



# **Consumer Scotland Act 2020: Report on SQA's progress of compliance with the consumer duty**

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# Introduction

The [Consumer Scotland Act 2020](#) places a responsibility on all relevant public authorities to comply with the consumer duty, which comes fully into force on 1 April 2025. The Act defines a consumer as 'an individual or small business who buys, uses or receives goods or services in Scotland, or could potentially do so, supplied by a public authority or public body'. As Scotland's national awarding body, SQA's consumers will include learners, partners (including contracted suppliers and SQA-approved centres), customers (internal and external), and stakeholders.

The consumer duty aims to put consumer interests at the heart of strategic decision-making across the public sector to deliver better policy outcomes for Scotland. It is intended to ensure better quality services and outcomes for consumers.

The Consumer Scotland Act 2020 imposes a duty on public authorities to:

- ◆ consider the impact of strategic decisions (including any review or changes to these) on consumers in Scotland, and
- ◆ aim to reduce harm to consumers in Scotland

This report outlines the steps taken by SQA to date that comply with the consumer duty as mandated by the Consumer Scotland Act 2020, including the impact assessment approach that will be undertaken by all colleagues, to align with other impact assessments including Equality Impact Assessments (EqIA), Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessments (CRWIAs) and Island Community Impact Assessments (ICIAs).

As SQA transitions to Qualifications Scotland, there may be changes to the methods used to engage with consumers and the approach to impact assessments. However, any changes and progress made will be included in the progress reports published by Qualifications Scotland.

# Current evidence of compliance with the consumer duty

## Prospectus for Change

Our [Prospectus for Change](#) is an ambitious blueprint for Scotland's new qualifications body. It is a significant milestone for the education and skills community, and marks the start of the year-long transition from SQA to Qualifications Scotland.

The Prospectus has been developed through extensive consultation and engagement with learners, teachers, lecturers, employers, training providers and many stakeholder organisations, as well as SQA staff.

Three key pledges lie at the heart of the Prospectus:

- ◆ resetting relationships with learners and teachers to win back their trust
- ◆ grasping the potential of technology to streamline services, making them more accessible and efficient
- ◆ delivering qualifications and assessments that keep pace with rapid changes in society and the economy

The Prospectus demonstrates our strong commitment to the principles outlined in the consumer duty, ensuring that our strategic decisions are consumer-focused and beneficial for all stakeholders. It outlines a number of planned changes with the aim of delivering qualifications and assessments that meet the needs of the future and, in doing so, playing our part in supporting and delivering the Scottish Government's wider education reform:

- ◆ Overhauling the way SQA engages with learners and educators, ensuring they have an opportunity to have their voice heard and to shape decisions and services.
- ◆ Using data, including the views of learners and educators, to inform evidence-based decision making. We will listen, act and provide feedback on the decisions we take and the reasons for them.
- ◆ Increasing digital access to qualifications and streamlined digital processes to deliver them.
- ◆ Transforming digital delivery to enable learners, educators and other users to easily and seamlessly access our services online.
- ◆ Reviewing the balance of approaches to assessment across National Qualifications.
- ◆ Continuing to pilot the next generation of skills-based qualifications and developing new model apprenticeships.
- ◆ Reviewing and rationalising the current qualifications portfolio, focusing on the needs of learners, colleges, universities, employers and society.
- ◆ Developing a fresh commercial roadmap to drive sustainable growth and income generation.
- ◆ Providing leadership on the use of AI in qualifications and assessment.

At the heart of all change will be the voices of our service- users and of our customers. We will work not only for users and customers but with them. We will listen, act and feedback on the decisions we take and the reasons for them.

Change will be informed by wider education reform. We are committed to making a full and positive contribution to implementing Scottish Government decisions flowing from the independent reviews of assessment and skills.

## **Customer charters**

As the national awarding body for Scotland, we design, quality assure and certificate qualifications that develop the skills, knowledge and competence of individuals, contributing to their personal development and to the economic growth and development of Scotland. We achieve our aims by acting in partnership with others to develop and deliver our qualifications and services, and being driven by the needs of our customers in all that we do.

We are committed to continually improving the quality and responsiveness of our service, and we constantly work to tailor our services as closely as we can to the needs of our customers. Our purpose is to help people fulfil their potential and maintain standards across Scottish education, and we demonstrate this in our [customer charter](#), which is available on our website.

