SQA

Assessment Arrangements in External Assessments: Understanding the experiences of centres, local authorities, parent/carers and learners

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Executive summary

Background

It is well documented by Scottish Government ([2023a](#)) and SQA (2024) that the number of learners who are assessed or declared disabled, or who have additional support needs, is increasing year on year. This mirrors the increasing numbers of assessment arrangements requests that centres submit to SQA on behalf of disabled learners or those with additional support needs for external assessments. SQA recognises that this has an impact on centres' ability to resource the support needed by learners, and on learners' access to the assessment arrangements they need to demonstrate their attainment.

Assessment arrangements provide disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs with access to appropriate support to complete SQA's external assessments, without compromising the integrity of the assessment itself. We term disabled learners or those with additional support needs as having a physical (including medical or sensory), behavioural, mental health or learning difficulty.

A number of research studies have been published that look into the provision of access arrangements in GCSEs for disabled learners ([Hipkiss, Woods and McCaldin, 2020](#); [McGhee and Masterson, 2022](#); [Starkie, 2023](#)). However, no similar research to date has been carried out on assessment arrangements in the context of Scotland and SQA qualifications.

Purpose

The purpose of this research is to:

1   Better understand how the provision of (and requests for) SQA's assessment arrangements work in practice.

2   Support continuous improvement of SQA's provision of assessment arrangements and our quality assurance of centre systems for provision of assessment arrangements.

3   Identify opportunities for improvements in the short, medium, and long term. Longer terms recommendations will be made and suggested to be taken forward into Qualifications Scotland that will replace SQA.

Methodology

We invited staff from centres (schools, colleges, and training providers) and local authorities, disabled learners or those with additional support needs, and their parents, carers, or guardians to participate in our research. Each of the three participant groups first completed surveys, and they were then invited to meet with SQA staff to discuss their experiences further. We conducted interviews with learners, parents and carers and focus groups with centre and local authority staff. We received survey responses from 198 centre and local authority staff, 50 learners and 129 parent and carers. A total of 10 centre and local authority staff

took part in focus groups, while individual interviews were conducted with four learners and seven parents and carers.

Findings

The research generated a number of key findings across six key areas: (1) identification and evidence; (2) guidance and information about assessment arrangements; (3) provision of assessment arrangements; (4) resourcing in centres; (5) the assessment arrangements requests (AAR) system; and (6) quality assurance visits.

Notably, centre and local authority staff stressed that gathering evidence is a difficult and resource-intensive process. Staff members reported an increased number of learners with additional support needs and volume of assessment arrangements they need compared to previous years, which has impacted their workload. There were also concerns about resourcing challenges in the delivery of assessment arrangements in the context of the increased number of requests.

While guidance and information about assessment arrangements for centres, learners and parents and carers were generally well received among all participant groups, some guidance documents had not been widely read. This was particularly true for learners, parents and carers. Only 56% of learners and 33% of parents and carers reported ever receiving information about how assessment arrangements work. Some parents and carers also felt that their centres at times provided information that was incorrect or inconsistent with SQA's, and suggested that SQA guidance could be shared more widely.

Roughly half of parents/carers and learners found it very easy or easy to understand how assessment arrangements work. Few found it difficult to understand the process, and none found it very difficult. Nevertheless, many centre and local authority staff suggested that there are disparities between what centre staff, parents and carers and learners know and understand about assessment arrangements. Some highlighted the importance of ensuring that guidance for learners and parents/carers is user friendly and easy to navigate.

In terms of accessing assessment arrangements, learners were more likely to be satisfied or very satisfied with the support they received from their centre/local authority (63%) compared to parents and carers (46%). However, learners expressed frustrations with the lengthy waiting times for support to be put in place and felt that they often had to make numerous requests. Similarly, some parents and carers felt they needed to be persistent and advocate for their child to get the necessary assessment arrangements in place.

Where assessment arrangements had been put in place, the majority of learners (68%) considered the assessment arrangements they were given to be very or extremely helpful. None of the learners surveyed found the assessment arrangements to be not helpful at all. Similarly, many parents and carers also found the assessment arrangements given to their children extremely helpful or very helpful (46%) or somewhat helpful (25%). However, some learners and parents and carers flagged instances where agreed arrangements were not

actioned in assessments or where there were issues with the support (such as assistive technologies).

Actions

While some of the findings from this research have supported anecdotal concerns that have been shared with colleagues across SQA, others have identified new opportunities for SQA (and Qualifications Scotland) to make improvements, within our processes and guidance, but also in collaboration with other key partners within Scotland's education system.

Based on the information we received from centres, learners, and parents/carers, we have identified the following actions that SQA will be taking forward:

♦ Share the research findings with key external stakeholders (short to medium term).
♦ Review SQA guidance to reduce potential misinterpretation of guidance (short term).
♦ Identify opportunities to improve how SQA communicates with centres, parents and carers, and learners (short to medium term).
♦ Review and make improvements to the current quality assurance process (short to medium term).
♦ Review the suitability of the current suite of assessment arrangements, and the terminology used (long term).
♦ Suggestions for improvement to the current AAR system (long term).

1   Introduction

Assessment arrangements (AAs) provide disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs with access to appropriate support to complete SQA's external assessments, without compromising the integrity of the assessment itself (SQA, 2023a). We term disabled learners as having a physical (including medical or sensory), behavioural, mental health or learning difficulty. Under section 1 of the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended 2009), a child or young person has an additional support need if they require additional support to benefit from school education. Scottish Government (2019) classifies additional support needs (ASN), into four categories: the learning environment; family circumstances; disability or health need; and social and emotional factors.

Summary statistics for schools in Scotland show that the number of secondary school pupils who are assessed or declared disabled, or have another type of additional support need (ASN), has been increasing yearly since 2010 (Scottish Government, 2023a). In 2023, 37% of all pupils (259,036) were recorded as having an ASN. Various factors may have influenced these increases, including improved recording and reporting practices, the introduction of additional categories of reasons for support in 2010, as well as increased awareness and identification of additional support needs (Scottish Government, 2023c). Additionally, in 2018, the Scottish Government conducted interviews with practitioners who also noted that the range and complexity of ASN has been increasing over time (Scottish Government, 2019).

Scottish Government's figures mirror SQA's data on assessment arrangements. The number of assessment arrangements requests made on the behalf of learners for National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher has increased from 20,160 in 2019 to 32,030 in 2024 (SQA, 2024). The most common assessment arrangements were extra time and separate accommodation, which together made up 60% of all assessment arrangement requests in 2024. In England the Association of Colleges reported that there has been an increase in the number of reasonable adjustments for learners entered for in GCSEs, AS and A-Level exams, particularly requests for extra time and rest breaks (Patel, 2024).

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended 2009) sets out the duties of centres and local authorities to identify and address additional support needs for children and young people, including providing assessment arrangements. An independent review was carried out by Angela Morgan (2020), who found that the implementation of this legislation was fragmented, inconsistent and over-dependent on committed individuals. As a result, Morgan noted that not all children and young people with additional support needs are being supported to fulfil their potential, not least because of a reduction in available resources. The review made 76 recommendations to close the gap between the intention behind the legislation and its implementation. A second progress report confirmed that 24 of the 76 recommendations from the initial report had been delivered, with many of the others well underway (Scottish Government, 2022a). However, the Humanly Report (Scottish Government,

2022b) acknowledged that the challenges presented in Angela Morgan's report of 2020, including resourcing issues, still persist two years later.

SQA's Evaluation of the Approach to the Assessment of Graded National Courses in 2022 found that the levels of understanding of assessment processes, grading, and modifications were significantly lower for disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs than for other learners (SQA, 2022). In addition, disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs were significantly less likely to report that the assessment process in 2022 was fair to them and were significantly more likely to find assessment approaches more stressful than learners without a disability or additional support need. Similarly, SQA's Learner Panel, an internal SQA initiative which includes disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs, described the process of assessment arrangements as 'stressful' and suggested that communication of the assessment arrangements process could be improved.

Howard (2020) also found that disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs report greater stress, especially in relation to exams, mirroring SQA's 2022 Evaluation findings (SQA, 2022). This experience may be linked to specific types of assessment, and feelings of stress or anxiety could adversely affect disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs compared to their peers (Fong and Soni, 2022).

Research has been (and continues to be) conducted on the use of access arrangements by disabled learners (the equivalent to SQA's assessment arrangements) for GCSEs in the rest of the UK. These studies have highlighted challenges for practitioners around the manageability of access arrangements and determining eligibility (McGhee and Masterson, 2022) as well as a need for a shared understanding about the purpose, place and limitations of assessment arrangements between regulators, awarding bodies and schools (Woods, James and Hipkiss, 2018). Research into parents' experiences of requesting access arrangements on behalf of their children has also highlighted that the need to 'persistently fight to access assessments' has an impact on the families' wellbeing (Starkie, 2023, p. 25). In addition, Hipkiss, Woods and McCaldin (2020) noted that provision of, for example, extra time did not provide disabled learners with an advantage, but that it allowed learners to achieve what teachers predicted they would achieve, similar to learners who did not require the same arrangement.

While extensive research has been conducted on the provision and impact of access arrangements in the rest of the UK, the only research conducted within a Scottish context focuses specifically on the use of assistive technology as an assessment arrangement following COVID-19 (CALL, 2021) and in the academic session 2021–22 (CALL, 2023). It is acknowledged that there is an increased number of recorded additional support needs and a decline in the number of specialist teachers (such as Teachers of the Deaf and Qualified Teachers of the Visually Impaired) (Drummond, 2022; Hepburn, 2023; Scottish Government, 2023; 2024a). However, as far as we are aware, there are currently no published research studies that explore the experiences of practitioners, parents/carers, and learners with the provision of assessment arrangements in Scotland, nor the

impact of the decrease in specialist teachers on the support that disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs receive.

SQA has a responsibility to ensure that the process of assessment is rigorous and fair for all learners, that the provision of assessment arrangements is appropriate, and only provided to those who have identified needs. The National Discussion on Education recommended the introduction of different types of assessments to offer more opportunities for success to more learners (Campbell and Harris, 2023). However, before any changes are implemented, further information is required on how effectively assessment arrangements currently support disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs.

As a non-departmental public body and Scotland's awarding body, under the Public Sector Equality Duty, SQA must consider how our policies and decisions affect those with protected characteristics. As per section 9 of the Equality Act 2010, public authorities must have due regard to the need to:

♦ eliminate unlawful discrimination
♦ advance equality of opportunity
♦ foster or encourage good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

We recognise that we have a part to play in supporting not only schools, colleges, and training providers, but also learners and their parents/carers in ensuring the provision of assessment arrangements is fair and equitable. Following the publication of Professor Ken Muir's report of 2022 (Scottish Government, 2022c), a period of Education Reform is currently underway in which the Scottish Government is determining the role and responsibility of Qualifications Scotland, which will replace SQA. We will continue to ensure the needs of our stakeholders are considered in a future assessment arrangements-type process delivered by Qualifications Scotland.

Through this research, SQA therefore seeks to better understand how the provision of (and request for) assessment arrangements work in practice for teaching practitioners and local authority staff, parents/carers, disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs.

The purpose of the research is to:

1   Better understand how the provision of (and requests for) SQA's assessment arrangements work in practice.

2   Support continuous improvement of SQA's provision of assessment arrangements and our quality assurance of centre systems for provision of assessment arrangements.

3   Identify opportunities for improvements in the short, medium, and long term. Longer terms recommendations will be made and suggested to be taken forward into Qualifications Scotland, which will replace SQA.

2   Assessment arrangements: overview

The purpose of assessment arrangements is to provide disabled learners or those with additional support needs with an equal opportunity to **demonstrate their attainment** in an assessment as their peers. In doing so, an assessment environment is provided that allows these learners to show the skills, knowledge and understanding they have achieved, without compromising the integrity of the assessment. Learners are individual people with a diverse range of needs, and it is important that centres (schools, colleges, and training providers) consider the individual assessment needs of their learners when considering the most appropriate assessment arrangements.

To determine the assessment arrangements that a learner may need, centres are asked to begin by identifying the difficulties the learner faces when accessing coursework and assessments. Centres are required to hold evidence of the learner's identified difficulty and how this impacts teaching and learning.

It is important to stress that SQA does not require evidence of a diagnosis of a disability or additional support need to support a request for assessment arrangements. It is the individual learner's assessment needs that must be the basis for the provision of an assessment arrangement. This means that centres have a critical role in ensuring that the process of providing assessment arrangements is fair and operates with integrity.

For example:

♦ A deaf learner who uses sign language such as BSL may need sign language support to access an assessment task.
♦ A learner experiencing mental health difficulties who is very lethargic first thing in the morning due to medication may need the start time of an assessment adjusted.
♦ A neurodivergent learner with dyslexia who experiences difficulties with processing written text may need a text reader and may also need extra time to complete an assessment.
♦ A learner with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) who has persistent difficulties with concentration, may need to undertake an exam in a separate room, or in a room with only a small number of learners.

For learners who are disabled, as defined under Section 6 of the Equality Act 2010, assessment arrangements such as those listed above might be the 'reasonable adjustment' required to compensate for a substantial disadvantage (section 20). However, there may be other unique adjustments that need to be considered to meet their individual needs. At the same time, it is important to recognise that some adjustments may not be possible for some qualifications. It is not possible to make an adjustment to the **standard** of the qualification where to do so would mean that it did not provide a reliable indication of the learner's knowledge, skills and understanding.

