

## **Supplementary guidance for SVQ assessment centres to support candidates impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic**

(updated November 2020)

As the Sector Skills Council and regulator for social services in Scotland we recognise the challenges the COVID-19 pandemic presents to services and the impact on workers gaining benchmark qualifications. Developing the workforce and supporting them to maintain the quality of service delivery is key in meeting the current challenges and needs of people who use services.

Due to restrictions on workplaces and movement of people, there is a need for flexible approaches to observation and assessment, to ease some of the anxiety around completion of qualifications.

We've developed this guidance in partnership with national partners. The SVQ assessment methodology or the assessment strategy has not changed. This guidance focuses on achievement of SVQs used by the social service sector wherever possible and practicable, while maintaining the quality and integrity of the qualifications. It is in response to COVID-19 and government restrictions and is not intended to replace assessor and internal verifier (IV) judgement and employer contributions.

This updated guidance has been reviewed in partnership with members of the SSSC Awarding Body Forum, Scottish Network Internal Verifiers, external verifiers and some stakeholders. It also applies to other qualifications where SVQs feature, including HNC and foundation apprenticeships.

SQA has developed separate guidance on completion of the HNC in Social Services and HNC Childhood Practice in partnership with the SSSC. [Read the HNC Social Services and HNC Childhood Practice – COVID-19 guidance on the SQA website here.](#)

### **SVQ qualifications**

SVQs are work-based awards, which rely on a holistic approach to the assessment of the knowledge, skills and values required to work safely and effectively with people who use services. Candidates should, wherever possible, continue to engage in learning, teaching, and gathering evidence to enable completion of the qualification. We have developed a wide range of free and accessible online resources to support this on our [Learning Zone](#). In most circumstances, candidates will continue to practice within work settings and have opportunities to gather evidence which can be used in reflective accounts and/or

professional discussion. If this is not possible, for example due to furlough, discussions should take place between assessor, employer and candidate to consider how they can best continue their studies and plan for when they can resume the SVQ.

## **Planning**

Assessment planning between the assessor and candidate is continuous throughout the qualification. You should use the plan to identify and record the most practicable assessment methods for the current COVID-19 restrictions and available resources. The rationale for using any alternative sources of evidence due to COVID-19 restrictions, should be clearly explained in the plan.

Effective and holistic planning will ensure the assessment of evidence remains valid, authentic, reliable, current and sufficient, in line with [Assessment Strategy](#) guidance.

## **Observed practice**

The assessor's observation of candidate practice is a fundamental principle of SVQ qualifications and is reflected in the principles and criteria used by the SSSC for qualifications we accept for registration.

It is considered to be a primary source of evidence because it is the most valid and reliable assessment method. In some settings where the assessor is on-site with their candidate, or outdoor activity can be observed safely, the observation should, and is expected to, take place. Where observation by the designated assessor is difficult due to COVID-19 restrictions, video/online evidence and/or expert witness may be used.

If using video/online methods, assessors and candidates must obtain permission from individuals involved and comply with legislation and policies relating to data protection and the SSSC Codes of Practice. Any materials gathered should be traceable, auditable and authenticated to meet the assessment strategy.

- Where a candidate is almost complete and has an assessed holistic observation of practice in the portfolio by a qualified assessor, and a second or third observation is missing, alternative assessment arrangements can be put in place as long as the quality and credibility of the award is not compromised. This can be in the form of an expert witness, reflective accounts and professional discussion.
- It is appropriate to have a lead assessor for the portfolio and a work-based assessor to complete the observations where practicable.
- Where it is not possible to complete an observation due to COVID-19 restrictions and there are no observations in the portfolio already, online platforms or video can be used for the observation and assessed by the assessor. Alternatively, where online methods are not suitable or

practicable, an expert witness by a suitable person, normally a line manager can be arranged.

