



Guide to Strategic Planning

Introduction

Strategic planning is an important process that all organisations should undertake. It is essential for clarifying what you want to achieve, for maintaining high quality services for beneficiaries and for ensuring the long-term sustainability of the organisation.

The complexity of your strategic plan will depend on the characteristics of your organisation, how large it is, how long it has been operating and the external environment you are working in. This guide will take you through the essential elements of the process and recommend further reading and resources that may assist. Also, please read the case study of Anytown Women's Centre which accompanies this guide and provides an example of an actual strategic planning process.

http://www.wrc.org.uk/includes/documents/cm_docs/2011/g/guidestratplancase_study_ng.pdf

What is strategic planning?

Strategic Planning can be defined a number of ways:

- "The process of clarifying the overall purpose or mission of your organisation and what you will do over the next 3-5 years (or whatever period the plan covers) to bring this about." (CES)
- "Strategic planning is the process of defining and presenting a clear, coherent and realistic view of what the organisation wants to achieve and a 3-5 year (or whatever period you need to be thinking about) overview of how it will achieve its aims and objectives"(Performance Hub)
- A strategic plan is a dynamic and useful tool for trustees and staff to monitor how the organisation as a whole is meeting its objectives.

What does it look like?

- It is about the big picture and the long term direction of the organisation.
- A strategic plan does not focus on the operational or daily tasks of the staff - these are short term work plans that feed into the strategic plan
- A strategic plan usually includes a mission statement, a statement of key

priorities and strategies for achieving these priorities, timescales and a procedure for reviewing progress and modifying the plan.

Why is it important?

Strategic Planning:

- Sets organisational priorities and ensures the purpose of the organisation is clear
- Ensures that beneficiaries are the focus of planning and setting of aims and objectives
- Provides the opportunity to ensure objectives are realistic, within a specific timeframe and within the organisation's capacity and resources
- Ensures that limited resources can be used for agreed priorities
- Assists an organisation to be proactive, as risks, strengths and weaknesses, and potential changes in the environment are identified and strategies to deal with them developed
- Ensures resources are allocated to the organisation's priorities, when done in conjunction with the budget process
- Shows that your organisation is thoughtful, understands its environment and is well managed; funding bodies often request a copy and it can be a great promotional tool
- Can promote closer relationships and improved understanding of different perspectives among staff, trustees and volunteers
- Can result in increased commitment by everyone in an organisation to its aims and objectives

What is the difference between a strategic plan and other types of plans?

Strategic plans focus on the overall purpose of your organisation and its long-term direction and aims. Strategic plans usually cover a 3-5 year period.

Business plans focus on how you will implement your strategic aims and the resources your organisation needs to achieve your aims in the medium-term. Sometimes, organisations will also do business plans for specific projects. Business plans usually cover a 1-3 year period.

Operational or work plans focus on the detailed tasks or activities that the staff in your organisation need to do to achieve your strategic aims. Operational plans usually cover a one-year period.

However, it is common for small to medium size voluntary and community organisations to combine strategic and business plans into one plan.

How is strategic planning done?

If this is the first time your organisation has undertaken a strategic planning process, make sure that the purpose of the exercise is communicated to the whole organisation and that there is support from everyone who is going to be involved in the process. People have different views and experiences of planning - some believe that it is a waste of time and will not be useful; others will be positive. It can also be useful to talk to other organisations and ask if they will share their plan and process so you can see how they have approached the task.

Be clear about the process you want to use: who will be consulted and when, who will 'lead' the process, how long will it take (set a target end date) and ensure everyone involved is happy with the process and timeframe.

Who should be involved?

Who to involve will depend on the size and type of your organisation. For larger organisations a working party with representatives from different areas of the organisation might be the way to go. For new, small organisations everyone might be involved. Most organisations involve staff, trustees, volunteers and occasionally service users.