Access to assessment: the principles

As the national awarding body for Scotland, SQA has a responsibility to ensure that assessment leading to certification is rigorous and fair for **all** learners, and that it allows learners to demonstrate the skills, knowledge and understanding required for the qualification. This is why it is important that assessment arrangements are provided only to those learners identified as having a physical (including medical or sensory), behavioural, mental health or learning difficulty that prevents them from accessing an assessment and demonstrating their attainment.

The four key principles that underpin our model for the provision of assessment arrangements focus on the need to remove barriers for disabled learners to provide them with an equal opportunity to access their assessments.

Principle 1: Assessment arrangements are intended to enable learners to demonstrate their attainment, not to compensate for lack of attainment.

Assessment arrangements must be considered in the context of the distinction between a learner's attainment and that of their ability to demonstrate their attainment under assessment conditions. They are agreed before an assessment takes place and allow disabled learners to *access* the assessment and show the skills, knowledge and understanding they have acquired.

For example, a learner with an identified reading difficulty may require text-reading software to decode written text to access a History assessment. Assessment arrangements are not designed to compensate for a candidate who has not acquired the key skills, competence, knowledge and understanding of the qualification concerned. For example, where a candidate has not been physically able to develop the practical skills in a subject such as Practical Metalwork, or where a candidate has not been able to develop any reading skills in a subject such as ESOL, assessment arrangements cannot be put in place to compensate for this.

Principle 2: Assessment arrangements must not compromise the integrity of the qualification.

Assessment arrangements must be considered in the context of the assessment standards or competence standards for each qualification. Assessment arrangements must not compromise these standards or undermine the integrity of the assessment or the credibility of the award. All stakeholders, including learners, must have confidence that the qualification awarded provides a reliable indication of the learner's knowledge, skills, understanding and competence.

For example, it is not possible for a scribe to use their discretion with spelling in the Writing assessment of Modern Languages. Learners are assessed on their ability to spell in the target language, so this would undermine the fundamental assessment objective of the Writing assessment.

Principle 3: Assessment arrangements must be tailored to meet a learner's individual needs.

Assessment arrangements must be considered in the context of the individual learner's assessment needs in each subject area.

As part of the overall support offered to them, learners should have an assessment arrangement plan, considered across subjects and courses with similar assessment conditions and demands. This is why we must consider the individual learner's need for assessment arrangements in each subject area, and in different assessments within subject areas in collaboration with the subject specialist, and make a judgement about the difficulties the learner will experience in the specific assessment.

This requires consideration of the learner's needs in the subject concerned, and the extent to which the published conditions of assessment may prevent the learner from accessing the assessment to demonstrate their attainment.

For example, a learner with significant writing difficulties might not be at any disadvantage in the multiple-choice question paper in the National 5 Chemistry exam. However, the same learner might have significant difficulties producing an extended written essay in the National 5 History exam.

Principle 4: Assessment arrangements should reflect, as far as possible, the learner's usual way of learning and producing work.

Assessment arrangements must be considered in the context of the ongoing support the learner needs to access teaching and learning. There should be continuity between the learner's need for support in learning and need for support in assessment. Assessment arrangements that are put in place should, where possible, reflect the ongoing support given to the learner in a learning environment.

For example, if a candidate uses ICT with text reader software regularly in class to overcome specific reading difficulties, this would most likely be the most suitable assessment arrangement provided in assessments.

However, there may be situations where the support provided to a learner in the learning environment is not acceptable in an assessment.

For example, a learner who has a language and communication difficulty, and who normally has someone in class explaining words and terms, would not be allowed such support in the external exam.

For this reason, it is very important that learners are aware of, and have practice in working in a way that reflects, what could be permitted as support in the assessment situation.

Further information on assessment arrangements for centres, including our guidance on quality assurance requirements, is available on our website (SQA, 2023c). We also published information for learners (SQA, 2023d) and parents/carers (SQA, 2023e) about the assessment support available on our website.

3 Methodology

Through this research, we wanted to better understand the common issues that our stakeholders experience, as well as any aspects of the assessment arrangement process that they would like to see remain, or that can be improved. We first surveyed participants and later carried out interviews and focus groups to allow for further exploration of key areas. This section sets out our methodology.

3.1 Recruitment

We recruited survey participants for this research using a purposive sampling strategy and a snowballing technique to reach learners, parents/carers, and centre/local authority staff. In other words, we recruited participants who met our sampling criteria set out in section 3.2 below (purposive sampling) and encouraged them to share the details of the research with others who met the sampling criteria (snowballing technique). We promoted the research in our regular SQA Co-ordinator Update newsletter and requested that SQA co-ordinators share this information with their staff, disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs, and their parents/carers. We also advertised the research on SQA social media channels.

SQA's external equality partners were also asked if they could promote the research through their own channels, particularly targeting learners and parents/carers. Our external equality partners include Dyslexia Scotland, CALL Scotland, Lead Scotland, Enquire, Education Scotland, General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS), ADHD UK, EIS, College Development Network (CDN), The Donaldson Trust, National Autistic Society, Sight Scotland, and the Scottish Sensory Centre. Similarly, we contacted college student unions and associations, and asked them to share the research through their own channels.

Participants self-selected to partake in the survey by clicking on a survey link and answering the screening questions. If they met the criteria given above, they were able to complete the survey.

The majority of the interview and focus group participants were recruited directly from the survey on an opt-in basis. Those who completed the survey were invited to sign up to take part in an interview or group. We also recruited some additional interview participants who did not complete the initial survey. Most of these additional interview participants were recruited using the same channels as used for the surveys. However, a small number of participants who heard about the research through word of mouth contacted us directly to take part.

3.2 Participants

The research was carried out with three participant groups that met the following sampling criteria:

1   Learners who are taking or had previously taken SQA qualifications and who:

      a. Consider themselves to have a disability as defined under the [Equality Act 2010](#); and/or

      b. Have additional support for learning needs; and/or

      c. Have or previously had assessment arrangements in place; and/or

      d. Are currently going through the process of getting assessment arrangements put in place

2   Parents/guardians/carers of learners who meet the criteria under (1)

3   Centres and local authority staff who work with learners who meet the criteria under (1)

3.3   Data collection

The project took a mixed-methods approach that involved quantitative and qualitative analyses to triangulate our data. We carried out the research in two stages, each involving all three groups who were studied separately.

Stage 1: Surveys

Online surveys were administered for each of the three groups using SmartSurvey from 31 August to 2 October 2023. All participant groups were presented with a screening question at the beginning of the survey to ensure only those who met the sampling criteria above were able to proceed with the research. The surveys each contained a set of optional open and closed questions generating quantitative data and rich qualitative data.

Stage 2: Interviews and focus groups

In addition to the qualitative data gathered from the survey, we also conducted interviews and focus groups: four learner interviews

♦ seven parent/carer interviews
♦ two focus groups with 10 local authority and centre staff

It is important to note the survey responses were anonymous, and so we were not able to link specific responses to those who participated in interviews or focus groups.

The interviews and focus groups were facilitated by SQA staff involved in the assessment arrangements process. We used a semi-structured approach, that aimed to allow participants to freely share their experiences without too much direction, while still allowing the interviews to focus on important aspects of assessment arrangements. Facilitators worked from a set of drafted questions as a basis but had flexibility to expand on specific matters raised by the participant(s) and to ask additional or follow-up questions. Equally, facilitators also took care to ensure that participants felt that their experiences were being heard and understood by those within SQA who know the process and can advocate for improvements on their behalf.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed using Microsoft Teams. Direct quotes are indented and given in italics.

3.4 Data analysis and interpretation of results

Quantitative data analysis

The quantitative analysis was completed using statistical software RStudio, with initial data cleaning completed in Excel. The same data wrangling method was applied across the three groups to give similar outputs in the form of counts and percentages. As questions were optional, percentages were calculated based on the number of participants who answered each question. All percentages have been rounded up to the nearest whole number, so not all figures presented will round up to 100%. With regards to the job role in the centre/local authority group, these were grouped to ensure no individual job role was disclosed.

We intended to carry out significance testing to compare the averages of learners' responses by their protected characteristic or equality group and ascertain if there were any significant differences. However, unfortunately, the sample size of the learner group (50 learners) was too small to allow for meaningful comparison across equalities groups. While further analysis of the data by equalities groups is not possible in this research, we acknowledge the importance of such analysis and commit to expanding our understanding of the experience of learners from minority and underrepresented groups in future work.

Qualitative data analysis

We subjected the qualitative data generated from the surveys and interviews/focus groups to qualitative content analysis, which is a process of analysing and interpreting the content of data. Researchers categorised responses to identify themes, producing codes that allowed analysis across responses. Line by line coding was carried out using NVivo. We used both inductive and deductive content analysis methods. Inductive content analysis is an exploratory process where data is analysed and coded without reference to any pre-determined theories or themes. Deductive content analysis is a top-down approach where content is analysed according to a predetermined set of themes.

Responses were analysed separately by research method (survey response or interview/focus group) and by participant group. Qualitative survey responses were analysed using an inductive approach, while interviews and focus groups responses were analysed using both inductive and deductive approaches.

For the interviews and focus groups, we took an initial deductive approach with a coding framework that was determined by researchers with guidance from the SQA's Equalities Team. Across all participant groups, interviews and focus groups were coded by a set of common themes identified prior to analyses to allow for cross-group comparisons. For example, by coding 'workloads associated with assessment arrangements' across all stakeholders, researchers

were able to compare how stakeholders discussed workloads associated with assessment arrangements. In addition to this, we carried out inductive content analysis (as we did with the qualitative survey responses) in order to identify and code specific themes that apply to each respective participant group.

3.5   Ethics

This research was conducted in accordance with SQA's Code of Research Practice (SQA, 2023b). The Code of Research Practice (CoRP) sets out essential principles for the production of valid and reliable research for everyone in SQA. Ethics, equity, and sustainability are fundamental to the CoRP's research framework and the research process. All research must carefully consider potential ethical concerns, but it is especially important in research such as this where potentially vulnerable participants are involved, including disabled children and young people and/or those with additional support needs. With that in mind, we adopted the following protocols for ethical practice in this research.

Voluntary informed consent

Participants were informed that their participation in the research was entirely voluntary. They were also made aware that they had the right to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason. To obtain informed consent, we provided participants with a Participant Information Form at each stage of the research (surveys and interviews/focus groups). These explained the purpose of the research and provided further information about participating.

Survey participants were able to read and download the relevant Participant Information Form before starting the survey questions. Prior to participation, all participants were asked to review this information and to complete a consent form confirming that they: (1) understood the purpose of the research; (2) understood they could withdraw at any time; and (3) that they were happy to participate. We repeated this process for interviews and focus groups by issuing the relevant Participant Information Forms and consent forms in advance by e-mail.

Confidentiality and data protection

Under the Data Protection Act 2018, any data about an individual's protected characteristics, including those on disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs and the assessment arrangements they are provided, are special category data. With that in mind, we put in place enhanced data protection protocols for collecting and storing equalities data, in line with internal SQA guidelines. Our data collection process was designed with data minimisation in mind. We only gathered data that was necessary and proportionate from the perspective of SQA's Public Sector Equality Duty.

We recognise that additional precautions need to be taken with requesting and handling special category data. It is for this reason that we did not ask for personal identifier data in the survey, to ensure the survey responses remained anonymous. Personal contact information required to allow us to contact

participants to arrange focus groups and interviews were collected using a separate registration form. Interview and focus group responses were also anonymised and the data handled confidentially. Any identifying information in survey responses and interview/focus transcriptions was redacted prior to analysis and reporting.

We also requested equality data about the learners, but not about other participant groups. For this reason, where there is a possibility of identifying individual learners, disclosure controls have been applied. Where less than 10% of learners selected a response, these have been denoted in the report as 'less than 10% of learners'. 0% response rates will be disclosed as such in the report unless doing so means that specific learners can be identified.

The research data is also held on a secure confidential server that only researchers involved in this project had access to. Once the anonymised participant data is no longer required, it be securely destroyed. As part of the informed consent process, participants were informed how their data would be used, how long it would be stored and when it would be disposed of, in the relevant Participant Information Form. They were also advised of their right to request information held about them before the data was anonymised.

Working with children and young people

We acknowledge that there are distinct ethical considerations that pertain to carrying out research with children and young people, particularly those with disabilities and/or additional support needs. With that in mind, the research was developed by SQA's Equalities Team in consultation with SQA's Research and Evaluation Team. In addition to SQA's Code of Research Practice (SQA, 2023b), this research was conducted in accordance with internal SQA Guidance for Working with Children and Young People. In line with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) definition of a 'child', this guidance applies to research involving anyone aged under the age of 18, with those aged 16 to 18 specifically designated as young people. Moreover, our corporate parenting responsibilities under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 apply to children who are looked after by local authorities, as well as young people up to the age of 26 who were looked after at age 16 or later.

With that in mind, we implemented several additional steps and safeguards to ensure the rights and wellbeing of children and young people involved in the research were protected. Firstly, in recognition that there may be barriers to informed consent, we created specific Participant Information Forms and consent forms for learners, using accessible language. For those learners aged under 16, we also required the consent of their parent/carer. Learners were also encouraged to discuss the information in the Participant Information Form with a responsible and trusted adult if this was appropriate, to ensure they understood the purpose of the research and their rights to withdraw at any time, and to access information held about them.