The Education (Scotland) Bill places a duty on our successor body, Qualifications Scotland, to co-create specific charters for learners, and teachers and practitioners, which will be reviewed every five years. The two charters will be published to demonstrate Qualifications Scotland's commitment to engage with learners, and teachers and practitioners, and to set out what each should expect from the new organisation.

## **Engagement and consultation with consumer groups**

We have a longstanding history of considering the needs and best interests of our consumers in our strategic decision-making processes. The feedback we gather through different channels, including direct engagement and consultation activity with key education partners, inform the impacts on our various consumer groups.

We carried out an internal survey, issued to all SQA staff, to better understand how feedback is gathered across the organisation, and how this is used to inform continuous improvement in our products and services. A total of 97 SQA staff across almost all business areas and directorates responded to the survey. The main consumer groups that the majority SQA staff identified as being impacted by their tasks, projects and services were centre staff (schools, colleges, employers and training providers) (92%), followed by learners (85%), appointees contracted by SQA for specific activities (74%), and local authorities (64%).

The majority of SQA staff (78%) who responded to our survey indicated that they gather feedback from the consumer groups through email correspondence (67%), surveys issued for specific projects or tasks (53%) followed by face-to-face (51%) and virtual or online (51%) interactions with consumers. When asked about how their work impacts on the consumer

groups they work with, they pointed to assessment, awarding and certification procedures, development and review of qualifications and assessments, responding to queries from consumers and ensuring that staff provided a positive experience and high level of customer service.

SQA colleagues were also asked how the feedback gathered from the consumer groups they interacted with was used to inform changes or improvements to their tasks, projects or services. A majority of respondents indicated that this was used for continuous improvement to existing processes or approaches. Feedback is also being used by SQA staff to inform improvements to how we communicate and engage with consumers, including improvements to the content of published information and the method of communication used. In addition, feedback received by one business area is shared with other business areas to improve cross-organisational working to improve consumers' experience of our products and services.

We demonstrate our commitment to listening to our consumers' needs and making improvements to our services by carrying out a range of engagement activities to ensure that our consumers are given the opportunity to share their experiences and views with us:

- ◆ Research activities with consumer groups
- ◆ Learner, parent and carer engagement activities
- ◆ 'Your Voice' panels
- ◆ Equality, Children's Rights and Wellbeing and Island Community Impact Assessments
- ◆ Complaints handling procedure

### **Research activities with consumer groups**

Our Policy, Analysis and Standards Team is responsible for commissioning, carrying out and collating research to inform and support all aspects of SQA's activities. All of our research is governed by our [Code of Research Practice](#), which, amongst other things, protects the interests of all research participants, including consumer groups. Most of the research that we carry out with consumers is published on [our website](#). Some of the research that we have recently carried out with consumer groups is highlighted in this section. (This is not an exhaustive list, but shows the range of activities that SQA carried out.)

SQA carries out an ongoing programme of stakeholder research to understand the views of key stakeholder and consumer groups on our organisation, activities, and our qualifications. One such example of this is the [Key Audience Research](#) 2023–24, which focused primarily on SQA's qualifications, wider perceptions of the organisation, and how effectively SQA communicates and engages with key stakeholders. The research collated the views of employers and the training provider, college and school sectors, and within each of those, the views of practitioners in both teaching and management roles, and the views of learners. It also covers the views of parents / carers and employers. An [accessible summary version of the findings from the Key Audience Research](#) is also available on our website.

We also carry out a range of evaluation activity on key projects and initiatives. An ongoing example of this is the Next Gen: HN project. While this work is ongoing, the first phase of

evaluation work, which involved a review of evaluative activity that had already taken place in the NextGen: HN project, plus dedicated research looking at the views of employers, and of HNC and HND practitioners who had not previously been involved in a NextGen: HN pilot, has been [published on our website](#). We focused on these groups as we wanted to have a good understanding of their views and the issues that they face.

Research reports on [Education reform in Scotland](#) contributed towards the national discussion and evidence base around education reform in Scotland. The research reports underpinned [SQA's response to Professor Muir's review of education reform](#). His subsequent report, [Putting Learners at the Centre: Towards a Future Vision for Scottish Education](#) (published by the Scottish Government in 2022) referenced the research.

