

What is the Strong Foundations Programme?

Voluntary Norfolk's Strong Foundations Programme has been created to help voluntary sector groups understand what policies, procedures, processes and practices they need to have in place to run safely and well. With strong foundations, organisations are more likely to be stable & secure, to inspire confidence and to successfully build on their strengths.

How does it work?

The main element of the Programme is a **Self Assessment Framework** divided into seven sections, plus an 'additional evidence' section for anything else your organisation wants to celebrate. Each section includes questions that are designed to get you thinking about what your group does and why, and reflect on how well things are going. It's not designed to be a 'tick box' exercise where you simply record what policies you have and give yourself a pat on the back – the framework includes some hints and tips about what good policies should include, and push you to go the extra mile. There's also a Resources section at the end with a list of places you can go to find out more.

The second element is the **External Assessment**, where you will need to gather a portfolio of evidence relating to the sections of the framework and submit it to a panel of voluntary and statutory sector leaders (such as commissioners, safeguarding officers, and charity directors). A member of the Voluntary Norfolk Communities team will visit your group to collect your evidence portfolio (either in a physical folder or on a memory stick) and see your organisation in action. They will chat to group members and staff / volunteers, and write a summary of the visit which will be shared with the assessment panel. If the panel are happy that the evidence demonstrates that your organisation is operating safely and delivering quality services, your organisation will be awarded a Strong Foundation Certificate valid for three years, which you can display at your venue and include in funding bids, annual reports etc. (In the event that the panel aren't quite satisfied, you will be able to work on your portfolio some more and resubmit your evidence at the next panel meeting.)

The Programme is completely optional; there is no requirement to do it and choosing not to do it won't prevent you from receiving support and advice from Voluntary Norfolk. You might choose to use the framework internally as part of a policy review but not go for the assessment and certification; that's absolutely fine. However, going through the whole process gives you the chance to get feedback from a range of different people in the sector about how your group is doing and how it could improve.

Who is the Strong Foundations Programme aimed at?

The Programme has been designed with small charities and community groups in mind; such as a local youth group, a lunch club, a community allotment project or a village parent and toddler group. However, even large charities have to start somewhere, and these 'foundations' will be relevant to voluntary sector groups of all sizes.

We've tried to make sure the framework is robust without being too prescriptive or offering a 'one size fits all' solution – we know that the voluntary and community sector is very diverse, and a

procedure that suits one community group won't necessarily be suitable for another. That's why the framework is phrased as a set of questions, so you can tell us what you think the right answer is for your organisation. Having said that, there are bound to be things we haven't thought of, so if you're working through the framework and feeling like a square peg trying to fit through a round hole, please do tell us why it's not working for you, so we can learn from it and make the framework more accessible.

What are the benefits for my organisation in taking part in the Strong Foundations Programme?

The aim of the Programme is to help groups feel more confident about their policies, procedures and practice. We often get asked what policies and procedures community groups should have, which shows that groups are keen to do things properly and keep their group members safe. The framework was developed to answer these kinds of questions and provoke deeper conversations within organisations about what 'good practice' looks like for your work.

Working through the framework and getting the certificate means you can demonstrate to your partners, funders, group members and potential staff / volunteers that you care about delivering high quality, safe services.

Who designed and developed the Strong Foundations programme?

The Programme has been designed and developed by a steering group of local organisations, who met online during the summer of 2020. All of the voluntary sector organisations attending had previously achieved the Ambition Quality First Steps (a similar quality mark that is no longer available), so they have experience of running safe, high quality services and understand what it's like to go through a quality assurance programme. We made sure there was a range of organisations on the steering group, from a local volunteer-led group to a larger organisation with projects commissioned by Norfolk County Council.

The organisations involved in the steering group were:

- Rocklanders Youth Club
- Attleborough Boxing Club
- MTM Youth Services
- The Diocese of Norwich
- The Safer Programme (part of the Norfolk Safeguarding Children Partnership)

The framework was also reviewed by officers at the Norfolk Safeguarding Adult Board.

A number of people within Voluntary Norfolk contributed to the development of the framework, including colleagues who have experience in data protection, volunteer management, youth work, working with older people, and charity governance.

How much does it cost?

The Strong Foundations Programme is completely free of charge, from downloading the framework to your final assessment and certificate.

However, taking part in the programme might identify areas your organisation needs to work on, and there could be costs involved in this – for example training your staff or buying health and safety equipment. If you are concerned about the potential costs, please talk to the Voluntary Norfolk Communities team as we might be able to help you access some funding.

How long will it take to complete the Strong Foundations Programme?

This will depend on your organisation's size and the resources you are able to dedicate to working through the framework. Small and medium-sized organisations should be able to work through the framework and gather evidence for assessment within a six month period, but if you need to take longer or want to put it on pause for a while then that's okay. If you are working towards the certificate, we won't set a date for your assessment until you're satisfied with your evidence, to avoid a last-minute rush to get everything ready on time.

Having said that, we recommend you try to complete it within a year, otherwise you might find that any evidence you started gathering at the beginning of your Strong Foundations journey is out of date and needs to be replaced – meaning you'll be doing the same work twice.

Remember that the process should involve a team of people; one group leader going it alone will take longer and be a less useful process overall. Don't forget to include volunteers, group members and other stakeholders to get the best out of the Programme and make it quicker and easier too.

How long does the Strong Foundations certification last? Do I have to renew it?

Organisations who successfully demonstrate to the assessment panel that they meet the requirements of the programme will receive a Strong Foundations Certificate which is valid for three years from the date of assessment.

Regardless of whether or not you opt to go for the certificate, we would encourage you to use the self-assessment framework on an annual basis as part of a review of your policies, procedures and governance, to make sure you're staying on the right track. Perhaps you could use the seven sections of the framework as the agenda for a trustee board away day?

How do I apply to start the Strong Foundations programme?

Please contact Aimee Gedge aimee.gedge@voluntarynorfolk.org.uk and/or download the Framework from our website www.voluntarynorfolk.org.uk/strongfoundations