



## General Information and Guidance

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### 1. About the Quality Standard

#### What is it?

The Star Social Firm is a quality standard developed by Social Firms UK specifically for Social Firms. The Star Social Firm confirms quality; of the businesses, their products and services and the workplace.

Star Social Firms are companies that have proved to be thriving sustainable businesses, where staff say, 'this is a good place to work!' Whilst the process for obtaining the Star Social Firm quality standard is undoubtedly rigorous, it is one that any well run Social Firm can achieve without difficulty.

Although developed by Social Firms UK the Star Social Firm is independently operated. With the external verification and moderation by SFEDI (Small Firms Enterprise Development Initiative, [www.sfedi.co.uk](http://www.sfedi.co.uk)) a standards setting body the integrity and reliability of the standard is fully ensured.

The Star Social Firm is the first quality standard to be developed in the social enterprise sector.

### 2. Why Social Firms UK Developed the Star Social Firm Quality Standard

Having established the Values-Based Checklist based on the Social Firm sector's values of Enterprise, Empowerment and Employment, the staff and board of Social Firms UK decided in 2005 that establishing a quality standard for the sector should be the next step in developing quality within the Social Firm sector.

The board and staff of Social Firms UK wanted to ensure that a quality standard could be introduced that would confirm a set of messages about Social Firms, their products and services and their supportive workplaces – the factors that make Social Firms unique.

### **For Social Firms and customers alike the Star Social Firm quality standard confirms they are:**

- leading-edge, genuine Social Firms;
- sustainable, professional quality driven businesses;
- businesses with a sound commercial focus;
- business where people and organisations can purchase with confidence;
- businesses that can help others achieve their own corporate social responsibility targets;
- businesses with high values *and* an ethical purpose.

### **For Social Firms achieving the quality standard:**

- symbolises professionalism to internal and external stakeholders; and
- provides a valuable developmental process.

### **For the Social Firm sector as a whole, Star Social Firms:**

- provide inspiration to others interested in creating Social Firms;
- raise the profile of Social Firms as good businesses.

To achieve these benefits, there needs to be a rigorous standard designed to reward genuine Social Firms and reassure customers that these organisations do what they say 'on the tin.' Social Firms UK feels it is crucial to support its members in achieving high quality standards in order to promote their products and services with confidence.

## **3. Promoting Star Social Firms**

Exhibiting the Star Social Firm logo will play a significant part in raising awareness of the Social Firm sector. In addition to indicating quality the design of the Star Social Firm also reflects the character of Social Firms as businesses that are:

- Progressive
- Dynamic
- Energetic
- Moving upwards
- Special

The Star Social Firm logo was also designed to address some practical issues e.g. to:

- Be simple
- Be inexpensive to print
- Have universal meaning
- Look good regardless of the size
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**Target audiences** who can purchase services and products from Star Social Firms with confidence are:

- Public authority procurement officers
- Companies with a positive approach to corporate social responsibility
- Third sector organisations
- Public consumers

**To increase the impact** of the quality standard the strategic target audiences includes:

- Ministers and politicians
- Social enterprise practitioners
- Social enterprise support agencies
- Disabled and disadvantaged individuals
- Carers and families
- Individuals with influence at a national level

## 4. How the Star Social Firm Standard was Developed

Full Members of Social Firms UK (i.e. emerging and full Social Firms) were asked for their opinions on what they thought of developing a Social Firm standard. Overall feedback was positive.

The first step was to identify an appropriate standard-setting body. Following several proposals, SFEDI was chosen as a partner.

A small number of Social Firms met for a day-long focus group which marked the beginning of the process of identifying three areas: the criteria, participants in a pilot and the need for assessors from the Social Firm sector.

Applications were sought from Social Firms interested in taking part in the pilot with a view to becoming one of the first group of Star Social Firms.

Social Firms and emerging Social Firms were also invited to put forward staff interested in becoming trained assessors for the Star Social Firm quality standard.

The pilot produced a number of Star Social Firms and a group of trained assessors who between them cover the UK.

## 5. The Star Social Firm Criteria

There are eight criteria that must be met. The full details of the criteria are given in the Star Social Firm Application Pack. The criteria are built around the sector's values of Enterprise, Employment and Empowerment:

### Enterprise

- Legal status and constitution
- Financial and environmental sustainability
- Social Firm business sustainability

### Employment

- Employment of severely disadvantaged people
- Clarity of role within the workplace and at board level

### Empowerment

- Legal compliance
- Training and learning
- Proactive support and development

Applicants will demonstrate they have met the criteria, first by completing the application form answering a series of questions and providing examples of practice. The application is followed up with an assessment visit. This is an opportunity to really showcase your Social Firm and ensure that the evidence you have provided can be verified.

## 6. Star Social Firm Assessors

Qualified assessors, all of whom work within the Social Firm sector, carry out Star Social Firm assessments.

The training for Star Social Firm assessors has been through a specially designed training programme set up and run by SFEDI.