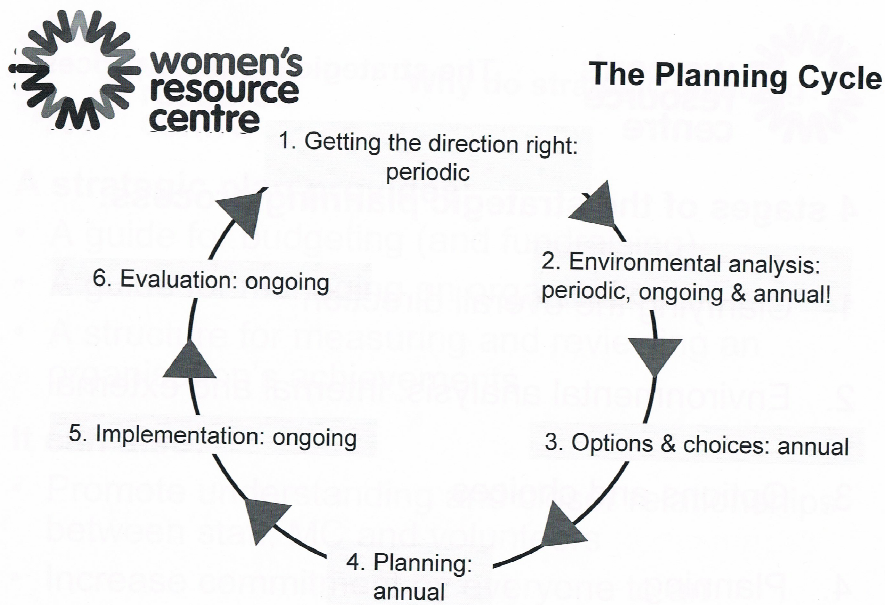
Once it has been decided who is to be involved and how (e.g. a working group), it is important to communicate the purpose, timeframe and consultation process to the organisation as a whole so everyone understands what is going on.

It can be useful to ensure that one person has responsibility for managing the process so that deadlines are met.

Be clear about who makes the final decision about the content of the strategic plan - usually this will be the board of trustees.

The strategic planning process can highlight change(s) that are necessary in order for an organisation to move forward. At this stage it is useful for the people who are leading the process to think about how to prepare the organisation for change and deal with any resistance to change that might come up.

Senior staff and trustee commitment to the planning process is essential. A message to the whole organisation outlining the purpose, timeframe, and support of senior staff and trustees can be helpful in establishing the importance of this strategic planning project.



Step 1: Getting Started

Agree your vision and mission statement ('where do we want to go') and organisation values ('who are we'). Be clear about the purpose of the organisation and its overall aims.

Even if your organisation is well established it is worth reviewing your vision, mission and value statements to ensure that they are still relevant and current. It is important that trustees and staff agree that they embody the current purpose, direction and values of the organisation.

What is a vision?

- The world as you would like it to be
- A vision is a statement of why the organisation exists and describes the change you want to see in the world
- A vision creates an ideal picture, it is inspiring and motivating

Examples of vision statements:

"Rape Crisis (England and Wales) wants all women and girls to be free from the fear and experience of sexual violence."

"Women and their organisations are strong, valued and free to exercise their rights" (Women's Resource Centre)

What is a mission?

- The role of your organisation in making the vision happen
- A mission statement outlines how the organisation will achieve its goals and guides its work.
- The statement should explain why the organisation exists, what it does and who should benefit from its work.

Example of mission statements:

“The London Irish Women’s Centre exists to empower, inspire, mobilise and celebrate women of Irish birth or descent in London.”

“Supporting and standing up for a diverse and thriving women’s sector”(WRC)

What are values?

Values describe how you aim to treat people and the way you do your work. “They may be beliefs, attitudes or principles, they act as the glue that binds the members of the organisations together.” Bernard and Walker 1994

Some examples are:

- Respect for beneficiaries and staff
- Consultative and inclusive
- Commitment to social justice
- Feminist
- Embrace diversity

Helpful hints

A good mission statement is brief, memorable, inspirational and at the same time credible.

Some organisations get bogged down with agreeing words and lose focus of their essential purpose. Ensure that the main points in your vision and mission statements are agreed and then ask those in the group who are keen on writing to go away and develop example statements to bring back to the larger group for discussion and agreement.

Make sure the agreed statements are consistent with all your organisations documents e.g. Constitution, Memorandum and Articles of Association, annual report, publicity etc.

In the process of getting everyone to agree on the specific wording, try not to lose the inspiring aspect of your statements.

Step 2: Analysing your environment

No organisation exists in a vacuum. In order to plan well for the future, you need to understand what is going on inside your organisation as well as the external influences which may impact on the organisation’s ability to meet its stated aims and objectives.

A tool that is used by many organisations is a ‘SWOT analysis’ (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats).

SWOT Analysis

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

Understanding your organisation

The first step is to identify the strengths and weaknesses of your organisation - your internal environment. This will provide information to enable you to test whether the strategies you develop are indeed feasible.

