Project Management

Why project management?

Projects are, more than ever, a fact of life for voluntary organisations. Changing patterns of funding, particularly the impact of the Community Fund, mean that it is becoming ever more common for agencies to develop their work and secure funding by developing specific projects. Funders in their turn are asking for details of how projects will be managed, with some beginning to expect agencies to use one or another established project management system.

Technical projects are more common. Many organisations are getting involved in IT and Internet based projects which bring high risks and costs, and take managers into technical developments where they may not feel confident.

Against this background there is a clear need for project management expertise, yet the voluntary sector has no great tradition of using formal methods of project management. This may be a reflection of a reasonable record of success: we haven't suffered from high profile project failures, especially IT project failures. A string of troubled projects has plagued the commercial and statutory sectors and driven the adoption of a more systematic approach.

But as voluntary organisations' projects grow in size and complexity it's clear we too can benefit from the established body of knowledge that exists on effective project management.

Project management isn't rocket science. A lot of it is common sense and anyone who has been involved in running a project informally will find much that is familiar. But established methods provide a more complete and systematic framework for defining and controlling

I see us as a sort of second Seven Samurai

BUILDING STRONG TEAMS

a project as well as helping with less tangible but vital areas like establishing good communication, clarifying roles and building strong teams.

Our belief is that voluntary organisations can learn from this body of knowledge and that their ability to manage the growing number of technical projects can be improved by the adoption of these techniques. Their projects tend to be smaller, the process of making funding applications can be an added complication, but they can still use these techniques to their advantage.

This Lasa Computanews Guide is intended to provide an introduction to the techniques of project management. It looks at the basic principles and available tools and provides some templates and procedures for implementing project management methods within the voluntary sector. We aren't setting out to produce another project management manual; there are plenty of books available, and this isn't a substitute for project management training. Our aim is to offer an introduction to technical project management, and to emphasise how it can work in a voluntary sector setting with particular reference to managing funding applications.

What is project management?

A typical project starts with someone having an idea, which then gains acceptance from a wider group: probably informally through discussion with colleagues and then through a more formal process involving senior management, the management committee or board. This leads to a fund-raising process, which usually causes significant delay, and then if the funding bid is successful the project can start, staff can be appointed and work

can begin. This work has to be planned and managed, problems dealt with, until the project concludes, hopefully successfully, and is wound up.

Formal methods of project management offer a framework to manage this process, providing a series of elements – templates and procedures – to manage the project through its life cycle. The key elements consist of:

- Defining the project accurately, systematically clarifying objectives.

- Dividing the project up into manageable tasks and stages.

- Controlling the project through its stages using the project definition as a baseline.

- Highlighting risks and developing specific procedures to deal with them.

- Providing mechanisms to deal with quality issues.

- Clarifying roles to provide the basis for effective teamwork.

The need to provide accountability and effective communication is implicit throughout.

Which method?

There are lots of different project management methodologies available, each touted by its supplier as having some special magic ingredient or suitability to your project. But when you look at the different systems it quickly becomes apparent that they are all variations on the same theme and have a lot in common. The same basic principles apply whichever system you use. The issue isn't so much the system you use but how well you apply it.

Many project management systems are proprietary. Project management consultants sell them as a package of services that will include training sessions and consultancy alongside documentation that will include templates and guidance notes.

These packages don't come cheap, costing hundreds if not thousands of pounds. But this approach may be a cost effective solution for larger organisations that want to set up a structure to manage a number of projects. In effect you're paying to set up a framework that will include training for staff, plus consultancy and support to manage projects within your organisation. If your organisation is new to formal project management this approach may be the best way to get staff up to speed and to implement a standard approach to project management across the organisation.

In selecting such a package you will need to be sure that the approach is appropriate for the scale of your projects, and that the style of the company meets your needs. Will their training style suit your staff? Will you be happy to work with their consultants?

Smaller organisations will face the same issue on a smaller scale. Can you find a book or manuals at a reasonable cost, and is training available? Don't underestimate the importance of training and support. A new methodology can be a challenge: good quality training and the availability of support can make all the difference.

PRINCE2

PRINCE2 has been adopted as standard by government, and its use is mandatory for most central and local government projects. This means that it is effectively non-proprietary in that you can buy the system (or a cheaper introduction) from the Stationery Office without a requirement to buy training or consultancy.

The full PRINCE2 manual still costs hundreds of pounds and training is certainly advisable, but its availability and wide use by government mean that it is worth looking at. Indeed if you're involved in a project with partners from the statutory sector you may find that the use of PRINCE2 is a requirement for the project.

Pros and cons

PRINCE2 is a heavy-duty system and is used to run large projects. It is therefore comprehensive, but also verbose and bureaucratic. This makes it somewhat intimidating, but it still has some advantages.

- It has reached version two, which means it is tried and tested and is internally consistent.

- It is readily available. You can buy PRINCE2 materials from the Stationery Office and you don't have to get tied into an expensive package of training and support.

- It is widely used particularly in government bodies.

The all encompassing nature of PRINCE2 is an issue: it's common to hear experienced project managers talk of using PRINCE2 'sensibly' or 'with a light touch'; that is using the PRINCE2 framework and templates but not following every last detail of the system.

We tried to adopt that approach here. We've used PRINCE2 as the basis of our examples and templates because it is readily available. But we've tried to keep it simple, and have made some changes of emphasis to reflect the needs of not-for-profit organisations. We are not recommending PRINCE2 as the best system for voluntary organisations, just using it as an example of an established project management system.

The choice of project management methodology is less important than the way it is applied. Indeed any project management system will be better than none at all. The advocates of the different systems all claim some special strength to distinguish their system from their rivals, but in truth there is no magic bullet. The different systems have much in common and none of them will manage the project for you. They provide a framework, but the success of a project depends on the skills and intelligence of the people running it.

Do formal methods kill creativity?

Project management systems with their checklists and templates, processes and procedures reek of rigidity and bureaucracy. PRINCE2 evolved to meet the need of large government departments and shows its bureaucratic origins. Project management systems clearly reflect senior managers' desire to keep control of projects and there's more than a hint of 'painting by numbers', as if success can be guaranteed if staff use approved templates and follow set procedures.