Assessors assess solely against the Star Social Firm Criteria. Assessors must be satisfied that the Social Firm:

- meets the criteria;
- is providing true, accurate and up-to-date information.

During training Star Social Firm assessors identified a range of attributes that they felt were important ones for assessors - see below.

**Good Star Social Firm Assessors Will:**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❑ Believe in the product – the social enterprise way of doing business</li><li>❑ Be committed to improving quality</li><li>❑ Be logical people who are approachable, impartial and can be trusted to make realistic assumptions</li><li>❑ Be able to put over ideas and thoughts clearly and concisely</li><li>❑ Enthusiastic</li><li>❑ Quietly confident</li><li>❑ Have good<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• interviewing skills;</li><li>• communication skills (verbal and written);</li><li>• mentoring skills;</li><li>• timekeeping abilities.</li></ul></li><li>❑ Have an:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• understanding of the issues facing people with a severe disadvantage;</li><li>• understanding of the business type.</li></ul></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>❑ Have an inclusive approach to assessment and working together</li><li>❑ Be open, transparent and honest</li><li>❑ Have an enquiring mind</li><li>❑ Be amenable</li><li>❑ Be methodical</li></ul>
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## **The Role of Star Social Firm Assessor**

Star Social Firm assessors are trained to assess Social Firms against the Star Social Firm criteria. As assessors they are there to assess and verify the evidence that has been provided.

Star Social Firm assessors are not health and safety inspectors, auditors or business consultants. The assessors' role is to verify the evidence that is put forward in the application. Assessors want to get the best out of people – to put people at ease and to ensure everyone benefits from the assessment visit.

The assessor and the lead person (for the Star Social Firm application) within the Social Firm jointly have a role in ensuring the assessment visit runs smoothly.

Once an assessor has been identified they will:

- Read the application;
- Make an introductory phone call to:
  - agree a date, a visit plan and a timetable for the assessment;
  - ensure applicants understand the assessment process and answer any queries about the process;
- Agree any additional paperwork that should be made available during the assessment visit.

At the end of the assessment the Star Social Firm assessor will report back to the applicant on the assessment findings and make recommendations.

## 7. What People Say

Here are some quotes from organisations that have gone through the Star Social Firm assessment.

**In response to the question, “How might it help your organisation in the future?” people said, [It will help us]:**

- ◆ “to focus on doing better, especially on business development.”
- ◆ “to maintain high standards of strategic and operational management and as a development tool and benchmark against our strategic objectives.”
- ◆ “to maintain and continue to develop high quality services that meet the needs of the target audiences”
- ◆ [With] “funding bids.”
- ◆ [With gaining] “credibility with Local Authority and other stakeholders.”
- ◆ [to] “promote disability employment and equate it to success – reducing stigma.”
- ◆ [in] “recognition of working to aims and objectives.”
- ◆ [with] “publicity”
- ◆ [since] “accredited firms would be a good exemplar for emerging companies to discuss their work with.”

**In response to the question, “Did you find the whole process beneficial to you or your organisation?” people said:**

- ◆ [It] “helped to identify and develop improved processes for the future direction and management of the organisation.”
- ◆ “It is beneficial because we are being asked to examine our protocols and effectiveness as a sustainable business with social objectives.”
- ◆ [It] “helped to formalize and record already established informal processes and procedures.”
- ◆ “It focuses you to think honestly about how your business functions especially as you are required to produce evidence and potentially forces you into addressing actions you had been thinking about but not progressed.”

- ◆ “The award will be enormously valuable to all Social Firms and aspiring Social Firms in promoting what they achieve.”
- ◆ [It] “validates what we do.”
- ◆ [It’s ] “proof that we do what we say!”
- ◆ “Always useful to have independent party come in and assess our processes and effectiveness.”
- ◆ “Pulling together information for assessment helped identify a couple of areas of service and system improvement.”
- ◆ “assessors listened and sought to understand are business – they did not come in with fixed expectations and a rigid “checklist” approach.”

## 8. Cost of Applications

Social Firms UK is very keen to ensure that as many Social Firms as possible attain the Star Social Firm quality standard. To encourage applications the cost is heavily subsidised. (See Section 11 for more information.)

The assessment visit time will vary according to the size of the organisation and the number of sites to be visited. The chart below indicates the assessment time that will be taken and how this links the cost of the assessment. Information on the cost will be available soon.

Payment will be made in two parts. An initial £50 paid once the Non Disclosure Agreement (see information in Section 9 re the Non Disclosure Agreement) is signed after which the Application Pack will be sent. The remainder of the fee is paid when the completed application is submitted.

