

An approach to quality and safety for micro social care and support services

Background

Evidence from the first phase of the Micro Markets project suggested that the majority of emerging micro enterprises fall outside current regulatory and legislative frameworks for care and support services. Micro providers who are regulated by the Care Quality Commission (CQC) have concerns that the regulatory approach does not allow them to show the quality of their service. It is important that all providers can demonstrate the quality and value of the services that they offer. It is equally important that service users and commissioners have a method of assessing the quality of services and comparing them with each other when making purchasing choices.

The focus of the second phase of the project, managed by Community Catalysts a social enterprise and subsidiary of NAAPS, has been on developing and testing an approach to quality marking that is tailored for micro social care enterprises. The approach to quality marketing is designed to be accessible and appropriate to many different service types whilst also being comprehensive and robust.

The Quality Mark Process

1. The approach

The underpinning principles for the development of the Quality Mark were that the approach should:

1. Have clear objectives
2. Offer the opportunity for development to providers
3. Be simple and cheap to join and use
4. Challenge false opposites; for example that a simple approach cannot also be robust
5. Ensure that customer feedback is absolutely central
6. Have an emphasis on values and outcomes for individuals.
7. Offer customers the tools to assess risk and quality for themselves
8. Have credibility with all stakeholders including customers, supporting professionals, commissioners, regulators and micro providers
9. Integrate with other regulatory and legislative frameworks

10. Have robust and effective sanctions
11. Be accessible and relevant for a range of different service types
12. Be as relevant to self funders as those with a personal budget

In line with these principles all documentation has been written in clear accessible English with minimal jargon and an engaging style. The process is designed to be simple and easy to use and to involve a limited amount of paperwork.

It does not set out to be a formal accreditation of providers and instead allows the local authority or other interested body to support micro providers to demonstrate their quality using evidence based approach that is rigorous and robust and has some external validation.

The process is divided into three distinct stages. The aim of this staged approach is to make the process accessible by breaking it down into 'bite sized' chunks and also to build in a developmental element to the process.

The three stages are:

1. Preparation – support and information
2. Gateway – application and assessment process leading to a “basic” or silver Quality Mark
3. People – continuous improvement based on user feedback leading to an “enhanced” or gold Quality Mark

2. Preparation stage

Evidence from Phase 1 of the work with micro providers shows that existing and potential micro providers need information, advice, help and some certainty about the market for their service before they take the huge step of setting up a new enterprise or transforming an existing service. The local agency model designed and developed by NAAPS and Community Catalysts provides a dedicated Coordinator able to offer the highly individualised and tailored support that potential and existing micro providers need.

Key Point

The approach to quality marking recognises the importance of local support to micro providers and assumes that support is available. The local agency support model lends itself well to this approach to quality marking but other types of support are possible.

The aim of the preparation stage is to ensure that providers have the *support and information* that they need to consider all the issues relating to the establishment of a new micro enterprise or the transformation and continuing viability of an existing micro enterprise. Providers are helped to decide whether:

- They wish to continue with their plan
- Those plans are viable
- They are ready to work with the local agency to gain Quality Mark recognition for that service

The Agency Co-ordinator or other supporter offers providers the advice, information, signposting and contacts that they need in order to decide whether their idea for a service is realistic and whether people might want to buy that service. The supporter will then help the provider to identify the steps they will need to take if they want to turn their idea into a viable and sustainable enterprise. Much of the support and information offered by the Coordinator involves signposting the provider to existing sources of specialist advice within their locality including business support, marketing advice, peer networks, local authority connections and links to providers of training and qualifications.

The supporter also uses the preparation stage to give the provider information about the quality marking process and the potential benefits and challenges this could bring and help them to think about whether they are ready to work towards a Quality Mark. If the provider decides they want to work towards the Quality Mark the Agency Co-ordinator or other supporter will supply information about the different stages of the process and help the provider to plan what they will need to do.

3. The Panel

Key Point

In order for any Quality Mark award to have credibility and value to providers, customers and local authorities it is essential that some form of external scrutiny is incorporated into the process.