Successful projects depend on good ideas, a genuine connection with user need, passion, dynamism, and competent people. To succeed, a successful project needs much more than a cookbook approach, particularly where innovation is required. But sound techniques are needed even in the most creative project. Project management methods provide useful tools and techniques that represent accumulated best practice. How you to choose to apply them is up to you, but they are too useful to ignore.

PRINCE SOMETIMES DISPLAYS ITS BUREAUCRATIC ORIGINS.

Small projects

Project management is a necessity for big projects that involve large teams perhaps working separately on different parts of the project. In this context, clear documentation and sound communication are essential if everyone involved in the project is to work together effectively.

On a smaller project, involving perhaps two or three people, formal project management is less essential. In a small team, communication can take place more informally, especially if the team members work closely together. Agreement on objectives and the scheduling of work can all be done informally.

But small projects can still go wrong. Communications can break down, things can get forgotten, and objectives can be subtly redefined especially where there are staff changes. Project management can help even on the smallest project. Their templates provide useful checklists for any project; their procedures encourage good communications, and their structures provide accountability.

The issue for smaller projects is to make use of project management techniques at an appropriate level. It makes little sense to produce copious documentation on a tiny project; the effort has to be justifiable by the result.

The test must be: is it useful? A project definition document may appear bureaucratic but it will help you clarify ideas and will improve communication and accountability. A project schedule will help you plan ahead and allocate resources. A clear statement of what the project will produce will help you communicate your needs to suppliers. If project management techniques make for a successful project, no matter how small, it is worth the extra effort.

The project management process

Defining the project

Projects that go wrong tend to do so right at the beginning. All project management methodologies emphasise the importance of the successful initiation of a project through the use of a Project Definition or, in PRINCE2 jargon, a Project Initiation Document (PID).

The production of these documents ensures that the project is defined accurately and that key issues like the overall purpose of the project and its key objectives are clear. The Project Definition will also specify the key deliverables of the project – the things it will produce, and will timetable the work of the project, broken down into a series of tasks.

The Project Definition provides the foundation of the project, the baseline against which progress can be measured and controlled. This doesn't mean that the project is set in concrete. As it proceeds there will be a need for changes, but these can be made in a considered way, against the background of the definition, rather than being incorporated piecemeal into the project.

The process of defining and presenting the project accurately helps ensure its accountability. The Project Definition provides a clear statement of what the project entails and can be used to make sure that everyone understands what it will do. The Project Definition is a great vehicle for communication and should be used to avoid misunderstandings of what the project is about, and to build consensus around its objectives. It is better to have the debate about what the project will do at an early stage of the project rather than let different points of view cause problems at a later date.

We'll let you out when you've written it!

Writing a project definition is hard

Writing a Project Definition is a demanding process. It involves thinking ahead, clearly and logically to structure the project into its different elements. Projects are complicated and it doesn't help that many of the concepts we need to use like objectives and outcomes are abstract and ill defined. (See the *Definition Soup* section on page 8 for more clarity on outcomes and objectives.)

It may be hard, but the effort you put in here will be repaid as the project proceeds. You are building the foundation for the project, setting the framework for its development and constructing a vehicle for communication.

Someone has to write the Project Definition but it shouldn't be a lonely task. You won't be an expert in every element of the project so you'll find it hard to confidently estimate the duration of tasks and the resources you'll require. Nobody has a crystal ball and if you don't know the details of what's involved in a particular process, don't guess. It's much better to talk to those who do have the knowledge and experience. This is particularly true if the project takes you into an area of specialist expertise like the Internet or computer technology. Don't guess how long it will take to develop a database or set up a website but get an estimate from those who do this work all the time.

'SCUSE ME-

TALK TO THOSE WHO KNOW.

The same applies to uncertainties like the needs of project users and the benefits that the project will deliver. Don't struggle to define these on your own but involve those within the organisations who deal in these issues. This may mean leading a discussion, but it is better to resolve these issues with all those involved than to struggle to resolve them on your own.

In the full PRINCE2 methodology a simple Project Brief is produced as a first step: this is then developed into a Project Initiation Document. The template for a Project Brief can be used very successfully as the agenda for an initial brainstorming meeting.

Project Managers have two different roles to play. One is the concentrated work of developing a logical structure to the project. The other is to facilitate communication between the different staff involved. These are distinct and very different skills. Some Project Managers feel more comfortable with the detailed work of planning, but the communication element is the key to the production of an effective Project Definition and a successful project.

Case Study

Tom was delighted to be given the job of working up the plan for the new project and set about the task with enthusiasm. But he found it hard to concentrate in the open plan office at work and it was agreed that he could write the first draft of the project plan at home.

He worked hard to get the plan completed, but found it very heavy going. There were so many uncertainties, but he stuck with it and after a couple of late nights got the job done and felt very pleased with his work. He took pride in his logical and tidy approach and was pleased when he finally pieced all the elements together. He emailed the completed documents to his colleagues back at the office.

When he returned to work he was surprised that his colleagues didn't seem to share his satisfaction. Dave told him angrily that his estimates were way out and that the project's priorities were all wrong. Other colleagues were tight-lipped. Meera told him that they were angry that they hadn't been consulted on what they felt was their area of work.

Tom had to admit that some elements of his plan were way out, and that his colleagues knew much more than he did in those areas of work. He wished he had done more to get everyone's input before he did that first draft of the project plan. Next time, he would use a brainstorming session around the Project Brief template to involve everyone from the start of the project.

Planning the project

"Planning is an unnatural process; it is much more fun to do something. And the nicest thing about not planning is that failure is a complete surprise rather than being preceded by a period of worry and depression."

John Harvey-Jones

The production of a Project Plan, or Schedule, is a key part of the development of any project. The schedule will set out the key stages to be completed during the project, with their starting and finishing dates, and the resources that need to be allocated.