Our analysis of the [Generative AI Consultation \(GenAI\) survey](#) and [focus groups](#) represents the first stage in a wider consultation of stakeholders and consumers on GenAI use in education, with a particular focus on the response to SQA's position on the use of GenAI in assessment. The research focused on the views of practitioners and work is currently underway to gather views from learners on the use of GenAI in education.

We undertook [extensive research into our assessment arrangements service](#) which gathered the views and feedback of staff from schools, colleges, training providers and local authorities along with learners and their parents and carers. Actions were identified for SQA to take forward and make improvements for our schools, colleges and training providers as well as learners and their parents and carers. Longer term recommendations were also identified to be taken forward by Qualifications Scotland.

SQA also carries out annual research into the lived experiences of learners, educators and senior appointees and Qualifications Development staff, who have been involved in the annual National Qualifications diet. This research allows us to understand the views of the consumers of National Qualifications, and their experiences of those qualifications, and, again, the findings of this research are [published on our website](#), as is a [learner friendly summary of those findings](#).

## **Centre, learner, parent and carer engagement activities**

As Scotland's national awarding body delivering a range of National, Higher National and Vocational Qualifications, we rely on a partnership with our consumers to ensure that our range of qualifications develop learners' key competences in relevant areas to enable them to progress to higher and further education or employment opportunities of their choosing. The case studies we make available on our website demonstrate our commitment to supporting customers across different sectors and helping them deliver the best solution for their needs, [within the UK](#) and [internationally](#).

After COVID-19 restrictions, members of SQA's Executive Management Team resumed visiting schools across Scotland in 2023 to hear first-hand from classroom teachers and learners about their experiences of delivering and taking qualifications. Donna Stewart, Scotland's new Chief Examining Officer, was joined by SQA's new interim Chief Executive, John Booth, [visited a school in Dunfermline in March this year](#). Both indicated that they are determined to reset



relationships and win back the trust of learners and teachers by visiting schools across the country, and listening to their views is a key priority. Donna and John heard what pupils and teachers think of a range of topics, including the qualifications they are currently working towards, the future of assessment, the use of Generative AI technologies, and SQA's Prospectus for Change.

SQA had a partnership with the Scottish Youth Parliament between 2021 and 2024 on a project to provide a series of monthly Advisory Group meetings and in-person Learner Panels in locations across Scotland. The Learner Advisory Group met monthly and discussions were learner-led, covering issues that mattered most to young people. The group adhered to a co-designed Charter that ensured a safe, inclusive and collaborative space for all.

The Learner Advisory Group meetings were held virtually and consisted of school, college and university learners. This allowed us to draw directly on the experience of learners who had undertaken National Qualifications (NQ) and included representation from young carers and disabled learners or those with additional support needs. Member of Scottish Youth Parliament, Alannah Logue, who was also a member of our Learner Advisory Group, shared [her reflections on the group's work](#). Scottish Youth Parliament also published a [report summarising the feedback gathered by the Learner Advisory Group](#) over the 2023–24 session.

In addition to our Learner Advisory Group, a quarterly Learner Panel took place in person at selected Scottish schools. By taking the Panel 'on tour', we aimed to have a broader representation of different learner groups. Our ambition was to offer an interactive experience, provide an opportunity for learners to discuss and share their thoughts on range of issues, and to build a map of the learner journey.

The Communications Directorate consists of two business areas — Communications & Engagement and Marketing. The two teams within our Communications Directorate provide insight and expertise in content creation, digital, stakeholder engagement, marketing, PR and media relations, direct communications, measurement and strategy. We listen, create and connect in everything we do:

- ◆ We listen — to what our customers need and what SQA needs, and find the sweet spot in the middle.
- ◆ We create — we 'make the complicated simple' via messaging and content that is clear, concise and relevant.
- ◆ We connect — internally and externally to add value to SQA's qualifications, services and reputation.

For example, we wanted to make our National Qualifications webpages more user friendly to ensure learners could find what they were looking for on our pages. We wanted to hear from users about whether they were happy with the content of these pages and whether they could find everything they needed during the exam period. We connected with our learners to create tailored content to support them through their exams. With this feedback we:

- ◆ Simplified the webpage layout, merging six smaller pages into one scrollable page.