Secondly, all learner interviews were carried out by two SQA facilitators to safeguard learners' welfare. Learners also had the right to be accompanied by an adult or person of their choosing for the interview. Interviews followed a semi-structured format, with the set of guiding questions being issued to learners in advance via email. Facilitators based the interview around these questions, and any follow-up or additional questions were considered with care to minimise the impact on the learner. As children and young people may be more prone to fluctuating consent, facilitators took care throughout to remind learners that they could stop the interview at any time.

Working with vulnerable adults

Furthermore, we were also mindful of the possibility that some adult participants may not be able to easily provide informed consent or may be more susceptible to harm in the research process. With that in mind, we implemented ethical and safeguarding protocols for working with vulnerable adults in accordance with internal SQA Guidance for Working with Vulnerable Adult Participants. As we had no way of identifying whether a participant may be a vulnerable adult, we took an accessibility-first approach across all stages of the research, as described in section 3.6 below. We also asked all interviews and focus group participants to advise us in advance if they required any support or adjustments in order to participate. In addition, all interviews and focus groups were facilitated by two SQA staff members as a pre-emptive safeguarding measure.

3.6   Equality and inclusion

SQA is committed to equality and inclusion, including within our research process. With that in mind, this research was led by SQA's Equalities Team, who carried out a thorough review of all aspects of the research to ensure that an inclusive and equitable approach was adopted. In particular, the Equalities Team oversaw the approach for gathering learner equality data in the survey, in consultation with SQA's Research and Evaluation Team. Equalities questions were selected after considerable discussion among equalities practitioners and researchers at SQA to ensure that they were as representative as possible, and that inclusive language was used. There is more detail in Appendix C.

Approach to gathering learner equality data

We included several questions in the survey that were designed to gather data about learners' protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 in furtherance of SQA's Public Sector Equality Duty. In recognition of SQA's corporate parent responsibilities under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, we also asked learners whether or not they considered themselves to be care experienced.

Some of the equalities questions we posed to learners called for a simple yes/no response (as well as the 'Prefer not to say' option). For example, we asked learners whether they considered themselves to have a disability, if they identified as transgender and/or non-binary, and whether they considered themselves to be care experienced. Others asked learners how they described

their identities across several domains, including their disability, gender, sexual orientation, and race. In these questions, learners were presented with a number of pre-selected categories and asked to select which applied to them. Alternatively, learners were given the option to enter their own response if they wished to.

We recognise the importance of using labels to define categories within the data collection process that reflect and accurately represent respondents' particular identities or characteristics. The Inclusive Data Taskforce (2021) found this to be of critical importance to respondents. As such, when selecting response categories, our aim was to provide meaningful categorisations that learners could recognise and use to describe themselves. Where appropriate, we referred to the Scottish Government (2024b) and Government Statistical Service (GSS) (n.d.) harmonised standards for gathering equalities data, as a starting point.

The purpose of harmonisation is to promote good research practice, coherency, and consistency, which allows for comparisons across different data sets. In some cases, we chose to adapt or deviate from the harmonised standards to suit the purposes of this research (as set out in section 3.6.2 below).

We took this approach of providing response categories so that we could report the aggregated equalities data in a meaningful way, and to allow for meaningful comparison between equalities groups (which as indicated in section 3.3 above, was ultimately not possible due to the small sample size). However, we do appreciate the value of gathering equalities data using open text boxes where participants can describe their identities in their own words.

The standardised approaches and umbrella categories used in our equalities questions may not necessarily reflect learners' specific identities. Nonetheless, we decided against only using open text boxes as this would likely have generated a much wider range of responses that ultimately would have to be categorised by SQA researchers for aggregation and comparison purposes. We decided that it would be more appropriate, and more accurate, if learners dictated the category that applied to themselves, rather than SQA researchers. However, we did include response guidance for these questions that encouraged learners to select from one of the categories or inputting their own response. We believe that this provided learners with the freedom to choose from the categories where applicable or otherwise to enter their own response.

4 Results

4.1 Overview

In total, there were 198 responses from centre/local authority staff, 129 from parents/carers, and 50 from learners. The majority of participants from all three groups were associated with local authority secondary and special schools (95% of centre staff, 97% of parents/carers and 86% of learners). The remaining participants were from colleges, and independent secondary and special schools. Less than 10% of parents/carers and learners answered either 'I'm not sure' or 'Other'.

The majority of centre and local authority staff delivered National 1 to Advanced Higher courses, while most learners, and the child(ren) of parents/carers, were studying National 5 or Higher courses (Table 1). It is also important to note than some learners may be taking more than one qualification level simultaneously.

Table 1: Percentage of survey participants who delivered or studied each qualification level

Level of Qualification	Staff	Learner	Parent/Carer
National 1 to 3	57%	6%	13%
National 4	93%	6%	18%
National 5	96%	52%	58%
Higher	90%	76%	52%
Advanced Higher	62%	26%	17%
Higher National Certificate/Diploma	6%	6%	2%
Vocational Qualifications	17%	0%	2%

Participants from local authority areas across Scotland took part in the surveys, though some areas were better represented than others. Centre staff from all local authority areas except Angus were represented. The largest proportion of centres and local authority staff work in Aberdeenshire (13%) followed by Edinburgh (10%), Perth and Kinross (7%) and Highland (7%). Most learners were from Edinburgh (18%), Dumfries and Galloway (14%) and Fife (12%), while most parents/carers were from Aberdeenshire (20%), Fife (9%), Edinburgh (9%), Renfrewshire (6%) and the Scottish Borders (6%).

In addition, equality data was gathered from learners who took part in our survey, including, for example, their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, whether they have a disability, the nature of their disability, and whether they are care-experienced. The purpose of gathering this data was to allow us to better understand the distinct experiences of learners from minority and underrepresented groups with the assessment arrangements process, including protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. As with all the survey

questions, the questions in this section were completely optional. We also took the additional step of reminding learners that they did not need to respond if they did not wish to. In addition, learners were given the option of responding with 'Prefer not to say'. We have included a breakdown of the data below: 47% of the learner sample described their gender as 'man/boy' and 49% as 'woman/girl'.

♦ Black and minority ethnic learners make up 16% of the sample, and white learners make up 80%.
♦ 54% of the sample indicated they have a disability and 36% indicated that they did not.
♦ 82% of the sample did not consider themselves to be care-experienced.
♦ 24% of the sample described their sexual orientation as falling under the LGBTQIA+ umbrella, while 64% described themselves as heterosexual/straight.
♦ 94% of learners in the sample identified as cisgender (their gender identity corresponds with the sex they were assigned at birth), while the remaining identified as transgender or non-binary, or preferred not to say.

The results of our research are presented across six sections:

The first section **identification and evidence** explores the experiences of centre/local authority staff in identifying a learner's need for assessment arrangements and gathering suitable supporting evidence. It also highlights the views of learners and their parents/carers.

The second section **guidance and information about assessment arrangements** focuses on information, guidance, and communications around assessment arrangements from both SQA and centres/local authorities. It covers the views of all three groups – centre/local authority staff, parents/carers and learners.

The third section **provision of assessment arrangements** looks at the provision of assessment arrangements from the perspectives of centres/local authorities, as well as parents/carers and learners. It details how parents/carers and learners perceive the support received from centres.

The fourth section **resourcing in centres** focuses on the increasing number of assessment arrangement requests and the impact this is having on centres/local authorities. It examines centre and local authority staff perspectives on resourcing the delivery of assessment arrangement, as well as the views of learners and parents/carers.

The fifth section **AAR system** focuses on SQA's Assessment Arrangements Request (AAR) system, which centre/local authorities use to submit and monitor assessment arrangement requests. It documents the views of centre/local authority staff on the functionality of the AAR system at present, as well as the views of all groups on developments to the AAR system.

The final section **quality assurance visits from SQA** explores centre/local authority staff experiences with SQA quality assurance visits.

4.2 Identification and evidence

4.2.1 Identification of a need for assessment arrangements

A learner's need for assessment arrangements is determined by their centre or local authority. To identify the assessment arrangements that a learner may need, centre/local authority staff must ascertain the specific difficulties the learner faces when accessing assessments. All 198 centre/local authority staff surveyed were involved in the process of identifying a learner's need for assessment arrangements. The majority of the staff (68%) were teachers/lecturers, while 20% were additional support needs, learning support, student support or pastoral support staff and 12% were principal teachers, head of faculty or other senior management staff.

Figure 1: Centre and local authority staff confidence in identifying needs for an assessment arrangement
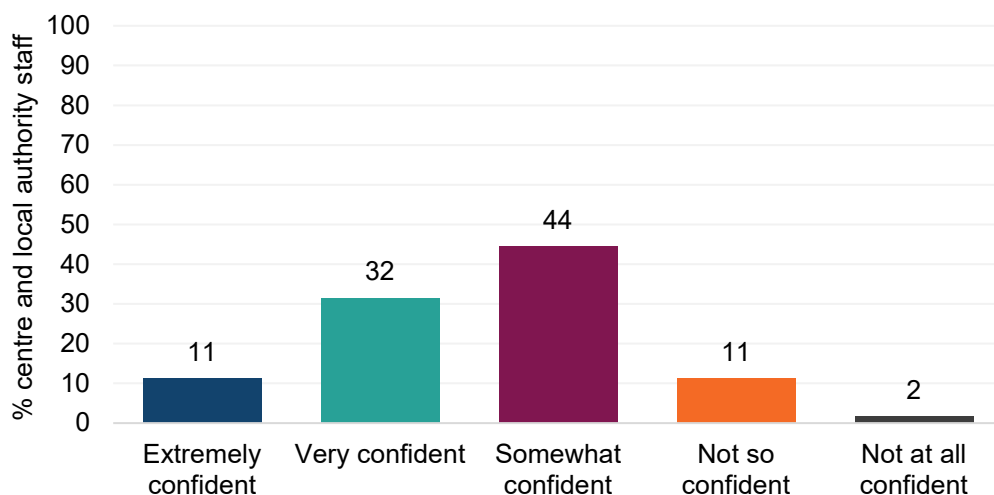

Figure 1 shows how confident centre and local authority staff feel about identifying a learner's need for an assessment arrangement. The majority of centre and local authority staff (76%) considered themselves to be somewhat confident or very confident, and a further 11% reported being extremely confident. Of those who described themselves as extremely confident, most were learning support staff (50%), followed by teaching staff (30%) and senior management staff (20%). Of the 13% who were not so confident or not at all confident, almost all (96%) were teachers/lecturers.

During the focus group sessions with centre and local authority staff, some practitioners emphasised that they did not feel best placed to recognise a particular learner's need for assessment arrangements, nor to gather the evidence to support these requests. These concerns were heightened in relation to learners attending remotely and those attending shorter or school-college partnership courses. Others also suggested that the dates of prelims and SQA exams do not allow sufficient time for practitioners, learners, and professionals (such as GPs and educational psychologists) to determine a need for assessment arrangements.

Additionally, there were conflicting responses across centre/local authority staff, parents/carers, and learners as to who is best able to recognise assessment arrangement needs. Each of the research groups at times expressed the view that they were best placed to accurately identify the need for assessment arrangements compared to other stakeholders. In some cases, participants considered their own judgement to be objectively correct and expressed frustration that other views superseded their own. The conflict in views was most apparent between parent/carers and centre/local authority staff, who sometimes regarded the other as a roadblock in the assessment arrangements process. Some practitioners indicated that parents/carers and learners were requesting assessment arrangements where they had not identified a need:

> Centre/local authority staff: 'There is a lot of parental pressure in our school, and I worry that sometimes parents try to 'game the system' by lobbying guidance teachers for AAs. We then get what is essentially a fait accompli as we then have to provide evidence for an AA we didn't even request!'

On the other hand, some learners and their parents/carers did not necessarily feel that their needs were being accurately or fairly identified:

> Parent/carer: 'My son is dyslexic. He only gets help if the teacher thinks it's needed. He passes small assessments ok but trying to study for the final exams he really struggles. Some subjects he gets help other he doesn't. He should get extra help on all subjects.'

4.2.2   Evidence gathering

SQA requires centres/local authorities to gather evidence of learners' identified difficulties, and the impact these difficulties have on teaching and learning. Almost all (94%) of the centre and local authority staff in the survey indicated that they were involved in gathering evidence to support an assessment arrangement request. Of those involved, 72% were subject teachers/lecturers, 19% were learning support, pastoral support or learner experience staff and 9% were senior management staff including SQA co-ordinators, curriculum managers, principal teachers, and faculty heads.

Across the survey and focus groups, centres/local authority staff reported that gathering evidence is an onerous, lengthy, and resource-intensive process. Some described the process as unnecessary, while others felt that the requirement for centres to provide evidence suggested a lack of trust in the professional judgement of centre staff on the part of SQA. Many suggested that large volumes of evidence are needed to support each learner's need for assessment arrangements, which increases staff workloads. Others noted that ongoing increases in the number of assessment arrangements requests has also put additional pressure on staff when it comes to gathering evidence.

In addition, centre/local authority staff raised the following issues in relation to the evidence gathering process:

♦ Some staff mentioned that it can be difficult to obtain evidence that proves that an assessment arrangement makes a difference to a learner's mark/grade, particularly for arrangements such as having extra time. However, we note that SQA does not advise that this is used as a measure to determine a learner's need for assessment arrangements.

♦ Some learners may experience difficulties in assessments that are not present in the teaching and learning environment, for example, in relation to their mental health and wellbeing. It can therefore be difficult to provide suitable evidence in such cases.