<b>Star Social Firm Assessment Time and Cost</b>				
<b>Number of Staff</b>	<b>Number of Sites</b>	<b>Assessment Visit Time</b>	<b>Number of Assessors</b>	<b>Cost</b>
Up to 10	1	Half day	1	TBA
11 to 20	1	Half day	1	TBA
21 to 50	1-2	Half day	1	TBA
51 to 100	1-2	Full day	1	Contact Kathy Baker to discuss
101 to 200	1-2	Full day	1	As above
Over 200	3 or more	1 – 1.5 days	1-2	As above

## 9. Making an Application

### Any Queries or Questions?

You may be very interested in making an application to become a Star Social Firm but still have some questions you would like to ask, or would just like some reassurance that you are ready to apply. If so please do contact Kathy Baker, Quality Development Manager, at Social Firms UK.

Contact Kathy by:  
Email: kbaker@socialfirmsuk.co.uk  
Direct Line: 01273 890333.

### The Process

Social Firms interested in becoming a Star Social Firm will be asked to sign a Non Disclosure Agreement and pay an initial fee of £50. For more information on the Non Disclosure Agreement see section on page 8.

Once the signed Non Disclosure Agreement is received the Application Pack will be supplied electronically.

Completed applications and additional evidence are also submitted electronically.

The Guidance Flowcharts guide Social Firms thorough the process of obtaining the Star Social Firm Quality Standard.

Successful applicants will be validated for three years.

### The Essentials – the Starting Point

All Social Firms that meet the Values-Based Checklist and have audited trading accounts for a minimum of two years are welcome to apply for Star Social Firm status.

### The Essentials – the People

The Social Firm staff and the board must:

- be committed to becoming a Star Social Firm;
- understand the application procedure;
- understand what is expected of them and their role within the application process.

One person within the Social Firm must take lead responsibility for the Star Social Firm application. The key person must be someone who:

- knows and understands the business;
- has the authority to drive the process forward;
- is committed to achieving Star Social Firm status, ensuring time is given to adequate preparation of the company, the application and the assessment visit.

Other staff will be involved in the application process. Some staff will be involved in aspects of putting the application together; others will need to meet with the assessor during the assessment visit.

## The Essentials - Non Disclosure Agreement

A great deal of interest has been shown in the Star Social Firm quality standard, particularly from organisations abroad that are developing Social Firms. As a result Social Firms UK believes it should take steps to protect its intellectual property and the good standing of the Star Social Firm quality standard on its own behalf and that of the Star Social Firms. One way to do this is to ensure the criteria and process for obtaining the Star Social Firm quality standard is not freely available. Social Firms will be asked to sign a Non Disclosure Agreement before obtaining an Application Pack. Please email [info@starsocialfirms.co.uk](mailto:info@starsocialfirms.co.uk) to request a Non Disclosure Agreement.

## The Essentials - Obtaining an Application Pack

Signed Non Disclosure Agreements should be sent, together with an initial payment of £50, to:

Star Social Firm  
Social Firms UK  
Suite 2 Victoria House  
10 Brighton Road  
Redhill Surrey RH1 6QZ

Once this is received an Application Pack will be emailed to you.



## Support with your Application

Social Firms UK is more than happy to provide advice and support to assist Social Firms in completing their application. Applicants are **strongly urged** to take up this offer, which is **free to Social Firms UK members**.

## Preparation Time

The amount of time it will take Social Firms to complete an application will vary depending, to a large extent, on the systems and processes that are already in place. Social Firms that have awards such as Investors in People may find that much of the evidence needed for the

Star Social Firm is readily available. Firms that have clear, well-documented systems and processes in place will find the application straightforward.

Once you have decided to apply for Star Social Firm status it is important to keep up the momentum. As a guide it is suggested that organisations should plan to prepare and complete applications within a three-month timeframe.

Further guidance on expected timings is provided in the Timeline document.

## 10. Administration and Validation Costs

The Star Social Firm quality standard is independently assessed and validated. Having developed the Star Social Firm standard the role of Social Firms UK is now to promote knowledge and understanding to the wider world and to encourage Social Firms to achieve the quality standard.

In seeking to grow the Social Firm sector and increase the number of Star Social Firms we have sought to keep the costs of applying for the quality standard as low as possible. To ensure that the cost of applying for the Star Social Firm is within reach and encourage applications Social Firms UK will pay:

- all the external validation, assessment and scrutiny costs charged by SFEDI (as the standards setting body appointed to oversee the Star Social Firm and to ensure impartiality)
- a proportion of the assessment costs
- the central administrative costs

We recognise the importance of being able to clearly demonstrate, that in administering the scheme, we are completely impartial and **do not**:

- benefit financially;
- influence who applies for the Star Social Firm;
- influence the outcome of assessments.

To ensure a financial separation between Social Firms UK and the Star Social Firm a separate cost centre has been set up for the Star Social Firm and our accounts and systems are open to scrutiny.

## For More Information

For more information about:

- The Star Social Firm quality standard visit [www.starsocialfirms.co.uk](http://www.starsocialfirms.co.uk) or email [info@starsocialfirms.co.uk](mailto:info@starsocialfirms.co.uk).
- Social Firms UK visit [www.socialfirmsuk.co.uk](http://www.socialfirmsuk.co.uk)
- SFEDI visit [www.sfedl.co.uk](http://www.sfedl.co.uk)