Get everyone in the group to think about the strengths and weaknesses of the organisation and write these down. Consider the following:

- Activities and services (e.g. how successful, level of demand etc.) – consider things you don’t do (and perhaps should do?) as well as things you do already
- Skills and knowledge (perhaps do a skills audit of staff and trustees?)
- Ways of working (e.g. inclusive, hierarchical)

See JISC InfoNet www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk

- Resources (funding, IT, venue/offices, equipment, partnerships, sources of support etc.)
- Capacity of the organisation – current and future – how sustainable is the organisation?
- Governance and management
- Relationships with key people outside the organisation (e.g. partners, referral agencies, funders, local community etc.)
- Feedback from service users, volunteers, partner organisations etc.

It is useful to have information at hand – e.g. trustee and staff information such as skills and knowledge, financial situation, information collected through monitoring and evaluation, changes to the lease of your office space etc.

It is important to write up the discussions as they can provide useful background information for a number of documents that you may later wish to develop for your organisation e.g. marketing information, annual reports etc.

A useful focus for the discussion is to identify what specific factors make your organisation different from others providing similar services – where do you add value, which services or approaches make your organisation unique? At the same time be honest about weaknesses as they provide guidance on priority areas for trustees and staff to address in order that aims and objectives can be met.

Understanding the external environment

In order to plan for the future, consideration needs to be given to what is happening around you, external factors that will either help or prevent you from meeting your aims and objectives.

Some external factors are obvious e.g. the availability of funding; others, such as changes of society attitudes or government policy, may not seem to be directly relevant to what your organisation wishes to achieve, but in the longer term, can be very important.

The external environment is always changing, and is made up of people, organisations and agencies that have an impact on your organisation.

A tool that is often used is called a PESTLE. This requires you to identify the political, economic, social, technological, legal and environmental characteristics of your external environment.

Political	Local council policies, national Government policy, European directives
Economic	Funding trends (including changes in funding sources), local and national economic changes, budget cuts, trends

	in charitable giving and volunteering,
Social	Changes in population (e.g. age, lone parents, race, culture, faith, etc.), public attitudes
Technological	Changes and access to new technology (e.g. IT, social media), skill requirements
Legal	New laws or changes to existing legislation
Environmental	Local, national and international environmental changes and impacts

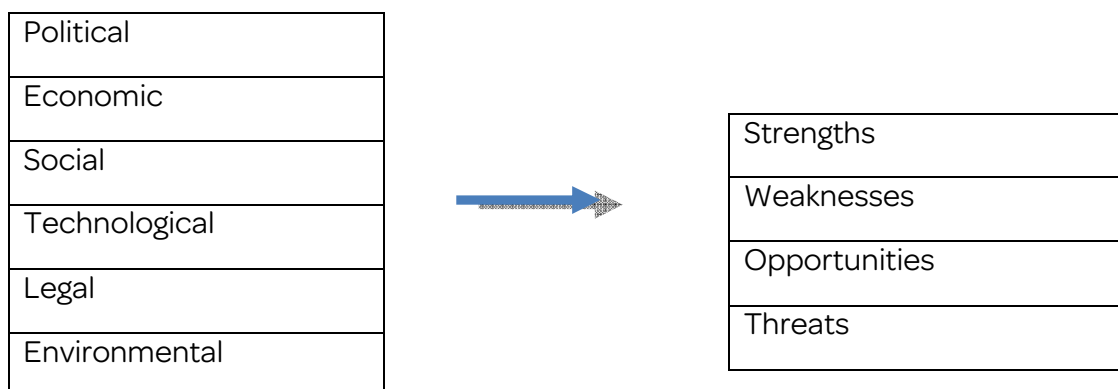
Consider the following questions:

- Which of these factors are most important now?
- Which are likely to become important in a few years?
- What are the factors influencing changes?

To analyse your external environment thoroughly, you may need to do some research on issues such as social trends, factors impacting on the voluntary sector, demographics of your local area. Often local authorities have information on their websites on what is happening locally; other useful resources are listed at the end of this guide.

Again, think widely and do not worry too much about the categories. The objective is to understand the external factors that may either assist your organisation’s objectives or be a challenge.

Use the PESTLE analysis to consider what external opportunities and threats your organisation is facing. The factors you identify will fit into the SWOT framework.



Once you have done your SWOT and PESTLE analyses discuss both the positive and negative points raised, and clarify the main strategic issues for your organisation by considering these questions:

- How do we use our strengths to take advantage of the opportunities?
- How do we overcome weaknesses that prevent us taking advantage of these opportunities?
- How do we use our strengths to reduce the likelihood and impact of these threats?
- How do we overcome the weaknesses that will make these threats a reality?