- ◆ Reviewed language to ensure it was clear and jargon free.
- ◆ Created responsive images, which are accessible across devices.

Our annual 'Get Exam Ready' campaign, launched in February 2024, aims to signpost users to our [learner hub](#), which is packed with tailored support for learners, parents and carers including past papers, study tips, helpful resources and wellbeing advice. We also publish the Your Exams booklet annually which contains important information, rules and advice for learners so they can do their very best on the day of exam. Colleagues from Communications took home gold at the Marketing Society Star awards in 2024 in the Digital Strategy Category for our Learner Campaign 'How SQA helped learners Get Exam Ready'.

## 'Your Voice' panels

We are committed to continue working with everyone across the education and skills community to deliver the commitments in the Prospectus for Change. We are [looking for learners, parents and carers, and educators](#) to take part in surveys and other research, giving them opportunities to have their say on a range of issues as part of our '[Your Voice](#)' panels, and broadening the range of stakeholders in these key groups that we can reach.

The refreshed initiative will give every learner and educator the opportunity to share their experiences and help shape the future of qualifications and assessment. The partnership panels will play a key role in delivering the commitments made in our Prospectus for Change. The key pledges in our Prospectus a commitment to resetting relationships with learners and teachers to win back their trust.

Those who sign up to a panel will be able to tell us what they think, shape decisions and services that affect them, contribute to the development of Qualifications Scotland, and make things better for other learners and educators. Participants will be invited to share their views on different topics and issues. They will generally be asked to take part in short online surveys, and they may also be invited to join focus groups or interviews. Their views will be used to inform decision making as well as to help shape Qualifications Scotland.

Key highlights:

- ◆ **Every Voice:** Open to learners, educators in Scotland's schools and colleges, and parents / carers of senior phase learners.
- ◆ **Direct Impact:** Partnership panel members can influence SQA's qualifications, assessments, products, and services through surveys, focus groups, and interviews.
- ◆ **Rebuilding Trust:** Supports SQA's ambitious [Prospectus for Change](#), aiming to reset relationships and win back trust with learners and teachers.

We launched the 'Your Voice' panels as part of our wider commitment to comply with the consumer duty outlined in the Consumer Scotland Act 2020. These panels play a crucial role in ensuring that consumer interests are at the heart of SQA's strategic decision-making processes.

It is intended that the panels will support our objective as set out in our Prospectus of rebuilding trust with learners and educators by providing a platform for open dialogue and collaboration. By involving consumers in the decision-making process, we want to also demonstrate our commitment to transparency and accountability to our consumers.

## **Equality, Children's Rights and Wellbeing and Island Community Impact Assessments**

The Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) process continues to be one of the most important tools that the SQA uses to mainstream equality. It allows us to embed equality considerations into our policies, strategies, projects and services.

By identifying the equality impacts of all policies, strategies and services, we will ensure that they are equitable and that we are considering the impacts, both positive and negative, on our people, learners and wider stakeholders. By training policy owners and encouraging them to engage with the EqIA process, we are building expertise throughout the organisation. By monitoring actions from EqIAs, we are ensuring that there are tangible benefits and positive impacts that are owned by staff across the organisation.

Following the implementation of the UNCRC (Implementation) (Scotland) Act 2024, policy owners are also required to complete a Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment (CRWIA) to demonstrate that the impacts on children under the age of 18 are considered in the development or review of a policy. This is of particular relevance to learners who undertake our National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher Courses as our impact assessments confirm that more than 99% of learners undertaking National Courses are between the ages of 15 and 18.

In addition to this, steps have been taken by our Corporate Equality Team to begin incorporating our obligations to consider the impact of our strategic decisions on island communities in an Island Community Impact Assessment (alongside the EqIA and CRWIA) when a policy is being developed or reviewed.

The Corporate Equality Team continue to work to develop SQA's equality and corporate parenting action plans and monitor progress and performance to be able to report against these commitments. The team also plays a key role in supporting SQA's Equality Steering Group, Corporate Parenting Steering Group, Children's Rights Steering Group and Equality Management Review Group.