These stages can be turned into bite size pieces, which are then much easier to budget for, and can be smoothly allocated to one or more people as tasks. The reliance on one piece of work finishing before the next can begin is readily visible and so a fairly accurate timescale for the whole project can be set, alongside a cash flow profile which will show at what stages of the project money will be spent. Progress can be monitored against each stage and completion readily reported on.

Planning brings other more subtle benefits. The planning process can be a very effective tool for communication. At each stage of the process, from setting objectives to deciding on tasks, you will need to talk to all those people who can bring knowledge to the project or are likely to be involved in its implementation. If handled well, the planning process will set up channels of communication and draw participants into involvement in the project. This will provide the basis for good teamwork. Objectives and roles should be clear. People will know where the project is going and what they have to do.

In most projects some tasks will be "dependent" on each other – you can't paint a wall until the bricklayers have finished building it, for example, or you can't run a playgroup until you have found a suitable venue. The Project Plan should make these dependencies clear – if the wall is not built on time, or if you cannot find a venue for the playgroup, other tasks in the project may be delayed.

There are many ways to produce this Project Plan. It could be done with pencil and paper; be a word-processed table as in our case study or use a spreadsheet; or be a set of dates in a calendar or on a wall chart. Other techniques like the

Case Study

Imagine we are going to produce a publication – an annual report for example.

The stages, estimated effort and timescales outlined in the project definition will form the basis of a project plan.

This will set out the main stages of the project, often called milestones, and the individual tasks that have to be done to complete each stage. For our annual report the milestones would be:

1 the text completed
2 illustrations ready
3 design and layout finished
4 printing done
5 distribution completed

For a simple publication that one person was putting together and copying in-house, the five stages set out above would be enough to enable the project to be timed, costed and monitored. However if the publication were a collaborative project that used an outside illustrator, designer and printer, a more detailed breakdown of tasks would be required. The table below shows how that might be done.

You would now need to do the same for the other elements of the project and add in any additional costs such as equipment. You can then get on and fund raise or carry out the project if you are lucky and funds are already available, making sure that tasks are done within the time limit and to the budget set.

Assignments		No of days	Who will do the task	Cost per day	Total cost
1 the text completed					
1.1	topics decided	2	editorial group	£450	£900
1.2	contributors briefed	1	editor	£150	£150
1.3	contributors chased	1	administrator	£70	£70
1.4	contributions written	10	contributors	£200	£2,000
1.5	returned contributions edited	2	editor	£150	£300
1.6	whole text proof read	2	administrator	£70	£140
2 illustrations ready					
2.1	outline brief put out to tender	2 + 2	editor + admin	£150 + £70	£440
	2.1.1 names of illustrators collected				
	2.1.2 tender document prepared				
	2.1.3 covering letter written				
	2.1.4 tenders mailed				
	2.1.5 tender documents chased				
2.2	returned tenders evaluated	1	editor	£150	£150
2.3	illustrator selected	2	editorial group	£450	£900
2.4	initial drawings commented on	1	editor	£150	£150
2.5	final drawings approved	1	editorial group	£450	£450
				Sub total	**£5,650**

Gannt chart shown on page 6, which show the dependencies within a project, are an excellent aid to project planning.

Project planning software

Computer software is available to help with the planning process. The software will produce attractive project plans complete with Gannt charts, and can also be used to allocate resources. These systems deal with the planning and scheduling elements of project management – they don't help with defining or managing the process.

The software package that most voluntary sector managers are likely to have available is Microsoft Project. This is not cheap, although it is available to registered charities for £124.

Most people who come to use MS Project for the first time are learning two things: how to use the software and how to do project planning. Both elements involve a fairly steep learning curve. Coming to grips with Project will take several days and can be a very frustrating process. Most people will want to attend a proper training course.

This learning process may be unwelcome, especially at the beginning of a new project; but if you're likely to

THE LEARNING PROCESS MAY BE UNWELCOME ...

plan more than one project, the time spent learning a new skill will be repaid. You'll probably be happy sticking to a spreadsheet or to word processed charts if project management is only incidental to your work and you don't enjoy learning new software.

Project management software doesn't have to become the whole basis of project planning. It can be used in a fairly modest way as a tool to identify and break down the key tasks of a project and produce Gannt charts, which provide an excellent representation of how the tasks fit together over time. Used in this way the software is very good at 'what-if' analysis, in the same way that a spreadsheet can be used for budgeting. The speed at which this can be done makes the software a very useful tool when breaking down the subtasks for a project, and displaying the results in a visual way.

For more details on the use of MS Project see 'The Complete Idiot's Guide to Project Management with MS Project 2000' by Ron Black (£17.50). Despite the title it is an excellent book, giving good advice on strategies for using Project for effective project planning.

Controlling the project

Project Board

The Project Board is charged with the task of controlling the project. A PRINCE2 Project Board consists of:

Executive
Senior manager with overall responsibility for the project.

Senior User
Represents the interests of users of the deliverables – staff within an agency for example.

Senior Supplier
Represents the interests of those responsible for product development

Project Manager
Runs the project on a day-to-day basis on behalf of the Project Board.

This is a smaller group than many voluntary organisations would use to oversee a project. The emphasis is on controlling the project; it is much more a working group than a talking shop. It shouldn't be seen as a steering group representing the interests of all the stakeholders. If there is real need for such a body it may well be required in addition to the Project Board.