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	<i>[How do we use these strengths to take advantage of these opportunities?]</i>	<i>[How do we overcome the weaknesses that prevent us taking advantage of these opportunities?]</i>
Threats	<i>[How do we use these strengths to reduce the likelihood and impact of these threats?]</i>	<i>[How do we address the weaknesses that will make these threats a reality?]</i>

The Resources section at the end of this guide gives links to other resources.

Stage 3: Options and Choices

Now to the heart of strategic planning. You need to agree on 5 or 6 priority issues (from the previous SWOT and PESTLE exercises) and strategies for dealing with these issues. This can be a difficult exercise, because there may be several options and the organisation may have to make some hard choices. The process may well include deciding not to do something or not to provide a particular service.

Once you have agreed on the main priorities for your organisation, discuss and clarify the various ways you can address these key issues. It is important to be both creative and realistic when thinking about your options. Make sure you keep in mind the limits of your organisation:

- How much space do you have?
- Staff time, skills and capacity
- Resource limits e.g. IT capabilities
- Legal and constitutional limits
- Financial limits.

Of course, even if you have limitations, you may identify ways to expand these limits e.g. find new office space, apply to increase funds.

Another useful tool is **scenario planning** – this can assist with deciding on the strategies you need to achieve your objectives.

This involves identifying a number of scenarios or 'what ifs'. For example:

What if the funding over the next year is reduced by 30%? What strategies or responses will your organisation implement to meet this challenge?

The government announces a new funding programme for your community with new criteria that is currently outside your constitution but this is the only 'new money' available. What strategies or responses will your organisation make to take advantage of this potential opportunity?

Assessing your options

Once you have a list of options that you would like to explore further, agree a set of criteria against which you can assess whether the identified option is to stay in your top list of 5 or 6. The criteria help you decide what stays in your strategic plan and what is not possible for you to achieve.

Examples of criteria are:

- Evidence of need
- Does it meet your mission statement?
- Do you have the necessary capacity and skills?

- Is sustainable funding available?
- Who else provides the service?
- Does your priority reflect those of key funders, local/regional/national government, partner organisations, other people who have an influence on your organisation?

By asking these questions about each of the options you have come up with, this should ensure your strategic plan is realistic.

Step 4 Writing strategic aims and targets

The final 5 or 6 options you have chosen should then be written up as strategic aims or goals. They need to be:

- Clear and provide direction for the organisation
- Be focused on the outcomes you want to achieve
- Be realistic and attainable
- Be relevant over the life of the plan

For example, one of Women's Resource Centre's strategic aims is: *To improve our national reach*

For each strategic aim, you then need to agree on key objectives or ways that the organisation will implement these aims. The actions need to be SMART:

- Specific
- Measureable
- Achievable
- Realistic
- Timebound

For example, some of WRC's key actions are:

1. *To increase our membership outside London by 50% (by Year 2 of the plan)*
2. *To develop an online women's network (by the end of Year 1)*
3. *To provide 4 training sessions per year on sustainable funding for the Rape Crisis Network*

Examples of objectives that are **not** SMART are:

To ensure that the Local Borough meets the needs of homeless women

To provide up to date information on DV to every woman in X community

To provide 54 training sessions per month (when you have resources for 10)

Step 5 Writing the Plan

Once decisions have been made about your organisation's future direction, then you are ready to write up your plan. Strategic plans also usually contain information on timeframes and who has responsibility for overall leadership of each strategic aim.

Staff then develop work plans or operational plans that identify tasks and actions to meet those strategic aims/goals and strategies - these are internal documents for the organisation.

There is no standard format for a strategic plan; how you decide to present your strategic plan is up to your organisation and how you decide to use it. It may be an internal working document, or put on the organisation's website and/or sent to funders and contractors.

It is probably most efficient if one person writes the plan.

A strategic plan usually includes the following:

- Mission, and vision (and sometimes, values) statements
- Organisation background, lists and brief information about trustees, staff, volunteers and service users, brief description of current services and key achievements
- A summary of the SWOT analysis
- An analysis of needs of service users, trends and changes in the external environment
- Overall strategic direction
- Strategic aims and objectives
- Key Actions
- Finance/resource information (summary of how you plan to find the resources to achieve you strategic aims)

Many organisations will also include fundraising strategies, budget information, marketing and publicity strategies, plan for implementation (including staff responsible and timescales).

Once a draft has been completed, those people who have been directly involved in the strategic planning process need to approve the draft. The strategic plan is then ready to be formally approved by the Trustees (or whoever decides the final

content of the plan) and distributed throughout the organisation.