A local Panel should be set up which is made up of key representatives from all stakeholder groups including customers and their families, providers, third sector representatives and safeguarding professionals and key LA personnel. The Panel should have administrative support wherever this is practical and necessary.

The Panel will bring external scrutiny to the quality marking process and will have shared accountability for the recommendations it makes about silver and gold Quality Mark awards. The Panel make their recommendations to a designated decision maker who decides whether the provider can be given the silver or gold award.

4. Gateway stage

The Gateway stage has four aims:

1. Offers providers an opportunity to take stock and be clear about the *aims of their enterprise*; to *plan for success* and to put some baseline *documentation, structure and systems* in place.

2. Allows providers to *demonstrate* what they hope to achieve, the values that underpin their service, that they have the right systems in place and are legal, sustainable and safe.
3. Gives *recognition* to providers who can demonstrate they have a professional approach and baseline quality systems by awarding them a passage through the Gateway.
4. Makes it clear to providers who do not have these baseline systems in place that they are '*not yet ready*' and need to do more work before they can gain recognition.

The application form for the Gateway stage of the process asks simple questions that are broad enough to be relevant to all service types and which do not have a rigid social care focus. The questions try not to make assumptions about providers, the services they offer and the approach they take and are designed to be accessible to as wide a range of providers as possible. The form puts the onus on the provider to supply relevant information and supporting evidence in whatever form is appropriate to demonstrate the value of their service. This approach allows the provider to approach Gateway in a way that feels right for them and avoids the requirement for a 'paper heavy' response if this is not appropriate for the provider and their service. The Gateway stage also requires providers to supply the contact details of three referees who know them and their service/service plans well.

There is no timescale for the completion and return of the form and Providers may approach this in one of two ways:

1. Providers who believe that they already have all the evidence needed to complete the form and to pass through Gateway may simply complete the form, supply all the required evidence and then submit it for assessment.
2. Providers who still have work to do to set up or transform their service can use the Gateway process as a way of ordering their thoughts and putting required systems and processes in place. In this instance providers will use the form and guidance notes, often with support from the Coordinator or other supporter, to guide their planning and work over a number of weeks or months to get things in place before submitting their application.

The completed form and key supporting documentation is sent by the provider to the Coordinator who undertakes a site visit, produces and attaches their own short recommendation report and all references before submitting to the Panel.

The external Panel makes a recommendation as to whether the provider can pass through Gateway based on all the information and evidence submitted. These recommendations go to a designated local authority or host organisation decision maker who decides if the silver or gold Quality Mark can be awarded.

Gateway places expectations on providers that for some could be seen as challenging and this is intentional in the design of the approach. Providers do not get through Gateway without having provided evidence that they have thought through all of the relevant issues and have all the necessary systems and processes in place.

Providers who get through Gateway are awarded the “basic” or silver Quality Mark award certificate which they can then display and publicise.

Key Point

Providers who do not get through Gateway are seen as ‘not yet ready’ and are given advice and support to develop their thinking and systems before trying again. Providers can apply to get through Gateway as many times as they like. In this the Gateway process plays a developmental role for providers.

5. People stage

The People stage of the process recognises that all the paperwork and systems in the world do not guarantee that the service will deliver good outcomes for customers and the people that support them. It uses very simple *feedback systems* to allow service users and their representatives to say what they think about the service they have received.

The aim of the People stage is to enable the provider to have the information necessary to *measure the impact of their activity* on the outcomes for their customers and then plan a response to this feedback in order to *improve* their service. The People stage also enables providers to *demonstrate this ongoing commitment to improvement* to future customers and external agencies.

Successful completion of the Gateway stage demonstrates that the provider has baseline systems and procedures in place. The People stage of the process recognises that whilst the Gateway stage has value for providers, commissioners and service users, evidence of the outcomes of the service for individual customers and their supporters is vital in helping new customers judge the suitability of the service and in helping the provider to deliver a sustainable service of high quality.

The People stage involves a series of survey questionnaires, an external audit of these and a final assessment of this evidence by the Panel. Survey 1 forms a baseline against which the performance of the service can be measured at a later date. Survey 2 focuses on the customer’s experiences in using the service asking people to say whether the service has delivered what was promised and make suggestions for improvement. Survey 3 is undertaken as the customer leaves the service. It gives providers the information they need to measure the performance of their service against the baseline and then use this to continually improve the service to achieve good outcomes for customers.