The model appears unusual to voluntary sector eyes, but it has some strengths. The inclusion of the executive, a manager from the organisation,

provides a champion for the project and ensures it doesn't get isolated. The senior user, usually a staff member who may represent service users, ensures that the project does meet its users' needs, an important issue for IT projects.
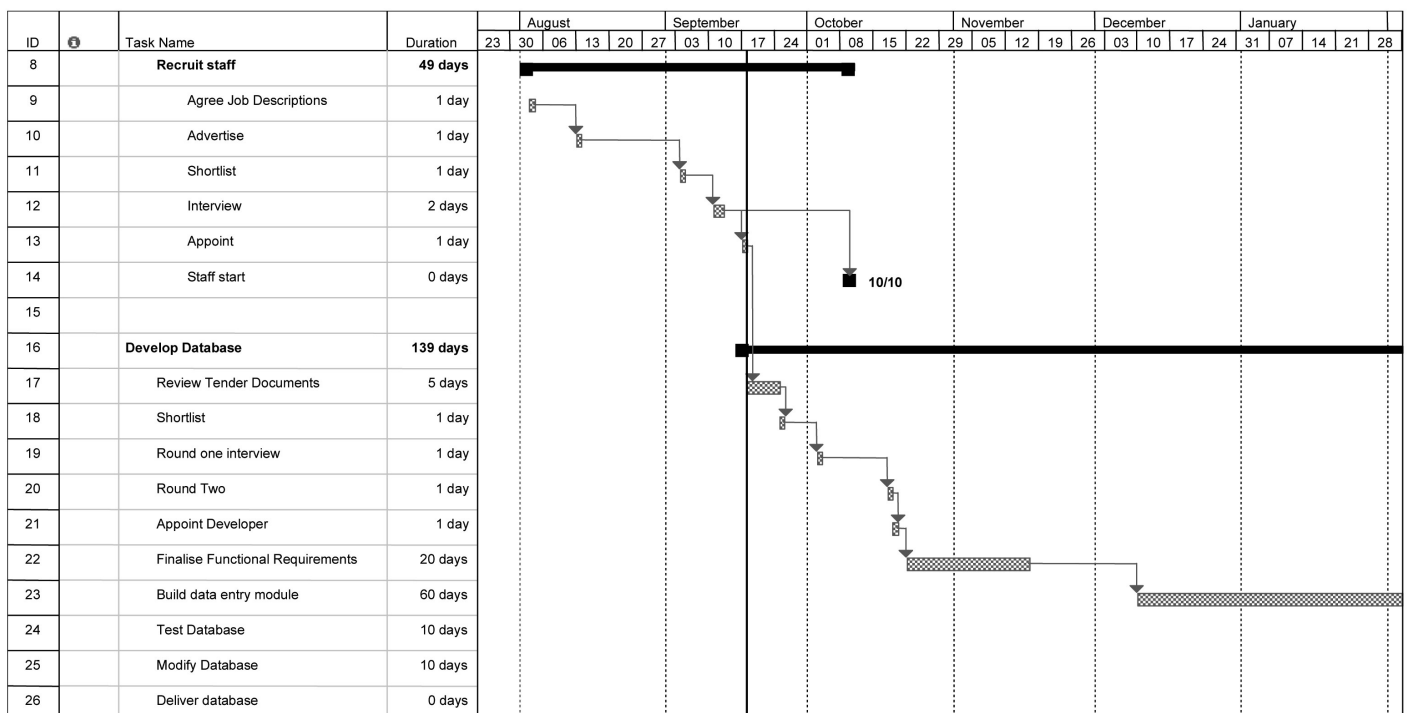
Stages

The Project Board's first task will be to agree and sign off the Project Definition. This will initiate the project and set the different stages. The Board will agree the different stages of the project, monitor progress through each stage and sign it off as it concludes. A basic principle is that a stage doesn't begin till the previous stage is successfully concluded. This is in contrast to informal (or non-existent) methods of project management where projects just roll on despite unresolved difficulties.

The Project Board will meet regularly throughout the project. They will control progress, review and agree key documents such as Product Descriptions, and receive regular highlight reports.

A technical project manager?

Within the voluntary sector it is common for the person who manages a project to be the one who had the initial idea, raised the funding, and who has the enthusiasm and the dedication to make the project succeed. This type of Project Manager is more likely to have skills in

● **Gannt chart from Microsoft Project**

ID	ⓘ	Task Name	Duration	August 23	30	06	13	20	27	September 03	10	17	24	October 01	08	15	22	29	November 05	12	19	26	December 03	10	17	24	January 31	07	14	21	28
8		**Recruit staff**	**49 days**																													
9		Agree Job Descriptions	1 day																													
10		Advertise	1 day																													
11		Shortlist	1 day																													
12		Interview	2 days																													
13		Appoint	1 day																													
14		Staff start	0 days											10/10																		
15																															
16		**Develop Database**	**139 days**																													
17		Review Tender Documents	5 days																													
18		Shortlist	1 day																													
19		Round one interview	1 day																													
20		Round Two	1 day																													
21		Appoint Developer	1 day																													
22		Finalise Functional Requirements	20 days																													
23		Build data entry module	60 days																													
24		Test Database	10 days																													
25		Modify Database	10 days																													
26		Deliver database	0 days																													

For more information, see Lasa's knowledgebase at www.lasa.org.uk/knowledgebase

the area of work involved rather than in project management itself.

A different approach is often taken in the wider world where Project Managers are appointed on the basis of their project management skills. This recognises project management as a technical skill in its own right, and this becomes the basis of the appointment rather than knowledge of the particular area of work.

The PRINCE2 model for the Project Board is based on this approach. The Project Executive is the manager with overall responsibility for the project while the Project Manager plays the more technical role of running the project day to day.

There are advantages in this separation. In the voluntary sector model the person who initiates the project is often the custodian of the vision and the driving force behind the project. This person may not have project management skills, and there can be a tension between their desire to maintain the vision of the project, and the ability to deal with the detail of running the project.

But can this approach work within the voluntary sector where resources are less often available to support this division of labour? We may not be able to afford specialist Project Managers, but it is worth considering how these skills can be developed. Recognition of the value of these skills is a start, as is the provision of training for those who need it. Larger agencies have developed project management units within their organisation to be available to projects as and when needed. Smaller agencies may identify one member of staff to be trained in the specialist skills needed to help colleagues run projects.

You have been chosen to be Training Project Manager!

SMALLER AGENCIES

This is exactly what we want

Dammit – she's being realistic and firm

We have followed the path of developing project management skills within Lasa and this paper is a result of that strategy. We've also successfully offered assistance to other organisations in terms of supporting their project management, especially on ICT orientated projects. For more details contact the Information Systems Team at Lasa – ist@lasa.org.uk, 020 7377 1226.

