

The NCIA Independence audit

Independence audit materials

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These are difficult times for the voluntary sector. Is your organisation managing to stay independent and true to the purpose it was set up for? NCIA challenges you to find out.

The voluntary sector should be unlike the public sector or the private sector in having the freedom to pursue whatever it thinks is important, without pressure to fit government priorities or to generate profits. In practice, many organisations are experiencing erosions of this freedom. NCIA is getting more and more reports from people who are uncomfortable about changes to working methods and management styles which make their workplace feel more like the private sector or the public sector.

How the audit can help

It is easy to lose sight of where your organisation is going at times of pressure, change or insecurity. The audit can be used to help focus you and remind you of what you're there for, and to give you arguments to use if others are questioning your right to exist. It can also be used to help you make decisions about new directions to take (or not), which funding to go for or which partnerships to pursue.

By doing the audit and sharing their results with us, organisations will also help NCIA to record and understand threats to voluntary sector independence, areas where people need information or support and possible remedies. If we want to make any information you have given us public, on our website or elsewhere, we will ask your permission, and we will not use your organisation's name if you don't want us to.

We devised the audit to help organisations to stop, think, and question what they are becoming and whether it is what they want to become. We hope that the results will help people to identify and challenge forces that may be weakening their unique and independent voice.

What people have said

'Really useful and interesting what came up...I'm going to take it to the next management meeting...very clear on areas we can improve.' (Sheffield Alcohol Support Services)

‘Using the materials made me feel more in charge. Having parameters for an argument and a construct to work from helped me to think straight...I realised we had strayed a long way from our purpose and needed to get back to it.’ (A disability organisation in South East London).



How to do the NCIA independence audit

The process

The audit looks at how an organisation relates to the outside world and what its internal culture is. We are interested in exploring your purpose and how you stick to it, your public voice, your relationships with funders and policy makers, your approaches to working with others and involving those who use your service, your management styles and what it feels like to work for and with you.

You can do the audit by getting an NCIA consultant to come and interview you and your colleagues and produce a report for you, or you can do the process yourself as a self assessment. The framework we use for the audit is freely available for you to download on the NCIA website, so there are no secrets. You may find it more interesting not to look at this before starting the audit, either with us or on your own, so that your responses are more genuine and fresh. If you do prefer to look beforehand, bear in mind that what is important is real practice, and the evidence for it, rather than policies and procedures or saying the ‘right thing’. The key question we try to answer by the end of the process is ‘do you practice what you preach?’ In this sense, the audit does not judge what it is you do or what it is you say, only the relationship between the two.

The ratings

We found that people like the discipline of having to commit to a rating. However, not all indicators necessarily carry the same weight, so the ratings are not intended to be added up and compared with a maximum possible total or with the total of another organisation. Rather they can be used to compare different indicators with each other to highlight strengths and weaknesses. The ratings are:

0: there has been no attempt to meet the indicator

1: a little work has been done on it

2: some work has been done on it but it isn't perfect

3: the indicator has been fully realised

If we do the audit with you, our assessor will give ratings, as well as asking you for your rating of yourself on the general question 'do you practice what you preach?' If you do the audit as a self assessment, you should try to set ratings together as a team.

Assessment by NCIA

We recommend asking NCIA to send one of our consultants to do the audit with you: you are more likely to get surprises and challenges by talking to someone external to your organisation. If you want us to come to you, you should arrange a minimum of two people for us to talk to: one manager and one staff member who is not a manager. It would also be useful for us to talk to trustees, more staff members, others you work in partnership with and/or users of your service. If you want us to do more interviews, please allow at least an hour for a manager interview, 45 minutes for staff and trustees and 30 minutes for others. The more time we spend with you and the more people we talk to, the better. But please don't arrange more than can be fitted into one day.

The interviews are informal and we don't expect any preparation: in fact you will probably get a more useful audit if you don't think about it beforehand! There are no right answers: the audit is to help us and you to think creatively about the pressures you are working under and the responses you make to them. We would like you to be honest about areas you don't feel you do well, because we want to gather intelligence about problems as well as ideas about what works well.

To arrange for an audit to be done, please e mail Rachael

McGill: rachael@independentaction.net.

Self assessment

The process for doing the audit on your own is the same: gather together as many people as you can who have different roles in the organisation and interview each other about the areas covered in the audit table. The assessor's answers at the end of section C should be reached through a group discussion with as many of the interviewees as possible. Alternatively, you might want to give one person or a small group of people the role of assessor.

The interview

The experience of the audit for the people being interviewed should be:

- Informal
- Encouraging
- Creative, allowing exploration and testing ideas they may not usually have time to consider
- Playful, irreverent and not too serious
- Non-judgemental: they should feel they can be human and honest

On the other hand, we do want to cover the indicators in the table, so the assessor's role in the interviews is to balance the above with probing into all of the areas we're interested in. The interviewer should get the person to talk generally around the subject titles, mentioning what they think is important or of concern, rather than trying to turn each indicator into a question. At the end the interviewer can check whether any indicators have not been discussed and come back to them.

People will have their own styles and ways of doing this. Below are a few pointers which might be of help:

- Start with the personal, asking someone how they came to the job, what it means to them as an individual. Let them move naturally from this to what the organisation represents.
- You will probably find that people start to cover the indicators themselves with just a little prompting around the general area, so you may not need to bring up each issue. If they're talking animatedly, let them carry on until they've said what they need to say (they might start talking about indicators from elsewhere in the audit too). Only interrupt if they're saying things that aren't relevant to any of the indicators or if they're repeating things they've already told you.
- On the other hand, if this approach is too anarchic for your brain, or if someone is answering briefly and waiting for the next question, probe them to get more and use the indicators to move them ahead.

· Get evidence, not just answers. Examples from practice are what we're looking for. If someone is giving lots of good examples, record them all, as they'll probably all be useful. If they're not giving any examples, ask them for some.

Completing the table

You don't have to go through the table slavishly giving the evidence for every indicator. Fill in the notes section whenever you have something interesting to report about that indicator. It's fine just to write 'yes' for an indicator if you have no more to say than that, but bear in mind that the audit needs to be used to help the organisation think about making changes, so try to make it clear in the notes why you're giving the rating you are.

You might have ideas or questions you want to address to NCIA within your write up of an indicator. That's fine – put it in bold or a different colour so we pick it up as separate from the information for the organisation. There's also space right at the end to give your general feedback about the process.

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Thank you!