7 quality of advice criteria covered all the aspects of advice giving
- 97% of participants said it was helpful to have the standards split into the “processes you need to show” and “the documents you need to have”
- 93% of respondents said the new quality mark was relevant to the work of their organisation

**More work is needed** The consultation highlighted several areas where more work is needed:

- To help overcome the lack of agreed understanding of key language used by the standard, the project offered a range of definitions. While 80% of respondents agreed with the definitions of advice and information, participants clearly disagreed with the definition of casework and more work is now being carried out in this area using consultation feedback
- Only 67% of respondents indicated they understood the differences between the new quality mark and the old CLS GHQM. That said many had picked up and welcomed the fact that the new QM was going to concentrate on the quality of advice, be more user friendly and relevant. A few were concerned that the new standard would “water

down” the CLS GHQM. More promotional work is planned to explain the project’s benefits

**Practical challenges** Participants offered valuable insight into the practical challenges of delivering the new quality mark which will impact ongoing development, including:

- challenges to assessing the quality of advice such as the resources needed, issues where advice is one of many functions, lack of consistency across the assessors and reliance on written case records.
- concerns about the extra work they may have to do to ensure compliance, there was a clear message about the standard not over burdening organisations with policies procedures and checklists.
- Difficulties in designing standard methods which could consistently assess the wide range of delivery methods being used across the sector

### **Quality of Advice Assessment Methods**

The consultation sought feedback about assessing quality of advice by external assessment, and self-assessment with verification. It also gathered feedback about the potential added value and challenges of observed interviews, post advice interviews with clients and mystery shopping.

Initially more than 64% of participants identified External Assessment as the “best way to assess a quality of advice standard compared with 55% who identified self-assessment with verification was the best way. However, having considered all methods and related issues, 64% of people then said self assessment was their favourite method. Key findings included:

- External assessment was thought to offer independence, impartiality, consistency, additional credibility and customer confidence
- Self-assessment with verification was thought to be cheaper, would encourage organisations to continuously assess delivery and implement remedial action more quickly.
- Whereas cost and the skills of assessors were the main practical challenges to external assessment, lack of time objectivity and skills for internal assessors were seen as the main challenges to self assessment.

There was general support for testing other methods. 67% of participants felt observation would bring added value, 76% mystery shopping and 65% client interviews. Participants felt other assessment methods may evidence elements of quality that can be missed by a case record, though they were also concerned that clients might find these methods intrusive. Overall, whilst comments indicated a desire to avoid a “one size fits all!” approach, there were significant levels of concern about whether any range of methods could offer consistency in delivery of assessments. Participant comments recognised the need to invest in a quality product but had a strong plea for affordability, balancing cost and effectiveness and avoiding developing a range of methods without any real purpose.

*Consultation findings will be incorporated with learning gained through the project’s pilot phase being carried out April – December 2009. A further and wider round of consultations will take place during 2010. For more information contact Judith Courts, Project Co-ordinator on [judith.courts@citizensadvice.org.uk](mailto:judith.courts@citizensadvice.org.uk)*



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