Funding applications

The typical pattern of project development in voluntary organisations goes something like this: an idea for a new project emerges and a funding bid is made. There is then a long pause, and if funding is approved the project goes ahead.

How does the process of making a funding application fit in with effective project initiation?

In most cases the funding application doesn't so much fit in as take over. The process of writing a successful funding application is time consuming, absorbing so much effort that it can easily become a substitute for explicit Project Definition.

Doing a funding application isn't the same as defining the project. Being successful with an application involves pressing the funders' buttons: meeting their priorities, a hard enough process in its own right, and not the same as defining a project in its own terms.

The application form will emphasise the elements of the project that meet the funder's priorities: completing it involves playing up the organisations strengths and downplaying weaknesses. In contrast, a Project Definition will take a more dispassionate view of the business case, and highlight difficulties and areas of weakness in order to deal with them.

If all the work goes into the application form and the application is unsuccessful, then the organisation is left with nothing but the unsuccessful form. This can be used as the basis for another application but priorities differ and so it may not be very useful.

A better approach is to use project management techniques to help with the funding applications. A Project Brief can be used to prepare the ground for a funding application. The template will act as a checklist for all the issues to be considered, and can provide the basis of an agenda to discuss the application. This discussion should lead to clear consensus on the nature of the project, and will tease out the detail that will provide the basis of the application. The Project Initiation Document template on page 14 includes a number of headings in the Business Case that reflect the questions on the current Community Fund application form.

This approach to funding application brings a major benefit: the project will be defined in its own terms not just within the framework set by the funder's application form. If the application is unsuccessful then the basis for other applications is in place. If the application does succeed, then the process of project initiation can get off to a flying start.

Project definition will still need to take place once a funder has given approval. The first task of staff appointed to a newly funded project will be to revisit an initial Project Brief that was done at the time of a funding application and rework it in more detail, looking hard at the assumptions that were made at the time of the original application. Circumstances may have changed, and the business case will still have to be made.

Definition soup

Mission and values; objectives and outcomes; benefits and deliverables: these terms are the stock in trade of the Project Manager and provide the key headings of the Project Definition. But their meanings are anything but clear. Different people use the same term to mean different things; some funders for example use 'objectives' to describe broad strategic vision, others use it to mean more precise measurable goals.

Our meanings for these terms are defined below. But be aware that others will have different definitions and you may have to translate some terms when using them for external purposes like application forms.

There is a clear hierarchy of scale involved here: "Vision" deals with the broad view of the project. "Outcomes" describes the difference the project will make. "Objectives" set out the key activities of the project. "Deliverables" are the specific things produced, and "Tasks" are the activities needed to produce them.
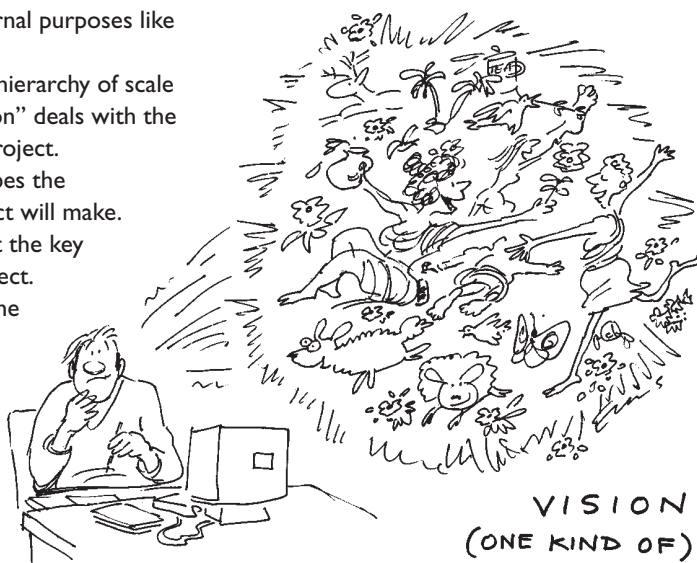
Working with suppliers

The most crucial step in many technical projects is to find the right supplier. Find a good company to develop your website or to set up your database and the project is well on the way to success. Pick a dud and you're in for a nightmare.

Good project management technique really begins to pay off when it comes to choosing your supplier. The work you've done producing a project definition will be a big help in selecting and managing your supplier.

VISION
(ONE KIND OF)

Invitation to tender

The starting point, whether you're going through a major tendering process or just talking to consultants about a small piece of work will be a clear statement of what you require from a potential supplier. This document will communicate your needs to a supplier; provide the basis of their tender, and of the contract between you.

An Invitation to Tender (ITT) will set out what you require, and also deal with procedural issues of how you will go about the tendering process and what information you require from them. A template for an ITT is included in the appendix on page 12.

Your list of requirements provides the meat of the tender document. The more detail you can provide about your needs, the easier it will be to select the best company. There's a tendency for companies to be very confident about their products and to believe they can do everything that anyone could want. The only way to make them cost the job accurately is to give specific details of the all things you *must* have. This forces you to think through your needs in detail: a hard but necessary part of the process.

Don't make the mistake of prescribing solutions. The trick is to describe your *requirements* and leave it to them to offer *solutions*. You're the expert

Term	Description	Example	Form
Vision	A sense of what the project aims to achieve in the broadest terms	Reduce social exclusion	
Outcomes	Broad view of the aims of the project	Improve service delivery of information to the public	
Objectives	What the project will do – should be readily measurable	Develop a website Produce a pamphlet Set up a telephone help-line	
Deliverables	What the project will produce	A website, a pamphlet, a help-line	Nouns *The 'what'*
Tasks	The activities that are required to produce the deliverable – usually many tasks per deliverable	Design the pamphlet, Commission content, Select typesetter etc.	Verbs *The 'how'*
Method of approach/values	Useful in voluntary sector projects. May encapsulate an organisation's values	Consult widely Involve users	

You're little - so you have modest requirements

That's what you think!

on what you want to do: they are the experts in the technical solutions.