Others also expressed concerns about the methods used to gather evidence. For example, some centre and local authority staff were frustrated about the perceived need for evidence to be collected repeatedly for the same learner. While SQA does not require centres to gather evidence with and without assessment arrangements each year, some staff members were concerned that this was in fact required. For example:

> Centre/local authority staff: 'It's not helped by the apparent belief in the SQA that a student can be identified, tested and be in demonstrable need as a result of dyslexia [. . .] and still need swathes of new evidence once they get to the Senior Phase. Challenges such as dyslexia, ADHD etc do not suddenly resolve themselves in the Senior Phase yet that is how the SQA data gathering comes across.'

Furthermore, while some staff generate evidence by observing learners and their specific needs, others administer additional assessments to establish need for assessment arrangements. Some practitioners were frustrated by the perceived need to test learners for proof of assessment arrangements and/or to test repeatedly, and expressed concern that this was unfair to learners. As put by one staff member:

> Centre/local authority staff: 'This creates extra assessment of some pupils and is time consuming. For some pupils this happens across multiple subjects so they face a lot of assessment gathering while, in reality, if they need extra time for a specific need it should be gathered once and that covers all similar situations across subjects.'

Conversely, others felt that requiring tested evidence helped to make the assessment arrangements process easier or more legitimate.

However, from the interviews and survey responses, it is not clear whether learners or their parents/carers have a strong preference for observed versus tested evidence. In both cases, observed and tested evidence were described as time-consuming processes:

> Parent/carer: 'Throughout my child's learning within the academy my child and I were advised the SQA requires my child to fail first in order to provide SQA with evidence to enable adjustments to assessment arrangements. This impacted not only my child self-belief but also confidence which is already

low. I feel this should not have been necessary when there is already evidence within my child's Learning Profile held within the school.'

4.3 Guidance and information about assessment arrangements

4.3.1 SQA assessment arrangements guidance for centres

SQA publishes guidance about assessment arrangements for centres and local authorities, including:

♦ *Assessment Arrangements Explained: Information for centres*
♦ *SQA guidance on digital question papers*
♦ *Assessment Arrangements Quality Assurance Guide for Centres*
♦ *Additional Guidance for use when requesting Adapted Question Papers and Artwork*
♦ *Use of a bilingual dictionary for English as an Additional Language (EAL) candidates*

Centre and local authority staff were asked in the survey whether they had read any of these documents. Figure 2 shows that *Assessment Arrangements Explained: Information for centres* has been read by the majority of centre and local authority staff (73%). Roughly a third of centre and local authority staff have read the other documents (ranging from 28% to 38%), with the exception of *Using Sign in SQA Assessments*, which has only read by 6% of staff.

Figure 2: Percentage of centre and local authority staff who read the SQA guidance
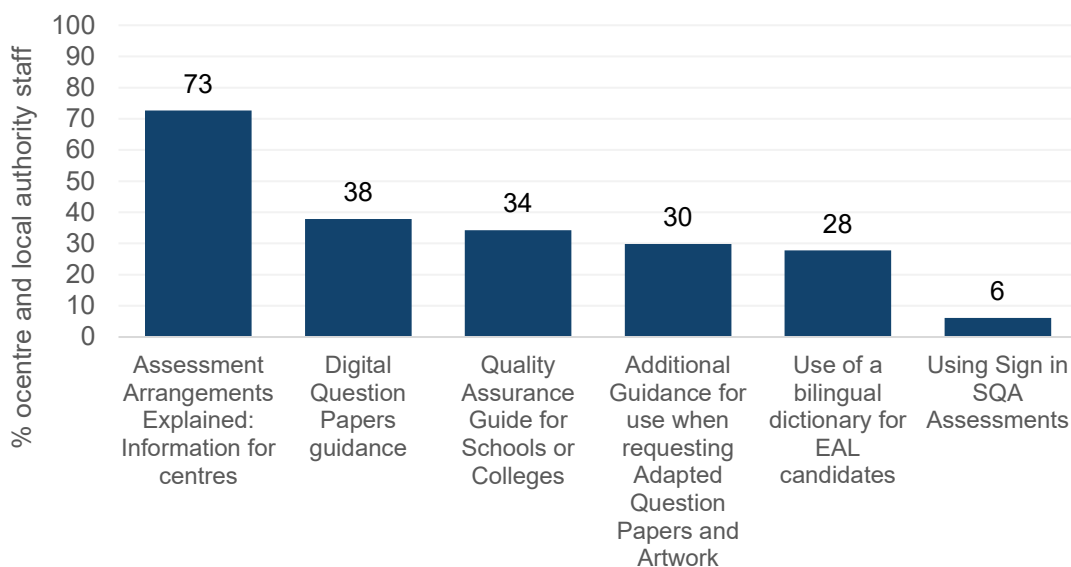

Table 2 shows how the percentage of centre and local authority staff who have read the documents varied across job roles. Notably, most of the documents were read by over 60% of learning support staff. While only a third (34%) of all
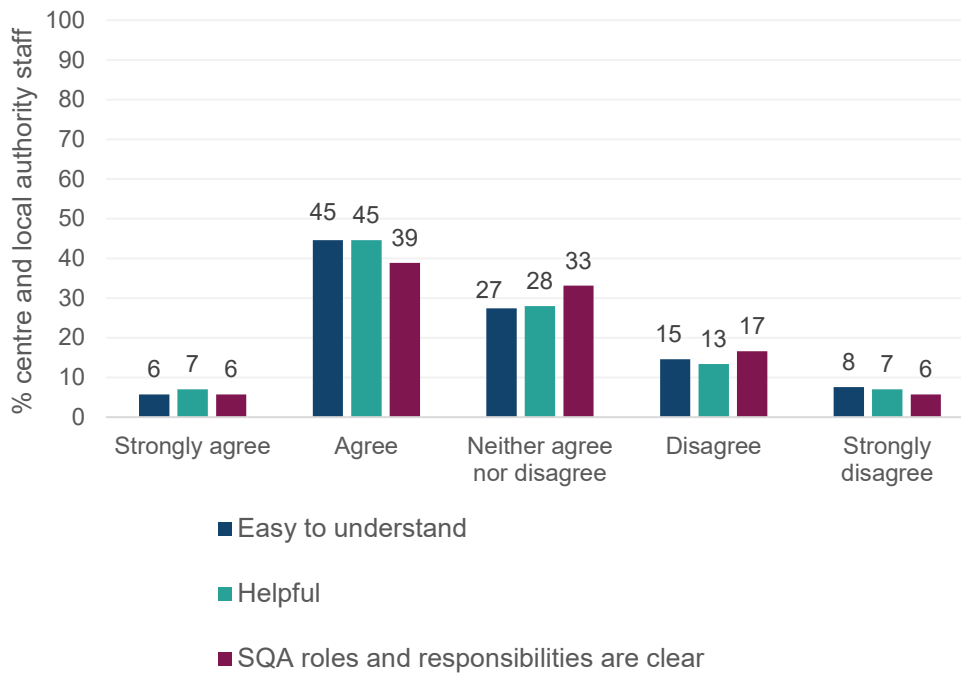
centre and local authority staff read the Quality Assurance Guide for Schools and Colleges, this rises to 78% among Senior management staff.

Table 2: Percentage of centre and local authority staff in each job role who read the SQA guidance

Guidance Document	Learning Support Staff	Senior Management Staff	Teaching Staff
Assessment Arrangements Explained: Information for centres	95%	87%	64%
Digital Question Papers guidance	70%	61%	24%
Quality Assurance Guide for Schools or Colleges	68%	78%	17%
Additional Guidance for use when requesting Adapted Question Papers and Artwork	63%	39%	19%
Use of a bilingual dictionary for EAL candidates	60%	44%	16%
Using Sign in SQA Assessments	13%	22%	2%

Overall, the centre and local authority staff who have read these guidance documents seemed to view them in a positive light (Figure 3). Approximately half of all centre and local authority staff agreed or strongly agreed that the documents were easy to understand (50%), helpful (52%), and made it clear what SQA's role and responsibility was in the provision of assessment arrangements (45%). Only around 20% disagreed or strongly disagreed with those statements.

Figure 3: Centre and local authority staff perceptions of SQA guidance

Centre and local authority staff who agreed or strongly agreed in response to the question specifically commented that:

♦ SQA shares the guidance widely through effective communication channels.
♦ The guidance is referred to frequently and consistently.
♦ The language used within the guidance is clear and straightforward.

However, there were several issues commonly cited among staff members, regardless of their initial response:

♦ There is too much information.
♦ The language is unclear.
♦ The information is inconsistent.
♦ The guidance is hard to find.

As such, while centre and local authority staff find SQA's guidance to be helpful and understandable overall, there may be areas for improvement. Staff members offered a range of suggestions to improve the guidance:

♦ summaries of guidance documents or overviews of key points
♦ clear lists of all the guidance documents on the SQA website
♦ relevant hyperlinks in the table of contents
♦ indicators within documents where new information has been added or changed

4.3.2 SQA Co-ordinator Updates and Centre News

SQA issues a regular newsletter, SQA News, as well as an SQA Co-ordinator Updates which is sent specifically to all SQA co-ordinators. Centre and local

authority staff were asked if they subscribe to SQA Co-ordinator Updates and/or SQA Centre News. More staff in the survey reported being subscribed to the SQA Centre Newsletter:

♦ 58% subscribe to the SQA Co-ordinator Updates
♦ 83% subscribe to SQA Centre News

As the majority of centre and local authority staff in the survey were not SQA co-ordinators, these results were to be expected.

As shown in Figure 4, most centre and local authority staff (over 50%) who read either or both newsletters thought the information and updates on assessment arrangements were somewhat helpful. Around 20% found the updates very helpful or extremely helpful.

Figure 4: Centre and local authority staff views on whether SQA newsletters are helpful
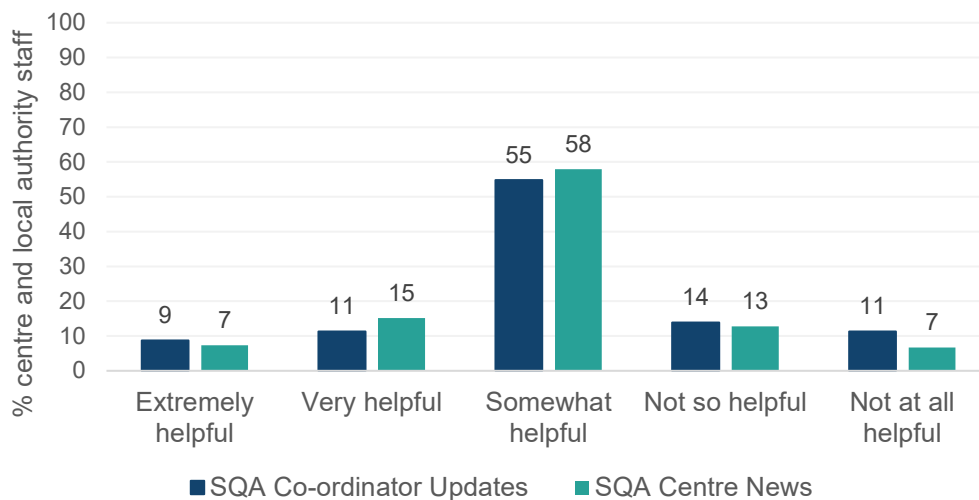
4.3.3 Assessment arrangements information for learners and parents/carers

SQA also publishes information about assessment arrangements for both learners and parents/carers. The majority of centre and local authority staff were aware that SQA produces such information:

♦ 63% were aware that SQA produced information for learners.
♦ 66% were aware that SQA produced information for parents and carers.

Of those who were aware, more than half considered the information for learners and parents/carers to be at least somewhat helpful (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Centre and local authority staff views on whether information produced by SQA for learners and parents/carers is helpful
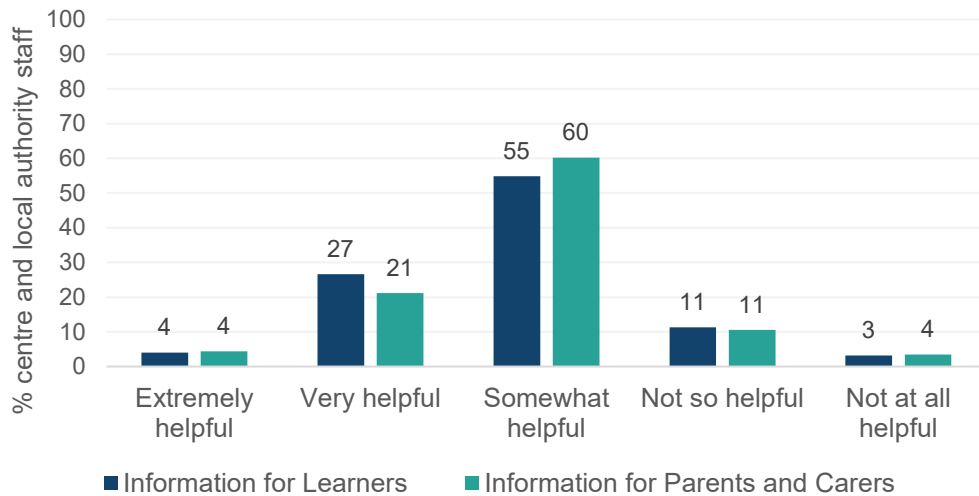
However, many centre and local authority staff, across the surveys and interviews, suggested that there are disparities between what centre staff, parents/carers and learners know and understand about assessment arrangements. Some staff members noted that these disparities can lead to situations where parents/carers believe that there is a need for assessment arrangements, but staff members were not able to identify this need. It was suggested this may be due to parents misinterpreting SQA guidance.