Key point

Some users of social care and support services rely heavily on the support of family or friends to live their lives. It is essential that providers take into account the key role of these ‘secondary customers’ when assessing the quality of the service they provide

The People stage of the quality mark process also involves a 'mystery shopper'. The nature of this activity, when it takes place and who undertakes it is at the discretion of the Coordinator based on the nature of the service and opportunities available.

All evidence of successful service delivery in the form of completed survey forms, comments from customers and their representatives, evidence of complaints and how these were handled and any action plans the provider has drawn up in response to feedback together with a short report written by the Coordinator is submitted to the external Panel for a recommendation as to whether the provider can be awarded the gold Quality Mark.

To ensure that customer feedback is an integral part of the development of the service whilst avoiding the need for customers to complete survey forms too frequently the gold standard Quality Mark is only awarded for two years. It must be reapplied for every 2 years by repeating the site visit and Panel assessment process

Piloting the Quality Mark

The Quality Mark approach as outlined was piloted in Oldham between December 2009 and August 2010 with the support of Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council (OMBC) and micro providers in Oldham.

Liz Fryman Community Services Manager and her colleagues from within the Community Capacity and Adult Social Care Teams of Oldham Council were instrumental in enabling the Quality Mark pilot to take place in Oldham, building on the earlier work with micro providers. When asked what had motivated OMBC to engage in the pilot Liz stated *"at the time there was nothing out there which measured quality standards"* and that *"it gives peace of mind that the provider has a good and proven level of quality"*

In January 2010 the Oldham Quality Mark panel was convened with three meetings taking place before the pilot ended in August 2010. Members of the Oldham Micro Providers Association, established as a result of the micromarkets project, were approached and asked if they would be willing to engage in a small pilot. Four micro providers agreed to pilot the process and a further three expressed an interest in the model and in engaging in the process at a later date.

Providers reported that the process had worked well for them and had been welcome as it enabled them to assess and then improve their existing systems. One provider stated that they *"Found the process difficult at times a bit like Yoga – 'difficult but stretches you'"*. Providers particularly valued the feedback element built into the process and the fact that they were given suggestions for improving how their service operates. One provider stated that he and his service *"were little fish slipping through a net and the Quality Mark caught them"*. A number of providers involved with the pilot hoped the Quality Mark would provide business opportunities and help them to stand out from other similar providers.

Key Messages

- I. Good providers of all sizes are eager to be able to demonstrate the value and quality of the service they provide and to continuously improve what they offer.
- II. Existing quality and accreditation systems do not enable micro providers to demonstrate their quality either because they are designed for much larger or very traditional providers or because they have a focus on a particular sector e.g. PQASSO for the third sector or activity e.g. CQC regulation for services providing personal care
- III. The Quality Mark system is accessible and appropriate for all service types including those not traditionally seen as social care. It balances this accessibility with a robustness that gives credibility to the model and the providers that engage with it.
- IV. The expertise and skills of Panel members combined with their diversity and independence is invaluable and gives providers and council staff confidence in the system
- V. The Quality Mark approach needs local backing at a senior level in order for it to have a sustainable impact.
- VI. Establishing the way in which the Quality Mark fits with existing and emerging procurement and accreditation processes within the local authority is key to its success.
- VII. There is a need to communicate clearly the benefits and scope of the Quality Mark to people who use services and those that support them such as family, care managers and brokers.
- VIII. While the Quality Mark approach has been designed and developed for micro providers it could be adapted for use with providers of all sizes.

More information

For a detailed project report on the Quality Mark pilot contact Angela Catley, Director of Operations at Community Catalyts angela.catley@communitycatalysts.co.uk .

Community Catalyts have developed a comprehensive implementation pack to enable public bodies and other organisations to implement the Quality Mark in their area. We can also provide specialist, practical help, advice and training to support this. Community Catalyts is a social enterprise that has particular expertise in marking shaping, micro enterprise and in unlocking the potential in people and communities www.communitycatalysts.co.uk