Smaller community and voluntary organisations face a particular problem in talking to commercial companies, particularly those that have not worked for this sector before. Commercial companies will tend to assume that smaller not-for-profit organisations will have modest requirements, easily met by their standard offerings. In fact the opposite is true. Many community-based organisations are very information intensive, and their information management needs are demanding and different from those of commercial companies. You need to be aware of this tendency and make sure you supply enough detail about your requirements to ensure they know what they are getting into.

Issue the tender document to as many companies as you can find. Recommendations from other organisations are always the best way to find good companies, but you need to cast your net wide to give yourself the best chance. Give them three weeks to respond and use their responses to make a short-list of companies you will interview. Use standard good practice for recruitment throughout. In the interview, don't let them spend more than five minutes on a standard presentation on their company.

Throughout the process the five key questions are:

- Can they do the work?

- Do they understand what you want?

- How well do they manage themselves?

- Can you work with them?

- Are they financially viable?

Supplier management

Good project management is nowhere more needed than when dealing with suppliers for a technical project like a website or database, although it applies equally to managing building works or any set of deliverables. The key issues are to ensure that they deliver what you want, when you want it and on budget.

Specification

The starting point is to ensure that your supplier understands what you want and can specify a system to meet those needs. Your Project Definition, together with Product Description and Invitation to Tender documents will provide a sound basis for further discussions. Your supplier should produce a technical specification for you to agree before they start the work.

The process of agreeing a specification is a subtle one. You know your requirements but you probably don't know what is technically possible. You have to work in partnership with the supplier to tease out what solution will be best for you. You shouldn't be too prescriptive; you don't want to stifle their creativity. You have picked the company for their abilities and you want them to have ideas you haven't thought of. At the same time you need to stick to your key requirements. Don't be talked out of them because they are unusual or hard to deliver.

Managing the project

You need to keep in control of the project, and sound project management techniques will help you do that. You don't want your supplier disappearing for a long while to do the work and then coming back with something that doesn't do what you want.

Instead, break the project into stages and agree milestones for the completion of each. Your suppliers will have other customers to contend with and will probably prefer to leave schedules a bit vague. But you will have your own deadlines to meet, so ensure scheduling is done accurately and monitored closely.

Communications

Good supplier management requires considerable skill and depends on good communications and a level of trust between the two partners. Technical projects aren't easy, with a high level of risk and stress for both parties. It's easy for trust to break down. You'll think they are slow in delivering the goods and worry that they can't do it. They'll think you are poor at thinking through what you want and don't understand the technical limitations. The key is to work closely together, communicate well, and at all costs prevent an 'us and them' attitude from developing. After all, you both are working hard to achieve the same aim and both want to succeed.

KEEP CLOSE TOUCH WITH YOUR SUPPLIER

Project Brief

(see template on p13)

The Project Brief provides a way into the project and acts as a first step to producing a Project Initiation Document. This template can be used successfully as the basis of an initial brainstorming session with everyone involved or interested in the project. It sets an agenda for the meeting and acts as a checklist to ensure that discussion covers all the major issues. It's helpful to issue everyone with a copy of the Brief template and encourage them to think about the issues before the meeting.

It's important to prevent the discussion getting bogged down in any one area of detail. People may struggle with the difference between outcomes and objectives for example, but you're not aiming for perfection at this stage, just general agreement on the various elements of the project.

The outcome of the meeting, as a completed Brief, should be written up by the Project Manager to form the basis of a more developed Project Description.

The Project Initiation Document

(see template on p14)

Background

Background is a brief account of how the project got to where it is. Keep it short, most information should appear under the specific headings below.

Project Definition

This section involves working down through a hierarchy of scale, moving from the broad vision for the project through to specific objectives; deliverables and the tasks needed to produce them.

Vision describes the overall change or impact sought such as *"combat social exclusion"* or *"increase access to justice"*.

Outcomes deals with the difference that the project will make in the broadest terms. Examples of outcomes would be captured in phrases like – "*improve delivery of information*"; "*reduce duplication of effort between agencies*".

Objectives are the main things that the project will do; they are the purpose of the project and should be readily measurable. You shouldn't have too many objectives; five objectives would be a lot for most projects.

Deliverables are the things that the project produces. They may be tangible objects like training manuals or less concrete entities like a training course or services.

Method of approach is important for many voluntary sector projects as a way of demonstrating the distinctiveness of a project, or to emphasise the values that are implicit in the project. Examples: *"involving users"*, *"work in partnership with other agencies"*.

Scope sets the boundaries to the project, in terms of the work done, client groups, or geographical boundaries.

Constraints describes limitations on the project like time or funding limits.

Exclusions spells out what the project won't do.

Interfaces deals with the relationship the project will have to the host organisation and with partners.

In writing these different elements it's worth thinking who they are being written for. The broader elements like "Outcomes" will be of interest to management committees and funders; the greater detail of the Project Plan will be more relevant to the staff doing the work. A PID isn't produced for its own sake, it's there to be used: explanations from the different sections can be variously used in funding applications, work plans etc.

Business Case

The phrase 'business case' may seem out of place in a voluntary sector project, but it deals with the justification for the project. What needs will the project meet? Will the benefits it delivers to its users and sponsors justify the cost?

This section will contain most of the information required by funders; the numbers and types of users and how they will access the project. Issues like marketing and publicity will be covered, along with links or overlaps with other services and how the project will be sustained when the initial funding runs out.

The business case for voluntary and not-for-profit projects differs from that of commercial projects, which will focus more on income and expenditure. The business case for voluntary sector projects may be more diffuse and less quantifiable, emphasising the needs we aim to meet and the benefits we will deliver.

Project Plan

The development of a Project Plan or schedule lies at the heart of any project. It involves identifying the key tasks of the project and then breaking them down into subtasks. This allows a more accurate estimate of the time the project will take along with a measure of the resources (such as staff time) needed to complete the tasks.

The schedule and Gannt charts are a key part of the Project Initiation Document, but are best kept as separate documents. It isn't necessary to do more than summarise the key tasks in the body of the PID itself.

Budget

The project will require a budget and this should be done in the normal way.