When asked about how guidance for learners and parent/carers could be improved, centre and local authority staff suggested making SQA resources more user-friendly, or easier for learners and parents/carers to navigate. Respondents also stated that parents/carers would benefit from clearer instructions and descriptors. Other suggestions included avoiding jargon; early communication with learners and parents/carers; providing various forms of resources, such as through SQA emails, videos, and leaflets; and setting clearer expectations, particularly in terms of timeframes. These sentiments are illustrated by the following comments from staff members:

Centre and local authority staff: 'SQA documentation is full of jargon. A simplified version that is accessible to learners and their families with summary checklists and bulleted points would suffice.'

Centre and local authority staff: 'More of an emphasis on the huge administration responsibilities which we undertake and how time consuming these are. Parents and carers think that they can just simply identify an issue the day before and have everything in place. More emphasis therefore on timescales – when we need to share information with SQA.'

Learners and parents/carers were also asked if they ever received information about how assessment arrangements work. More learners (56%) received the information than parents/carers (33%). Roughly half (56%) of parents/carers did

not receive information about assessment arrangements, compared to just 26% of learners.

The most common source of information about assessment arrangements for both parents/carers (33%) and learners (56%) was their centre or local authority. A few parent/carers reported receiving information from SQA, other online sources and personal friends. Learners also discussed receiving information from parents/carers, SQA and other online sources.

While parents/carers generally found SQA's information to be useful, some felt that their centres at times provided information that was incorrect or inconsistent with SQA's. For this reason, many parents/carers indicated that they would like to see the guidance from SQA more widely shared by centres and local authorities.

Figure 6 shows that a similar proportion of parents/carers (53%) and learners (54%) found it very easy or easy to understand how assessment arrangements work. Few found it difficult to understand the process, but none found it very difficult.

Figure 6: Ease of understanding how assessment arrangements work for learners and parents/carers
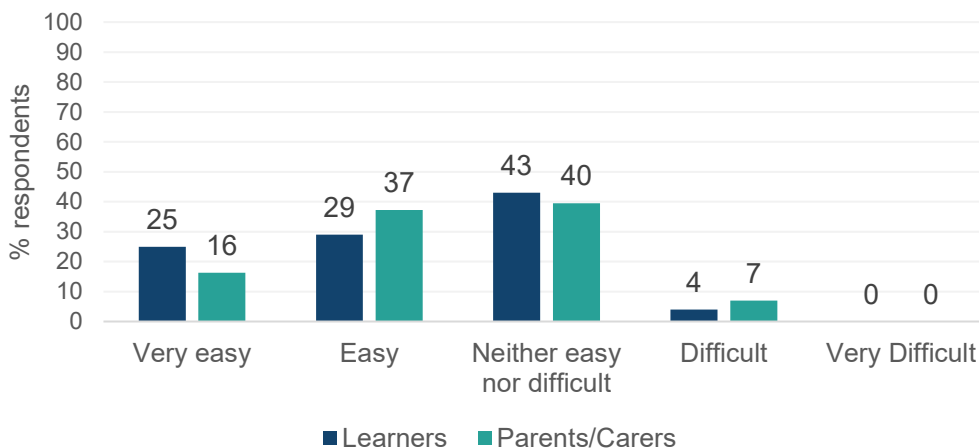
4.3.4 Communication about assessment arrangements (parents/carers and learners)

Parents/carers and learners were asked whether their centre or local authority had discussed the need for assessment arrangements with them. Most (83%) parents/carers had discussed their child's need for assessment arrangements with the centre, while 16% had not. Similarly, 76% of learners indicated that they, or their parent, carer, or guardian, had discussed their needs for assessment arrangements with their centre, while the remaining 24% had either not discussed this or were unsure if it had been discussed.

However, many learners and parents/carers, across the surveys and interviews, reported dissatisfaction with the communications from their centre/local authority, particularly in relation to a lack of update about the provision of assessment

arrangements. Some parents/carers also highlighted that they often relied on communication with one or two centre staff to ensure the assessment arrangements their child(ren) needs are consistently provided, and that they were concerned about what would happen if they left the school, were on leave or unwell.

We also asked learners and their parents/carers whether they had been asked to sign a consent form prior to sitting SQA assessments. Learners (and their parents/carers if the learner is under the age of 16) are required to sign a consent form to confirm their acceptance of the assessment arrangements provided, and to acknowledge they are aware that centres are required to submit this information for external assessments to SQA.

As shown in Figure 7, 54% of learners in the survey had been asked by their centre to sign a consent form; 34% were not asked to do so and 12% were not sure. Around half (52%) of parents/carers (whose child had sat an SQA exam in 2023) did not know if their child had been asked to sign a consent form, 37% confirmed that a consent form had been signed, while 11% were not asked at all.

Figure 7: Confirming acceptance of the assessment arrangements
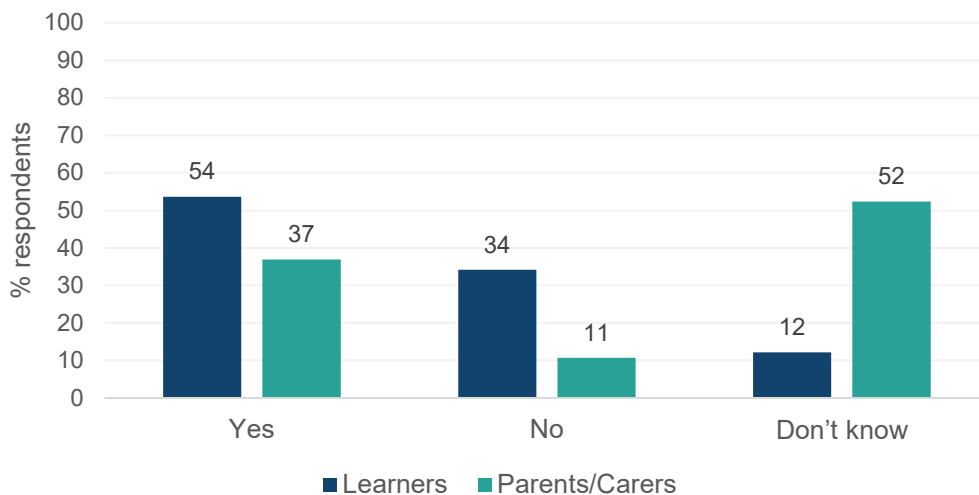
4.4   Provision of assessment arrangements

4.4.1   Accessing assessment arrangements

All three groups were asked about their experiences with the process of accessing of assessment arrangements. In the respective surveys, parents/carers and learners were asked to rate their satisfaction with the support the learner received from the centre with getting assessment arrangements put in place. A higher proportion of learners than parents/carers were satisfied with the support provided. Figure 8 shows that 63% of learners were satisfied or very satisfied, compared to just 46% of parents/carers. Likewise, only 19% of learners were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the support they received from their centre, compared to 35% of parents/carers.

Figure 8: Learner and parent/carer satisfaction with the support from their centre
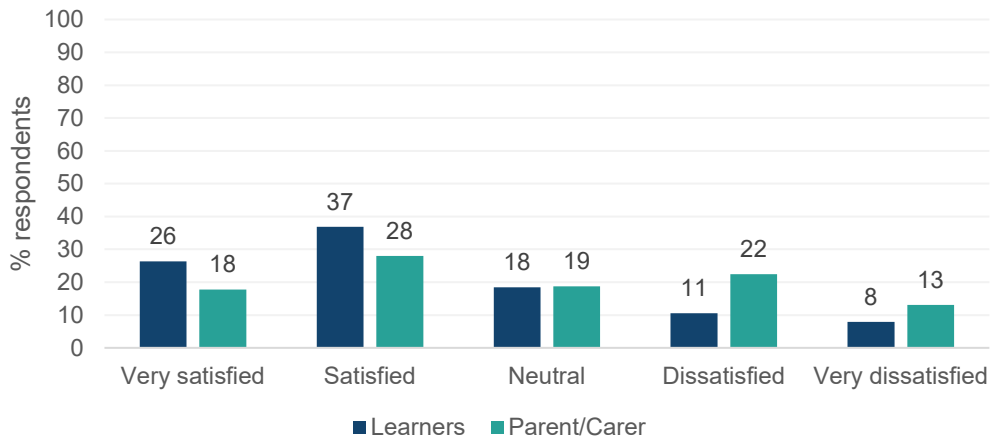
Many parents/carers explained that they felt they needed to be vocal about their children's needs for assessment arrangements and had to follow this up with centre staff to receive information or support. There was concern that learners were 'flying under the radar' if parents/carers did not advocate on their behalf, and that the learners needed to be capable of communicating with centre staff to get the support they need. Some parents/carers also reported that they were met with resistance from centre/local authority staff when requesting assessment arrangements, and that they were cautioned that it would take a long period of time to get supports in place. For example, according to one parent/carer:

> Parent/carer: 'I had to fight to get my child identified as Dyslexic it took a period of 18 months! By the time we had the identification it was too late to have support in place. He had things in place for some subjects and not others which really came down to the department having the time to establish if and what was needed.'

Learners expressed similar sentiments, with many describing the assessment arrangements process as a cause of stress. In particular, learners pointed to lengthy waiting periods following an initial request for assessment arrangements, delaying access to necessary support. Some learners reported having to make numerous requests to get assessment arrangements in place and having to follow up with their centre or local authority for updates or information. Others stressed the importance of having support in place on time for mock exams and prelims, so that there would be an opportunity to practice prior to SQA assessments.

However, some learners and parents/carers flagged instances where agreed arrangements were not actioned in an assessment or where there were issues with the support (such as in relation to assistive technologies). In these cases, learners reported that they had to speak up to have issues rectified as centre/local authority staff did not check in with them. Similarly, others stated that had to remind subject teachers/lecturers of the support in place in the teaching and learning environment.

Lastly, some parents/carers and learners across the surveys and interviews described what they felt was a process of 'luck' in the assessment arrangements process. They suggested that experiences can differ across centres/local authorities, and between specific practitioners within each centre/local authority:

> Parent/carer: 'Now, I think the school have been really good. I feel they've put a lot of effort in for our daughter and we're hugely grateful. My only observation would be that that's been quite reliant on one or two key individuals who probably have gone above and beyond. I have panicked moments at what would happen if those individuals weren't there. There's a key individual who, if she was to be sick over the period of the exams themselves, I dread to think what the experience will be, because it would be very different, I think.'

On the other hand, centre/local authority staff generally contended that the assessment arrangements system is flexible enough with a range of ways to meet the individual needs of each learner.

4.4.2 Effectiveness of assessment arrangements

Both learners and parents/carers were asked about the types of assessment arrangements that they or their child received. The most common arrangements reported by learners were extra time (60%), separate accommodation (60%) and use of a laptop or tablet with or without spellcheck (32%). Similarly, parents/carers noted that their children received extra time (75%), separate accommodation (57%) and a laptop or tablet with or without spellcheck (40%).

The majority of learners (68%) considered the assessment arrangements they were given to be very or extremely helpful, while 24% found them somewhat helpful and 7% felt the arrangements were not so helpful. None of the learners surveyed found the assessment arrangements to be not helpful at all. Similarly, many parents/carers also found the assessment arrangements given to their children extremely helpful or very helpful (46%) or somewhat helpful (25%). A smaller percentage were unsure (14%) or found the arrangements not so helpful or not at all helpful (14%).

With the appropriate assessment arrangements in place, learners reported that their experiences with learning and assessment have improved. Parents/carers made similar comments, noting improvements to their children's experiences, reinforcing the need for support to allow learners equitable access to assessment.

However, some learners and parents/carers flagged instances where agreed arrangements were not actioned in an assessment or where there were issues with the support (such as assistive technologies). In these cases, learners reported that they had to speak up to have issues rectified as centre/local authority staff did not check in with them. Similarly, others stated that had to remind subject teachers/lecturers of the support in place in the teaching and learning environment.

4.5   Resourcing in centres

Consistent with SQA data ([SQA, 2023b](#)), many centre and local authority staff reported increases in the number of learners with additional support needs and the volume of assessment arrangements requests. The majority of centre and local authority staff surveyed noted increases in requests for extra time (86%), separate accommodation (84%), use of ICT with and without spellcheck (70%), reader (64%) and scribe (61%). Staff members stressed that further insight as to the cause of these increases is essential.

However, centre and local authority staff were not confident in their ability to resource increased assessment arrangements requests. As shown in Figure 9, only 18% agreed or strongly agreed that their centre or local authority currently has sufficient resources to deliver assessment arrangements requests. Only 10% agreed or strongly agreed that their centre or local authority has sufficient resources going forward to the future. The majority of centre and local authority staff disagreed or strongly disagreed that their centre had enough resources currently (68%) or going forward (74%).