Our impact assessments are published and available to view from [our website](#). SQA is committed to equality of opportunity and to a culture that respects difference. We believe that, as an employer and public body, we can play a leading part in promoting equality, diversity and inclusion more widely. The [Equality, diversity and inclusion webpage](#) also contains more information about the work we have carried out to positively contribute to a more equal society through advancing equality and good relations in its day-to-day business.

## **Complaints handling procedure**

We have an established [complaints handling procedure](#) and information on our website for our consumers on how to submit a complaint. We regard a complaint as any expression of dissatisfaction about our action or lack of action, or about the standard of service provided by us or on our behalf. The complaints handling procedure is open to anyone who receives, requests or is directly affected by our services. This includes the representative of someone who is dissatisfied with our service (for example, a relative, friend, advocate or adviser). If someone is making a complaint on a consumer's behalf, they will normally need that person's written consent before we can proceed to investigate the matter.

To make this process as accessible as possible, a consumer can complain in person at any of our offices, by phone, in writing, by email or via our [complaints form](#) on our website. As part of SQA's Gaelic Language plan, complaints can also be submitted in Gaelic and we will reply to the consumer in Gaelic.

We are committed to providing high-quality customer service and the information we gather from complaints are used to help us improve our services. For openness and transparency, we also provide a summary of outcomes of complaints investigations and the improvements made as a result of this every quarter. In addition to this, annual complaints handling reports are published and is available from the ['Complaining to SQA'](#) page of our website.

## Approach to Consumer Duty Impact Assessment

SQA already has an established process to completing Equality Impact Assessments (EqIAs) and work is already underway to embed completion of Children's Rights and Wellbeing (CRWIA) and Island Community Impact Assessments (ICIAs) with the development of new, or review of existing, policies.

To ensure we comply with the specific considerations required of us as a public authority, SQA will be adopting the [consumer duty impact assessment template](#) from the '[Consumer duty guidance](#)' page of [Consumer Scotland's website](#). This will also ensure that all policy owners and authors, as well as colleagues who manage SQA services that directly impact on our consumers, follow the guidance set out by Consumer Scotland on how to complete an impact assessment.

As we transition into Qualifications Scotland, work will be carried out to consider bringing together each individual impact assessment into one integrated impact assessment template, possibly as an online tool. This will be considered as an option if it is deemed more user-friendly for Qualifications Scotland staff to complete and, most importantly, more accessible for our consumers to access.

SQA currently has a number of channels in which we report on our engagement activities with our consumers and the actions that have been taken to improve our services. Our Prospectus for Change highlights our ambition to work not only *for* users and customers, but *with* them. We will listen, act and provide feedback on the decisions we take and the reasons for them. We will do this by following the guidance for public authorities in meeting the consumer duty.

This information will also be included in our report outlining our progress in meeting the Duty, which will be published annually and will follow a similar format to other outcome reports we publish, including [our equality reports](#) such as the Equality Mainstreaming Report and Workforce Equality Monitoring Report, and the [Children's Rights Reports](#).

## Opportunities for future improvements

In the internal survey issued to all SQA staff, one of the questions asked respondents to provide information on how they feel consumer feedback could be used to improve SQA's products and services. Respondents highlighted the importance of listening to consumer feedback and implementing changes accordingly. Another key theme was the need for improved approaches and methodology to allow feedback to be gathered from our consumers. Suggestions of methodologies that should be adopted consistently across SQA included regular follow up monitoring surveys, investment in technology to improve customer service efficiency and establishing groups or panels that represent the broad range of SQA's consumers.

The provision of the proposed Education (Scotland) Bill to create a learner charter, as well as a teacher and practitioner charter, will require Qualifications Scotland to engage with students and staff and to publish what each should expect from Qualifications Scotland. In doing this, teachers and students will be able to hold Qualifications Scotland accountable through the establishment of dedicated committees for learners, and teachers and practitioners.

Our Prospectus for Change also demonstrates our commitment to work more closely with our consumers to ensure that their best interests and their needs are at the heart of all our strategic decision making.

There is also the opportunity for some recommendations and feedback that have been identified through our research — for example in relation to the [assessment arrangements service](#) and [use of generative AI](#) — to be considered and taken forward by Qualifications Scotland. Where strategic decisions are being made on these, we will inform consumers of the outcome, and we will also cover them in future consumer duty reports.