If a funding application will be made as a part of the project it is helpful to use the project budget as the basis for

the application, and to use this to generate the specific information required by the application form.

Project Organisational Structure

Project Organisational Structure will clarify the makeup of the Project Board and of the project team. It is particularly important to be clear on staff roles within the project. So often, difficulties and differences within teams have their roots in uncertainties and competition over roles, and it is helpful to establish roles at the start of the project.

The development of an effective team is a key component in the development of a successful project and there is a wealth of literature available on team building.

Project Control

The Project Manager will report to the Project Board on the progress of the project. This can be done by means of a regular highlight report through the course of the project (perhaps monthly), which will report on activities through the period. The Project Board may meet to discuss this report or it can simply be circulated if the project is going according to plan.

At the end of each stage of the project the Project Manager will produce an "end of stage report". The Board will meet at this point to approve the report and give permission to move on to the next stage.

Risks

Effective project management puts effort into managing the risks within a project, focusing attention and allocating resources where it is needed most, rather than spreading them across the whole project. There is perhaps a natural tendency to avoid thinking about those things that are going unpalatably wrong: a defined structure for highlighting and monitoring problems ensures that risks aren't neglected.

This is achieved by keeping a risk log which lists the identified risks for the project and the status of the risk – usually tagged as green, amber or red to give a measure of the severity. Crucially, someone will be given responsibility for managing each risk. The Project Board will review project risks, at least at the end of each stage.

Quality Plan

The Quality Plan will lay out key quality criteria, particularly for project deliverables. It is useful to identify the quality measures and to be clear on who will be responsible for seeing that they are met. Each Product Description will give more detail on quality criteria for each deliverable.

The quality plan will also deal with how the project will be evaluated as it proceeds. Evaluation often continues after a project is complete, but it is important to build these mechanisms into the project at the planning stage.

Summary

Producing a Project Initiation Document can be a substantial piece of work. On smaller projects it can be difficult to know how much effort to put into it. How much detail is commensurate with the size of the project?   It's impossible to give a precise answer, but the work done early in the project will be repaid with interest later on. On a smaller project it is better to respond briefly to all headings than to only complete some of the headings.

Product Description

(see template on p15)

While the Project Definition Document provides an overview of the project, it is necessary to go into more detail about the key deliverables – the things that the project will produce. A Product Description is used to do this, spelling out the purpose of the product, details of what it will consist of, and set quality criteria. The "product" may be tangible things like a printed publication or a website, or they may be less concrete entities like a training course or some form of service.

The Product Description is a separate document from the Project Initiation Document. The Product Description will go into more detail: for example, the Product Description for a publication will describe its content, the different sections, its format etc. The two documents have different purposes and you'll want the Product Description to be able to stand alone. A Product Description will also be used to provide the basis for an Invitation to Tender document (see Invitation to Tender).

Put in – icebergs!

KEEP A RISK LOG.

Invitation to Tender

1 Background to the project

Short section, no longer than half a page, setting out an overview of the project, similar to background section in Project Initiation Document

2 Supplier response required

This is the key section that sets out what the supplier needs to respond to. It should be laid out in a clear manner that will ensure suppliers approach the ITT in a consistent way, thus facilitating ease of comparison. You may want to consider setting these out in table form, as an appendix.

2.1 Scope of the work

This section should be based on the relevant deliverables, laid out as individual bullet points. Should include any associated work such as ongoing support or training of staff. It may also include asking for the experience/views of the supplier on future development options and how this stage of the development might best be used to ensure that future needs can be accommodated.

Each point to be further developed in the Requirements section as described below.

2.2 Supplier profile

This should set out what the supplier has to demonstrate to be considered for the job. For example:

- experience of this type of work in the public/voluntary sector

- understanding of the values of voluntary sector work, including adherence to equal opportunities statement/policy (worth attaching to ITT?)

- a secure and stable company – details of the company size/structure

- clear methods of work – a description of how the contract will be handled and the project managed. How they might handle any difficulties that could emerge. How they might present progress.

- two referees

2.3 Success criteria

Should specify that success criteria not in priority order.

The decision making criteria e.g.:

- meeting the deliverables as regards price

- meeting the deliverables as regards quality

- offering creative solutions to the requirements

2.4 General contractual details

This should include for example:

- any guidance on funds available, for example, development is expected to cost in the region of £........ (a broad spread is advisable to avoid tenders to within a few pounds of your guide price)

- ownership of development

- payment to be geared to milestones, to be agreed with the successful supplier

3 Timetable and process of choosing a supplier

This should set out a clear timetable and process as laid out in the Project Plan. Include details of the main contact.

4 Requirements

This section provides the 'meat' of the ITT. It should take the individual bullet points of 2.1 and make them into headings to be elaborated. If the deliverables have been expanded into Product Descriptions then these can be the basis for this section of the ITT.

Each section to include:

- What we want to achieve – not the specific technical solutions but the 'business' requirement. This may verge on the technical where we are clear e.g. 'we require a content management system', but avoid narrowing the options to specific solutions as you want suppliers to respond (creatively) with their views

- User requirements (What do staff require to do maintenance or updating? What do end users require?)

It can be useful to present your requirements in a numbered list so that you, and the potential supplier, can check off those they claim to meet. The more precise and detailed you can be about your needs the easier it will be to determine which bidders can meet your requirements.