Figure 9: Centre and local authority staff agreement with whether their centre has sufficient resources to deliver assessment arrangements requests
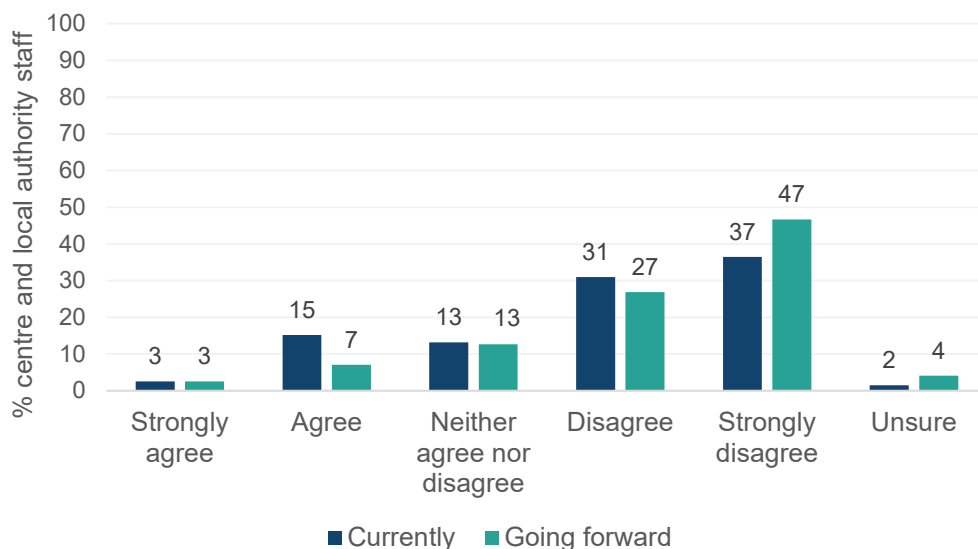
Staff members also highlighted resourcing as a key concern throughout the focus groups and survey responses. This may, in part, explain frustrations expressed by some centre and local authority staff about parents/carers and learners requesting assessment arrangements where practitioners have not or were not able to identify a need. Practitioners felt that dealing with these requests increased workloads and decreased resources.

Participants drew attention to a number of issues arising as a result of the increases, coupled with the lack of resources. Many remarked that their workload has increased, particularly as more staff members have been required to facilitate an increasing number of assessment arrangements. For example, additional staff members have been required to oversee the delivery of assessment

arrangements, such as supporting learners with additional time and addressing any technical issues associated with the use of ICT and/or digital question papers.

It was also suggested that centres/local authorities did not have the necessary infrastructure to accommodate assessment arrangements. Centre and local authority staff reported difficulties with meeting the support needs of all disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs in the classroom environment. Various reasons were cited for this, including insufficient separate or quiet rooms for individual accommodation, a lack of suitable technology, and an insufficient set up to support the increased use of ICT.

Centre and local authority staff also noted that they want to be helpful to their colleagues as well as learners, and to SQA Liaison Managers who carry out the quality assurance visits, but they also expressed feelings of being exhausted and isolated, and that no one cared.

Furthermore, several learners and parents/carers remarked during the interviews that they had experienced issues when it came to obtaining resources that they needed for their disability or additional support needs. Some parents/carers were understanding that centres and local authorities are facing resourcing issues, and that this has an impact on their child's experience with assessment arrangements:

> Parent/carer: 'But as soon as we went in and said no, this needs sorting, it was sorted and this Support for Learning Team at the school … I can't fault them. . .They're hard pushed. There's not enough of them. That's what the problem is. But the ones that are there. You've got a set on them, but they will go and get it sorted.'

Similarly, some parents/carers in their survey responses expressed some awareness of the lack of resources that centres and practitioners are facing, such as access to digital papers or assistive technology. However, in some cases, parents/carers attached blame to the centre or local authority attached blame for resourcing issues.

4.6   AAR system

Centres/local authorities submit and monitor assessment arrangement requests on behalf of learners using SQA's Assessment Arrangements Request (AAR) system. In total, 20% of centre and local authority staff surveyed had experience of submitting requests using the AAR system. Of those staff members, a similar proportion found the AAR system overall to be difficult or very difficult (40%) as found it easy or very easy to use (37%). The remaining 24% of centre and local authority staff felt the AAR system was neither easy nor difficult to use.

Figure 10 shows centre and local authority views on different processes of the AAR system. More staff found saving files of learners' assessment arrangement requests directly from the centre or local authority's chosen MIS system (such as

SEEMIS or Phoenix) before uploading this to the AAR system to be difficult compared to any of the other processes.

Figure 10: Centre and local authority views on the ease of using specific Assessment Arrangements Request (AAR) system processes
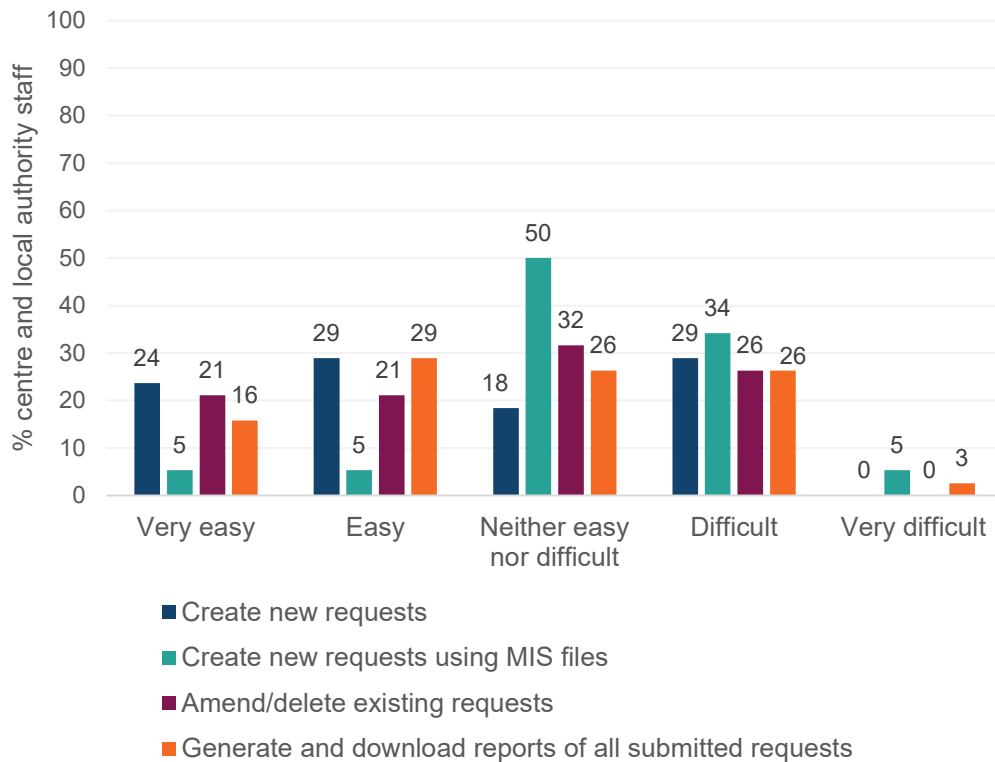
We also asked all three participant groups whether they would support a potential development to the AAR system to provide learners with access to their assessment arrangements requests to verify the accuracy of the data submitted. Of those who responded to this question in the survey, 74% of centre staff said that they would support this development, while 26% said they would not.

Those in support of the development cited three primary reasons:

♦ It would decrease the workload of practitioners.
♦ It would increase the autonomy and responsibility of learners and parents/carers.
♦ Or conversely, it would have no or little impact, as learners are already provided with this information.

However, some participants who agreed with the proposed development expressed some scepticism or reservations, particularly around whether it would:

♦ increase the demand on schools
♦ require learners to be proactive where they may not be, or have trouble being proactive because of assessment arrangements needs

♦ require the addition of more options around specific needs on the AAR so learners are not categorised as 'other'

For the respondents who did not support the proposed development to the AAR system, the following justifications were offered:

♦ It could cause privacy issues amongst learners, where they could share login details with each other or see other learners' assessment arrangements.
♦ It may increase practitioners' workloads by:

— allowing opportunities for the evidence to be questioned;
— increasing the numbers of assessment arrangements requests (including requests from learners who may not have assessment arrangements needs;
— creating misunderstandings or communication issues if learners are able to make edits on the AAR system, particularly if practitioners have to make corrections.

♦ It would not serve any real purpose because communication between LAs/centres, learners, and parents/carers is already clear.

Similarly, having access to SQA's system was welcomed by the majority of parents/carers (71%) and learners (68%). A smaller proportion of parents/carers (23%) and learners (26%) were not sure, while 5% of parents/carers and 6% of learners did not think this development would be helpful.

4.7   Quality assurance visits from SQA (centres)

The Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended 2009) sets out the duties of centres and local authorities to identify and address additional support needs for children and young people, including providing assessment arrangements. As Scotland's Awarding Body, SQA also has a duty to ensure that our centres have appropriate internal verification processes so that assessment arrangement requests are only provided to learners with an identified need. SQA's quality assurance visits allow dedicated SQA staff to carry out this function to ensure our evidence requirements are being followed, but also to provide support to centres when this is needed to clarify any misunderstandings, and to identify and promote best practice.

The majority of the centre and local authority staff who participated in the survey (56%) were not sure if their centre had recently been selected for a quality assurance visit in the past three years. 22% had not been selected while a similar proportion (22%) had been selected for a quality assurance visit by SQA.

Over half (59%) of centre and local authority staff who have been selected for a quality assurance visit found it to be somewhat helpful in supporting the centre to meet SQA's assessment arrangements quality assurance requirements. Figure 11 shows that twice as many centre and local authority staff (28%) found the visit very or extremely helpful than not so helpful or not helpful at all (14%).

Figure 11: Centre and local authority staff views on whether their quality assurance visit from SQA was helpful
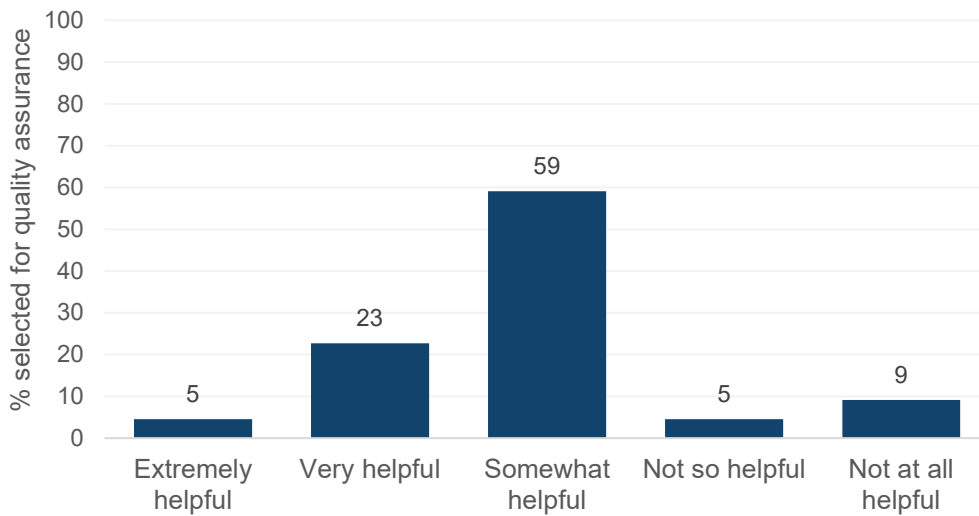
Many members of centre staff offered positive feedback on the quality assurance visits, commenting particularly on:

♦ opportunities to clarify evidence requirements and how to ensure forms are completed correctly
♦ useful interactions and discussions
♦ SQA staff taking a rigorous but supportive approach
♦ highlighting good practice
♦ helping centre and local authority staff to understand their responsibilities in the process and the importance of gathering evidence

However, there were also comments that quality assurance visits could be a difficult experience for centre and local authority staff members. It was suggested that:

♦ Staff members involved in collating the evidence feel stressed and under pressure during visits.
♦ The process is overly bureaucratic or intense, particularly given the huge amount of paperwork involved.
♦ Centre and local authority staff believe that there are many hoops to jump through given that evidence requirements change every year.
♦ Not all feedback arising from the visit is cascaded to staff members.
♦ Departments are not given specific feedback, which many staff feel would have been useful.
♦ No suggestions were given on how to reduce or streamline the process.
♦ Staff members feel that their judgement is being questioned or that they are not trusted to have the appropriate evidence in place.
♦ Evidence requirements from the Liaison Manager during the visit were perceived to contradict information given by SQA representatives at Quality and College Development Network meetings.

Lastly, some centre and local authority staff members suggested that quality assurance visits would be more valuable if they included more supportive process for centres in identifying improvements rather than having their access to SQA's AAR system put on hold for not meeting requirements, which was not found to be helpful.

5   Limitations

Several limitations to this research must be noted. Firstly, there are some limitations in the data collection method. We only studied learners who already had assessment arrangements in place or who were going through the process of getting them in place. For this reason, we were not able to capture the views of learners who have never had assessment arrangements in place, who been denied assessment arrangements, nor those who have not yet begun the process of getting assessment arrangements in place.

Secondly, participants were also self-selected. Those who participated in this research may have been motivated by particularly strong feelings that they wished to share with us. Moreover, while we used several communication channels to recruit a diverse range of participants, we recognise that there are certain groups that we were unable to reach. In particular, we recruited learners and parents/carers through direct SQA communication and supportive organisations. As such, we may not have been able to engage with learners and their parents/carers who do not follow SQA on social media, are not subscribed to SQA communications and/or who are not receiving support from external organisations.

In addition, the sample sizes of the surveys and focus groups/interviews were small considering the number of eligible participants. For example, the Scottish Government's pupil census estimates there were 259,036 pupils with additional support needs in Scotland in 2023 (Scottish Government, 2023a), while we surveyed only 50 learners and interviewed four. As such, this research is an exploratory project generating indicative data. Findings therefore do not fully represent the range of views in the wider centre, local authority, learner, and parent/carer population who have been part of the assessment arrangements process, and therefore cannot be generalised.