Monitoring and Evaluation

To ensure the plan is useful regular monitoring and evaluation needs to take place. Key strategies and actions need to be monitored to ensure that they are having the anticipated impact. If not then changes need to be made. A strategic plan is a dynamic tool, not locked in stone until the end of the planning period. External changes may also lead to a review of the plan e.g. changes to funding or staffing or emerging events may require the plan to be re-evaluated to ensure it remains relevant and of use to the organisation.

It is useful to have a regular monitoring meeting – this could be every 4-6 months but as a minimum should happen once a year. If the organisation is going through extensive changes or the external environment is in a state of change, you may want to review the plan more often. Identify someone to take responsibility for organising these meetings throughout the life of the plan. Gather together people who are responsible for implementing the plan and ask them to report back on how well the work is going towards reaching your objectives. You may want to consider if it is appropriate to involve service users – what do they think of the progress?

It may be necessary to amend the plan if there are unforeseen changes or delays.

Questions to ask when reviewing your strategic plan:

How will you know you have been successful?

What are the indicators for measuring progress e.g. service user numbers, feedback by participants of training, specific partnerships established. Use the criteria you agreed in the development of your strategic plan.

Are you making good progress towards meeting your objectives?

If you set targets or milestones (targets that you want to achieve on the way to achieving your final objectives or outcomes), are you on course to achieve these? Are you likely to achieve your objectives? Are there any unexpected outcomes?

Do you need to do anything differently to meet your objectives?

Do you need to change the way the project is delivered, spend more resources, involve other staff?

Are the set timeframes still realistic?

Do you need to change the timeframe because unforeseen events have taken place or new initiatives emerged?

Have we reported on the progress of the plan as agreed?

Is everyone in the organisation still happy with the strategic aims and

objectives set and the outcomes achieved so far?

The monitoring and evaluation of the strategic plan lets everyone know how you are going and provides a valuable, regular opportunity to come together to discuss the achievements of the organisation.

Conclusion

Your strategic plan is an important tool and process for your organisation. It will help you focus on the important work you want to achieve and then monitor your work and make sure you are on track. Your strategic plan will demonstrate to all involved in your organisation what you are going to do and how you will achieve this. It will also demonstrate to current and potential funders your expertise and ability to provide high quality services to your beneficiaries.

Useful resources:Publications

Tools for Tomorrow: A Practical Guide to Strategic Planning for Voluntary Organisations, NCVO, 2004

The Complete Guide to Business and Strategic Planning for Voluntary Organisations, Alan Lawrie, 2001 (Directory of Social Change)

Strategic Management for Non-Profit Organisations, TR Courtney, 2002

Just About Managing, Sandy Adirondack, 2006 (London Voluntary Sector Council)

The Essential Guide to Strategic Planning developed by the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations: www.acevo.org.uk

Websites:**Performance Hub:**

<http://www.performancehub.org.uk/>

Includes free resources

National Council for Voluntary Organisations:

<http://www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/>

Includes free resources + access to the performance and governance hubs (with more planning resources) <http://www.strategy-impact.org.uk/>

Third Sector Foresight:

www.3s4.org.uk

Guidance and discussion of all aspects of strategic planning in the third sector, including information about environmental trends affecting community and voluntary organisations.

NfP Synergy:

www.nfpsynergy.net

Includes guide to writing mission statements: Mission Impossible

Charities Evaluation Service:

<http://www.ces-vol.org.uk/>

Provides training and information on monitoring and evaluation, planning and quality assurance. Also leads on the National Performance Programme:

www.performancemanagement.org.uk

Know How Non-Profit:

<http://www.knowhownonprofit.org/>

Includes information on strategic planning

JISC InfoNet:

www.jiscinfonet.ac.uk

Provides information on strategic planning tools

Definitions:

Aims: the changes you hope to achieve as a result of your work

Evaluation: Using information from monitoring and elsewhere to judge the performance of an organisation or project.

Milestones: A well defined and significant step towards achieving a target, output, outcome or impact, allowing a group to track progress.

Mission: Why an organisation or project exists and the broad effect that it wants to have. A summary of the overall difference it wants to make.

Monitoring: Collecting and recording information in a routine and systematic way to check progress against plans and enable evaluation.

Objectives: the activities you plan to undertake and the services you offer to bring these changes about

Outcomes: the changes, benefits, learning or other effects that actually occur as a result of your activities.

Outputs: the specific activities services and products your organisation actually does or provides

Target: a defined level of achievement which a project or organization sets itself to achieve in a specific period of time.

Vision: The ideal state a project or organisation wants the world to be in. What the world will look like if the project or organisation is successful in achieving its mission.