You may want to distinguish between mandatory requirements, things you must have, and desirables, things you would like but could manage without. The process of deciding which requirements you must have can be very instructive. It determines the essence of your project and is a very useful exercise. ●
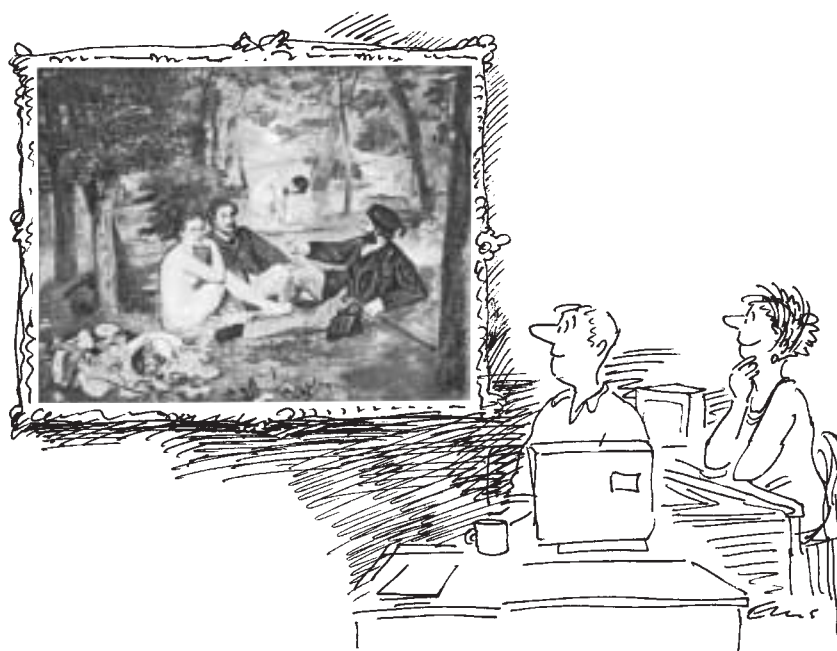
DESIRABLES : THINGS YOU WOULD LIKE BUT COULD MANAGE WITHOUT

TEMPLATE 1: Project Brief

1   **Outcomes** – what difference or impact we hope the project will make

2   **Objectives** – the purpose of the project; what the project will do – must be measurable

3   **Outline deliverables** – the specific things (products) that we will produce

4   **Scope** – what is and isn't included in the project (users, geographical boundaries, depth and type of work)

5   **Approach** – how we will go about it, our values

6   **Exclusions** – what we won't do

7   **Constraints** – the things that might prevent us doing all that we want

8   **Outline business case** – needs, benefits, users (numbers), income generation, funding sources, and marketing (budget?)

9   **Reasons for selecting this solution**

10   **Outline project plan/schedule** – timetable

11   **Quality expectations** – including monitoring and performance indicators

12   **Risk assessment** – what could go wrong and what the contingency might be

TEMPLATE 2: Project Initiation Document (PID)

Background

    Context

    Origins

    How we got where we are

Project Definition

    Vision

    Outcomes

    Objectives

    Deliverables

    Method of approach

    Scope

    Constraints

    Exclusions

    Interfaces (how the project fits into overall organisation management – and relationships with partners)

    Assumptions

Initial Business Case

    Needs assessment

    Benefits

    Users (who)

    Numbers

    Marketing and access

    Other players (voluntary and statutory)

    Sustainability

Initial Project Plan (Can use software like MS Project)

    Assignments (tasks)

    Timings

    Estimated effort (staff time)

Budget

Quality Plan

    How products will be tested

    (Monitoring, performance indicators)

    Evaluation

Risks

Contingency Plan

Project Organisation Structure

    (People, roles etc.)

Project Controls

    (Running the project)

Exception Process

    (Under what circumstances we make what changes when things go wrong – who decides)

TEMPLATE 3: Product Description

1   Introduction

2   Purpose of the product

3   Scope of the product

4   Details of the product

5   Delivery of the product

6   Quality criteria

7   Review process

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www.lasa.org.uk/it

● IT HEALTHCHECK
www.lasa.org.uk/it/healthcheck.shtml

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For more details call us on **020 7377 1226**, *or email us at* **ist@lasa.org.uk**.

● IT HELPLINE

If you need access to high quality, one to one ICT advice call NCVO's helpdesk free on **0800 2798 798**. This service is provided in partnership with Lasa and supported by Poptel. *For further information about NCVO please contact their helpdesk or website at* **www.ncvo-vol.org.uk**. *London voluntary agencies can phone our ALG funded helpline on* **020 7377 1226** *to speak to a member of the Lasa Information Systems Team.*

● KNOWLEDGEBASE
www.lasa.org.uk/knowledgebase

Our award-winning comprehensive database of IT information and advice online. The Lasa IT knowledgebase provides expert advice on IT queries and IT management issues. Written in clear, plain English by the voluntary sector for the voluntary sector, the Lasa knowledgebase provides information on Buying IT, Databases, Equality issues, the Internet, Managing IT, Project Management, Software, and Troubleshooting resources.

● COMPUTANEWS
www.lasa.org.uk/computanews

Our magazine **Computanews** provides clear information on the use of information technology for advice and information providers. Computanews is full of informative and entertaining articles including:

- The latest IT developments in the advice world
- The internet, world wide web and email
- Choosing and setting-up a database
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- IT training, new software and much more

● CIRCUIT RIDERS
www.lasa.org.uk/circuitriders

Lasa supports the development of a movement of Circuit Riders – mobile IT support workers. A Circuit Rider supports a caseload of organisations, each too small to have their own IT staff. Circuit Riders are part of a movement through which they can support each other, and work with funders, networks and policy makers to ensure the voluntary sector is making the best use of IT. We have set up a Circuit Rider discussion forum and are involved in organising meetings of Circuit Riders around the UK.

Lasa started the Circuit Rider project in September 2002. We are helping over twenty London-based organisations develop their IT capacity. Project members sign-up to an 18-month programme (overseen by a steering committee), which provides an initial site visit and assistance with immediate IT problems, followed by the development of individual recommendations and action plans and periodic follow-up visits. The project also includes training sessions, group events, publications, a telephone and email help-line, a dedicated website and a private email discussion list.

For more details see our website at **www.lasa.org.uk/circuitriders** *or phone us on* **020 7377 1226**.

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Lasa's Information Systems Team publish a series of Computanews Guides. These clearly written booklets cover many aspects of computer use and answer common queries.

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For further details contact:

Lasa Publications
Universal House
88–94 Wentworth Street
London E1 7SA

TELEPHONE: 020 7377 2748

FAX: 020 7247 4725

EMAIL: publications@lasa.org.uk

WEBSITE: www.lasa.org.uk

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