Furthermore, we note that some of the interview participants did not complete the initial survey as they were recruited in a second round. Whilst the same robust methods were used to recruit and screen individuals who registered their interest in participating in interviews, we acknowledge that the qualitative data generated through the interviews may not directly correlate with the survey data. However, there were common themes that emerged between responses to the open-ended questions in the survey and the rich data gathered from interviews, allowing patterns to be identified.

It is also important to acknowledge the power dynamics involved in this research. All interviews and focus groups were facilitated by SQA staff who have a direct role in the consideration of reasonable adjustments and/or the design of the assessment arrangements process. We took this approach so that facilitators were able to respond to any questions from participants about the assessment arrangements process, and to provide them with relevant information that may be requested in the focus groups and interviews.

However, it is possible that participants, particularly learners, regarded the facilitators as authority figures or may have felt that SQA staff were not impartial. There is already a power imbalance inherent to the facilitator-participant relationship which may be exacerbated in this context, and consequently had an impact on the responses given. Participants may have felt nervous or uncomfortable with providing feedback to an individual that they considered to be an authority figure, especially more constructive comments. To mitigate this concern, facilitators took care to establish from the outset that the interview or focus group was a safe space for open and honest communication. We actively encouraged participants to give a full and honest account of their experiences and opinions, all while reinforcing that their comments would be kept completely anonymous.

We also recognise that there may have been some accessibility issues in the research by way of the terminology used in the assessment arrangements process. While some terms such as 'support for learning', 'learning support' and 'additional support needs' may be widely used in centres, other terms may be less familiar to learners and their parents/carers. Learners, and their parents/carers, may not have come across the term 'assessment arrangements', and may not be aware that the support they receive, or are seeking, is in fact an assessment arrangement. As such, we acknowledge that this may have created barriers to participation, and that any potential areas of misunderstanding could have impacted the responses given, particularly in the case of learners and parents/carers.

With that in mind, a number of steps were taken to make participation as accessible as possible. All stages of the research process were also rigorously evaluated from an accessibility standpoint, including communications and recruitment; the survey, interview and focus group questions sets; supporting information provided to participants; and the approach used to facilitate interviews/focus groups.

Any communications issued in relation to this research, including recruitment materials, were written in plain English, using inclusive and accessible language. Prior to being issued, these materials were reviewed by SQA's Equalities and Marketing and Communications Teams for compliance with accessibility guidelines and principles.

The survey, interview and focus group questions sets were subjected to a thorough, objective evaluation by SQA's Research and Evaluation Team to ensure that the questions were not leading participants to answer in a specific way, were age appropriate and written in plain English. Moreover, SQA's Research and Evaluation Team provided standardised consent forms and Participant Information Forms, including plain language versions for all learners and parent/carers, as well as centre and local authority staff upon request.

The question sets, consent forms and Participant Information Forms were also assessed by SQA's Equalities Team to ensure that the language used was inclusive and accessible, and that any equalities considerations were taken into account. In addition, the Equalities Team provided definitions of key terms for

learners and parents/carers, such as 'assessment arrangements' and specific 'protected characteristics', including the definition of 'disability' under the Equality Act 2010. These were written in appropriate, accessible language.

6 Concluding remarks

In this research, we were able to generate rich indicative data, with findings consistent with both internal anecdotal information we received through customer enquiries, and with other studies. For example, our findings relating to confidence levels of centre staff identifying learners' needs for assessment arrangements, professional development opportunities to support their practice, and consistency in the delivery of support mirrors findings from Alharbi and Iqtadar (2024).

Moreover, the continued increase in the number of requests for assessment arrangements annually (SQA, 2023b) raised concerns about the capacity of centres to sufficiently resource and adequately support learners, consistent with the rest of the UK (McGhee and Masterson, 2022). The Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) also flagged this as a concern for teachers and noted the impact it has on the learning experience of disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs (McFarlane, 2024).

Many centre and local authority staff raised concerns about the resource-intensive process of gathering evidence to support an identification of need for assessment arrangements, particularly in the context of the increasing number of assessment arrangement requests. Some practitioners reported generating evidence by asking disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs to complete additional internal assessments to evidence a need for assessment arrangements that their peers are not required to sit. Centre staff also commented that they are required to gather large volumes of evidence for each learner's assessment arrangements. Some staff members appeared to be under the impression that assessment arrangements must show a difference to the learner's mark or grade before assessment arrangements can be provided, for example, demonstrated by the number of marks the learner achieves with the provision of extra time. We are concerned that these misconceptions do not align with SQA quality assurance requirements and want to use the evidence from this research to inform our continuous improvement activities.

The experiences of centre staff who provided information on their experience of SQA's quality assurance visit varied. Some centres found the interaction with SQA staff useful and that it helped to clarify evidence requirements, while others found the process to be stressful, overly bureaucratic, or intense. Some centres also felt that their professional judgement was not trusted, and that information shared by SQA staff during the visit contradicted advice given by SQA representatives at external events.

In terms of accessing assessment arrangements, learners were more likely to be satisfied or very satisfied with the support they received from their centre/local authority (63%) compared to parents/carers (46%). However, both learners and parents/carers expressed frustrations with the lengthy waiting times for supports to be put in place and felt they needed to be persistent and continue to follow up about the assessment arrangements needed. This mirrors Starkie's (2023) findings that highlighted the experiences of parents who needed to advocate their child's need for access arrangements in the rest of the UK. However, where

assessment arrangements have been provided, the majority of learners and many parents/carers found the assessment arrangements given to be very or extremely helpful (see also Hipkiss, Woods and McCaldin (2020) who made similar findings in the GCSE context). Parents/carers also highlighted that they often rely on communication with one or two centre staff to ensure the assessment arrangements their child(ren) needs are consistently provided, and that they were concerned about what would happen if they left the school, were on leave or unwell.

6.1 Further research

There were other areas that have been highlighted by participants that present opportunities for further research and consultation to ensure that the process is suitable for all stakeholders, with the needs of the learners at the centre of this approach. Due to the small sample size, we were not able to carry out meaningful intersectional analysis to explore the distinct experiences of learners with more than one protected characteristic or equality group in the assessment arrangements process. Further research will take an intersectional approach to understanding how participants' protected characteristics or equality groups impact their experience of the assessment arrangements process.

There are also opportunities for further research to understand the distinct experiences of learner groups across different disability categories. For example, some participants in this research drew attention to the distinct challenges faced by neurodivergent learners. Neurodivergent learners may experience additional sensory sensitivities that impact their experiences of the assessment process, which we were not able to fully explore in this research (such as the impact of loud noises, bright lights or particular aromas in assessment settings). Changes to the physical school environment may be required to create an inclusive and safe learning space for neurodivergent learners and listening to their lived experience is important in achieving this (National Autistic Society and Scottish Autism, 2020; Neilson and Bond, 2023; Alharbi and Iqtadar, 2024). It is also important to note that the experiences of neurodivergent individuals are often not fully captured in disability research. Research carried out by the GSS (2023b) found that the current harmonised standard for gathering disability data in the public sector may not be effective for gathering data on neurodivergence. As such, further research focused on the experiences of neurodivergent learners using appropriate methodologies may be warranted and we hope to explore this in the future.

6.2 Next steps

Based on the information we received from centres, parents/carers, and learners, we have identified the following actions that SQA will be taking forward:

1 **Share the research findings with key external stakeholders** (short to medium term)

SQA's remit in the context of providing assessment arrangements and considering requests for reasonable adjustments is limited to ensuring our qualifications and assessments are as equitable and fair as possible for disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs. It is important that we work collaboratively with other key partners in Scotland's education system, such as Scottish Government, Education Scotland, EIS and local authorities, to address the concerns raised regarding resourcing for assessment arrangements (McFarlane, 2024), and support for teaching practitioners. A collaborative approach is needed to ensure that each and every learner is provided with an inclusive learning environment to access high quality learning experience (Scottish Government, 2023b).

2 **Review of SQA guidance to reduce potential misinterpretation of guidance** (short term)

The varied practice in centres of gathering evidence to support a learner's need for assessment arrangements has been cited as a process that staff find resource intensive. Colleagues across SQA will work together to identify areas of improvement in the resources we publish to ensure the information is streamlined and consistent. This may also include investigating additional opportunities to engage with centre staff, including teaching practitioners, to clarify SQA's quality assurance requirements when gathering evidence to support assessment arrangement requests. We hope that in doing so, this will help reduce over-assessment of learners in order to generate evidence of a learner's need for assessment arrangements.

3 **Identify opportunities to improve how SQA communicates with centres, parents/carers and learners** (short to medium term)

Parents/carers who participated in this research highlighted that the information for learners and parents/carers were helpful, but they were not aware this information was available until they needed guidance to support their discussions with their child's school or college. Some also explained that the centre provided different advice to SQA guidance and said that it would be helpful for there to be a consistent message shared by centres, local authorities and SQA, such as a collaborative event, to reduce any misunderstanding.

We will work with key external partners to determine the best way to improve how we communicate with our learners and parents/carers about assessment arrangements. This may include wider engagement with external partners in joint public informational events.

4 **Review and make improvements to the current quality assurance process** (short to medium term)

The purpose of the quality assurance visits is to support centres, ensuring their internal quality assurance process for assessment arrangements complies with SQA requirements and their legislative duties under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004 (as amended

2009). Some centre staff indicated the support provided by SQA staff during the quality assurance visit was helpful, whereas others have found it to be a stressful, bureaucratic, and intensive experience. We will engage further with our centres and other key stakeholders to ensure the process is supportive and does not introduce undue burden on centres, and that it meets the needs of different centre types (for example, schools and colleges). It is important that any changes to SQA processes considers the needs of disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs. Research shows that opportunity for learners to participate in discussions around their needs for assessment arrangements improves their self-esteem and ensured the arrangements are meeting their individual needs (Tyrrell and Woods, 2019). The learner voice is also important to ensure that their needs and lived experiences are considered (Neilson and Bond, 2023; Alharbi and Iqtadar, 2024).

5   **Review of the suitability of the current suite of assessment arrangements, and the terminology used** (long term)

Assessment arrangements are designed to provide disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their attainment in an assessment. The future of National Course assessments under the current round of education reform has not yet been established. It may require a review of the types of assessment arrangements permitted in assessments by Qualifications Scotland.

The type of assessment arrangements learners are allowed in an assessment depends on the assessment conditions for the qualification, to ensure the integrity of the assessment is not compromised. A full review by Qualifications Scotland will ensure accessibility of the assessment not only for learners, but also for centres and parents/carers, and ensure the range of assessment arrangements are fit for purpose.

6   **Suggestions for improvement to the current AAR system** (long term)

We are currently only able to make minor changes to SQA's AAR system's functionality because of the way it was built and is linked to other SQA systems (such as those for centre and learner entry data). However, we are aware of the issues centre staff experience with it. SQA will continue to document known issues and any suggestions for improvement made by centres. SQA staff will continue to monitor the difficulties centre staff experience and update relevant documentation to support centres in the meantime.

Using SQA staff's existing knowledge and experience of the AAR system, suggested features and recommendations can be identified for Qualifications Scotland to investigate, with the potential to develop a new system that is suitable for the needs of centre staff, parents/carers, and learners. This may include, for example, a feature that allows disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs to access and consent to their assessment arrangements. This suggested feature was welcomed by all participant groups.

We are committed to ensuring the services and support we provide meets the complex and varied needs of our centres, learners and parents/carers and the recommendations above reflect this. We intend to provide regular updates in the future to provide accountability of the progress we have made with the above recommendations and, where possible, demonstrate where we have been able to collaborate with key partners in Scotland's education system to achieve positive change.

6.3　Acknowledgements

We want to take this opportunity to thank centres, local authorities, and our external key partners for sharing our research in their newsletters and social media. We want to also thank learners, parents/carers, centres and local authorities for taking the time to complete our surveys and to participate in our interviews and focus groups.

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Appendix A: Equalities questions for learner survey

1.

(A) Do you consider yourself to have a disability based on the definition below?

Disability is defined under the Equality Act 2010 as a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities (typically lasting or expected to last 12 months or more).

Yes
No
Prefer not to say

(B) How would you describe your disability? You can either choose from the options below (please select all that apply), type your own answer or select 'prefer not to say'.

♦ Hearing
    o Deafness
    o Partial hearing
    o Other hearing impairment
♦ Mental health and wellbeing
    o Anxiety Disorder, including Generalised Anxiety Disorder, Social Anxiety Disorder, Panic Disorder, Phobias, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
    o Depression
    o Bipolar Disorder
    o Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
    o Schizophrenia
    o Personality Disorder, including Borderline Personality Disorder and Anti-Social Personality Disorder
♦ Neurodivergent
    o Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
    o Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
    o Dyslexia
    o Dyspraxia
    o Dysgraphia
    o Dyscalculia
♦ Physical/Biological impairment
    o Mobility
    o Motor impairment
    o Physical injury
♦ Progressive Conditions

- o   Muscular dystrophy
- o   Multiple Sclerosis
- ♦ Speech impairment
  - o   Elective or selective mute
  - o   Stammering
  - o   Tourette's Syndrome
  - o   Other speech impairment
- ♦ Visual impairment
  - o   Blindness
  - o   Partially sight
  - o   Other visual impairment not corrected by glasses

2. How would you describe your gender? You can either choose one of the options below, type in your own answer or select 'prefer not to say'.

- ♦ Man/Boy
- ♦ Woman/Girl
- ♦ Non-Binary
- ♦ Enter your own response
- ♦ Prefer not to say

3. Do you identify as transgender and/or non-binary?

- ♦ Yes
- ♦ No
- ♦ Prefer not to say

4. How would you describe your sexual orientation? You can either choose one of the options below, type in your own answer or select 'prefer not to say'.

- ♦ Ace/Asexual
- ♦ Bisexual or Pansexual
- ♦ Gay or Lesbian
- ♦ Queer
- ♦ Straight/heterosexual

5. Do you consider yourself to be Care Experienced based on the definition below?

The term 'Care Experienced' refers to any person who is or has ever been in care or looked after for any length of time. This includes anyone who has ever been provided with care in a range of settings, such as foster care, residential care, kinship care (with relatives or friends) or through being looked after at home with supervision requirements.

- ♦ Yes
- ♦ No
- ♦ I'm not sure
- ♦ Prefer not to say

6. How would you describe your ethnicity? You can either choose one of the options below, type in your own answer or select 'prefer not to say'.

♦ African
- o African, African Scottish or African British
- o Any other African ethnic group (please specify)

♦ Arab
- o Arab, Arab Scottish or Arab British
- o Any other Arab ethnic group (please specify)

♦ Asian, Asian Scottish or Asian British
- o Bangladeshi, Bangladeshi Scottish or Bangladeshi British
- o Chinese, Chinese Scottish or Chinese British
- o Indian, Indian Scottish or Indian British
- o Pakistani, Pakistani Scottish, Pakistani British
- o Any other Asian ethnic group (please specify)

♦ Caribbean or Black
- o Caribbean, Caribbean Scottish or Caribbean British
- o Black, Black Scottish or Black British
- o Any other Caribbean or Black ethnic group (please specify)

♦ Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups
- o Any Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups (please specify)

♦ White
- o Scottish
- o Other British
- o Irish
- o Gypsy/Traveller/Roma
- o Any other White ethnic group (please specify)

Appendix B: Equalities Harmonised Standards

1. Ethnicity Recommended Question ([Scottish Government, 2022d](#); [GSS, 2011](#))

Question: What is your ethnic group?

Answer: Choose one section from A to F, then tick one box which best describes your ethnic group or background

- A. White
  1. Scottish
  2. Other British
  3. Irish
  4. Polish
  5. Gypsy / Traveller
  6. Roma
  7. Showman / Showwoman
  8. Other white ethnic group, please write in

- B. Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
  9. Any mixed or multiple ethnic groups, please write in

- C. Asian, Scottish Asian or British Asian
  10. Pakistani, Scottish Pakistani or British Pakistani
  11. Indian, Scottish Indian or British Indian
  12. Bangladeshi, Scottish Bangladeshi or British Bangladeshi
  13. Chinese, Scottish Chinese or British Chinese
  14. Other, please write in

- D. African, Scottish African or British African
  15. Please write in (for example, Nigerian, Somali)

- E. Caribbean or Black
  16. Please write in (for example, Scottish Caribbean, Black Scottish)

- F. Other ethnic group
  17. Arab, Scottish Arab or British Arab
  18. Other, please write in (for example, Sikh, Jewish)
- G.
  19. Refusal (spontaneous only)
  20. Prefer not to say (non-interviewer led questionnaires only)

2. Disability Recommended Questions ([Scottish Government, 2022e](#); [GSS, 2019](#)).

(A) The long-lasting health conditions and illness harmonised standard (GSS, 2020a)

Question: Do you have any physical or mental health conditions or illnesses lasting or expected to last 12 months or more?
Answer:

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know (Spontaneous only)
4. Refusal (Spontaneous only)
5. Prefer not to say (non-interviewer led questionnaires only)

(B) The impairment harmonised standard (an optional complementary question) (GSS, 2020b)

Question: Do any of these conditions or illnesses affect you in any of the following areas?
Answer:

1. Vision (for example blindness or partial sight)
2. Hearing (for example deafness or partial hearing)
3. Mobility (for example walking short distances or climbing stairs)
4. Dexterity (for example lifting or carrying objects, using a keyboard)
5. Learning or understanding or concentrating
6. Memory
7. Mental health
8. Stamina or breathing or fatigue
9. Socially or behaviourally (for example associated with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) which includes Asperger's, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD))
10. Other (please specify)
11. None of the above (spontaneous only)
12. Refusal (spontaneous only)
13. Prefer not to say (non-interviewer led questionnaires only)

(C) The activity restriction harmonised standard (GSS, 2020c)

Question: Does your condition or illness/do any of your conditions or illnesses reduce your ability to carry-out day-to-day activities?
Answer:

1. Yes, a lot
2. Yes, a little
3. Not at all
4. Refusal (spontaneous only)
5. Prefer not to say (non-interviewer led questionnaires only)

3. Sexual Orientation Recommended Question ([Scottish Government 2022f](#))

Question: Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation? Tick one box only

1. Answer:
2. Straight / Heterosexual
3. Gay or Lesbian
4. Bisexual
5. Other sexual orientation, please write in
6. Refusal (spontaneous only)
7. Prefer not to say (non-interviewer led questionnaires only)

4. Sex, Gender Identity and Trans Status Recommended Questions ([Scottish Government, 2024b](#))

Question: What is your sex?
Answer:

1. Female
2. Male
3. Prefer not to say

Question: Do you consider yourself to be trans, or have a trans history?

Answer:

1. Yes
2. No
3. Prefer not to say

Appendix C: Methodology in more detail

Surveys and interviews

Stage 1: Surveys

Online surveys were administered for each of the three groups using SmartSurvey from 31 August to 2 October 2023. All participant groups were presented with a screening question at the beginning of the survey to ensure that only those who met the sampling criteria were able to proceed with the research. The surveys each contained a set of optional open and closed questions generating quantitative data and rich qualitative data.

Centres and local authorities were asked to respond to questions, and where relevant to provide further information or comments, on the following aspects of the assessment arrangements process:

- identifying a learner's need for assessment arrangements
- gathering evidence to support the provision of a learner's assessment arrangements
- guidance, policies and procedures, including SQA's information for learners and parents/carers
- provision of assessment arrangements and resourcing
- SQA's quality assurance visits

Learners and parents/carers were asked about:

- information available to them about assessment arrangements
- communications with the centre about the learner's need for assessment arrangements
- the process of receiving assessment arrangements; and
- suggested developments to SQA's current system that schools, colleges and training providers use to submit learners' assessment arrangement requests to SQA

Equalities questions

We have set out our approach to gathering equalities data below. A full account of the equalities questions can be found in Appendix A.

Ethnicity

The ethnicity question used in the survey was adapted from the harmonised standards for gathering ethnicity data for use in surveys in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2022d; GSS, 2011). The harmonised question recommended for use in Scotland can be found in Appendix B, paragraph 1.

However, we recognise that this is currently being revised, as recommended by the Inclusive Data Taskforce (2021), who found that ethnicity categories were not seen as representative. The GSS recently carried out a review of the current harmonised standard following research with multiple stakeholders, which identified a number of issues (GSS, 2023a). Taking these findings into account, we made some adjustments to the framing of the question and the category breakdowns for the purposes of this research (see Appendix A).

For example, we asked learners how they described their ethnicity and encouraged them to either choose from the categories provided or to input their own answer. The purpose of doing so was to provide learners with the opportunity to define their ethnicity in their own words if none if the response options reflected their identity. However, we acknowledge that the response categories may not be fully representative, and we aim to continually reassess our approach in future research to ensure inclusivity.

Disability

We took a multifaceted approach to developing survey questions relating to disability. The Scottish Government guidance for collecting data on disability in surveys (Scottish Government, 2022e) reflects the relevant GSS harmonised standards (GSS, 2019). The guidance sets out three recommended questions (one of which is optional) based on three harmonised standards, which together measure disability according to the Equality Act 2010 (see Appendix B, paragraph 2):

♦ The long-lasting health conditions and illness harmonised standard question asks whether the respondent has any health conditions or illnesses lasting 12 months or more (GSS, 2020a).
♦ The impairment harmonised standard is an optional complementary question which lists a number of 'impairments', and asks respondents to indicate any that apply to them (GSS, 2020b).
♦ The activity restriction harmonised standard question asks respondents whether, and the extent to which, their condition or illness affects their daily activities (GSS, 2020c).

However, the GSS is currently in the process of updating these harmonised standards, following the Inclusive Data Taskforce recommendations report (UK Statistics Authority, 2021). The report suggested that current questions on disability are often considered to be based on 'outdated, deficit concepts that do not sufficiently capture the experiences of individuals' (p14). It recommended that standards for gathering disability data should be revised to be more in line with the International Classification of Functioning Disability and Health (ICF) (2001) biopsychosocial model of disability, and that they should be reviewed and updated every five years. The GSS has subsequently published a review, which sets out the strengths and weaknesses of the current harmonised standards based on research with multiple stakeholders (GSS, 2023b).

For the purposes of our research, we developed a two-part question for gathering disability data from learners. Our approach was based around the current

harmonised standards but adjusted in consideration of the GSS report findings. The first part of the question was, in effect, an amalgamation of the long-lasting health conditions and illness, and activity restriction standards. It asked learners if they considered themselves to have a disability based on the definition set out in section 6 of the Equality Act 2010:

> a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities (typically lasting or expected to last 12 months or more)

We structured the question in this way for two primary reasons. Firstly, we choose to refer to the legislative definition of 'disability' in recognition of SQA's Public Sector Equality Duty under the Equality Act 2010. Secondly, we believed this approach would be more straightforward for learners to interpret. Indeed, the GSS (2023) review found that, in relation to the activity restriction standard, respondents do not consistently interpret the distinction between 'a little' and 'a lot'. Some struggled to understand the difference between the two response options and considered it to be too subjective. However, we acknowledge that this approach does not necessarily align with a social model of disability, and so we will continue to review our approach if or when gathering such data in future research projects.

The second part of the question was an adaption of the impairment harmonised standard, which sets out categories of impairment types and asks respondents to select any that apply to them. It focuses on impairment (functions that a person cannot perform or has difficulty performing due to their health condition) rather than medical condition. However, the GSS (2023) review found that respondents did not fully understand the impairment approach and the fact that it does not capture medical conditions. Each impairment could be attributed to a number of medical conditions, and a respondent's primary impairment could lead to impairments in other areas, which often results in confusion among respondents. The lack of examples of medical conditions that may relate to each impairment was particularly noted.

Moreover, there were concerns that the categories were not inclusive of the wide spectrum of neurodivergence. Response guidance for the social/behavioural category listed autism and ADHD as examples, which could imply that these conditions are linked to social/behavioural issues rather than neurodivergence. Respondents also found the response guidance across the various categories to be confusing and noted the lack of examples. Notably, there is no guidance on the 'mental health' option and very little detail in comparison to physical impairments. Respondents suggested that 'mental health' category is broad, and further guidance is needed.

With that in mind, we asked learners in the second part of the question how they described their disability and gave them the freedom to select from one of the categories or to enter their own response. The response categories were intended to be inclusive and representative of learners' experiences. Taking the GSS findings into account, for each category we listed examples of medical conditions that may relate to each category. We also included a specific

'neurodivergent' category rather than 'social/behavioural'. In future research, we will continue to reassess our approach to gathering disability data, as we recognise that the current approach may not be fully representative.

Gender, gender identity and sexual orientation

We sought to develop an inclusive approach to gathering data on gender, gender identity and sexual orientation, that were representative of the distinct identities of our learners. The recommended questions for gathering such data (Scottish Government 2022f; 2024c) are based on the protected characteristics of 'sex', 'gender reassignment' and 'sexual orientation' under the Equality Act 2010, as set out in Appendix B paragraphs 3 and 4.

Question: What is your sex?

Answer:

1. Female

2. Male

3. Prefer not to say

Question: Do you consider yourself to be trans, or have a trans history?

Answer:

1. Yes

2. No

3. Prefer not to say

Question: Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation? Tick one box only

Answer:

1. Straight / Heterosexual

2. Gay or Lesbian

3. Bisexual

4. Other sexual orientation, please write in

5. Refusal (spontaneous only)

6. Prefer not to say (non-interviewer led questionnaires only)

However, we were mindful that the way these categories are constructed, and the terminology used, does not necessary align with contemporary language that is generally considered to be most appropriate within LGBTQIA+ communities, and that they may not reflect the language adopted by learners. In addition, we wanted to ensure that the categories selected were reflective and inclusive of our learners' identities.

With that in mind, we included three separate questions in the survey that asked learners about their gender, sexual orientation, and transgender status. In designing these questions, we sought advice from Stonewall Scotland and incorporated this feedback into our final question set. When asking about gender and sexual orientation, we followed the same approach as set out above in relation to ethnicity in that learners were encouraged to select from one of the response categories or to input their own response.

For the question around gender, we used the language man/boy and woman/girl instead of male or female, and we added an additional non-binary option. For the question around sexual orientation, we also included additional response options, including bisexual or pansexual, ace/asexual, and queer. Lastly, broadly following the approach of the harmonised standard, we asked learners if they identify as transgender and/or non-binary. We also considered including a question that allowed learners who answered 'yes' to this question to provide further details about their transgender and/or non-binary identity in recognition of the fact that there are a wide range of gender identities that are not captured by these umbrella terms. Unfortunately, the size and scope of the research meant that this was not possible, but we will continue to explore this in future research.

Care experience status

Lastly, we asked learners whether they considered themselves to be care experienced based on the definition provided, which was written in plain, accessible language.