## **Expert witness**

Expert witnesses can be drawn from [occupationally competent](#) (see p7 of the SQA guidance) individuals who can attest to the candidate's performance in the workplace. This may include line managers or other experienced colleagues from inside an organisation or from other agencies. The evidence from the expert witness must meet the requirements of validity, authenticity and reliability, and reflect the requirements set out in the SVQ Assessment Strategy. A qualified assessor must assess the evidence provided by an expert witness including its contribution to overall evidence of competence.

Expert witness statements can be used for mandatory and optional units. Challenges in gathering expert witness testimonies or confirmation of expert witness qualifications, should be managed with the support of the expert witness's line manager.

Where there are time constraints for the expert witness, the following options are available and must be agreed through standardisation.

- Where there are challenges in gathering the details of occupational competence, such as expert witness qualifications, an email can be sent to the line manager of the expert witness containing the expert witness competence requirements from the assessment strategy. The line manager can confirm the expert witness meets those requirements.
- Where a centre standardised checklist of the performance criteria has been used by the expert witness, it should be followed up with an online professional discussion between the expert witness and the assessor. The assessor can then record the details in the evidence gathering form.
- It is appropriate for the expert witness to read a reflective account written by the candidate and provide a brief expert witness statement, explaining that they observed the candidate's practice as recorded in the reflective account.
- Where the expert witness has already completed recent observations of practice in the workplace or recorded details of observed practice in an appraisal, the observation or appraisal record can be used as the expert witness evidence.

These adaptations are for the period of the COVID-19 pandemic and will revert to in-service observations when it is safe to do so.

## **Digital technology**

Where possible, you can use digital technology to facilitate and enable the assessment of SVQ qualifications. Many assessment centres are using a range of digital platforms and resources, such as online portfolios, video conferencing and mobile devices. Digital solutions have enabled online observations of practice, virtual face-to-face candidate support, and online forums where IVs and assessors can discuss current trends and standardisation.

If using an online portfolio, it is worthwhile checking if it includes the option for video evidence using a smartphone app, which uploads the video directly to the

portfolio. Candidates, assessors and IVs should first check the security of any online platform with their own IT department.

Where there are barriers with digital capability or access to resources, support should be sought from employers, colleagues, or a workplace digital champion. For information about video conferencing platforms and video recording, please see our [Guide to using video conferencing and video recordings for SVQ assessment](#).

### **Audio recordings**

Audio recordings should not be used for observations of practice. They can however be used for professional discussion and should be traceable through short recordings, which state the performance criteria covered in each section of the recording.

### **Authentication**

The candidate's portfolio should contain a declaration that confirms the content of their portfolio is their own work and this can replace the need for signatures on all work. Where an expert witness or reflective account is sent to the assessor from the person's password protected email, this also supports authentication. Products can be viewed online using video conferencing platforms and mobile phones can be used for questions and planned professional discussions. Difficulties in obtaining signatures should not hold up assessment, as the assessor can leave a statement in the portfolio explaining the method of authentication used. The authentication methods can be agreed through standardisation.

### **What you cannot do**

An assessor cannot sign off a portfolio without an observation of practice by either an assessor or expert witness. Although it must be holistic, it does not need to cover all units in the portfolio.

Professional discussions on their own are not acceptable but they are acceptable forms of evidence alongside others in the portfolio.

Using simulation, other than in the circumstances set out in the SVQ Assessment Strategy, is not an appropriate alternative method of assessment.

### **Assessor and verification process**

The assessor is key to implementing this guidance and their professional judgement is pivotal in assessing competence of a candidate's practice. We recognise the additional work required by assessors in managing the uncertainty caused by the pandemic. Verification of the approaches taken by assessors provides confidence in consistency and standardisation of decisions made. As the awarding body for SVQs in social services, SQA have made a commitment to use processes, including external verification of centres to examine the approach taken. This may include external verifier (EV) provision of additional support in monitoring the approaches taken.

In relation to centres' standardisation processes, it is important to keep a record of how they are accommodating circumstances related to the pandemic. It will be important that SQA EVs consider the centre standardisation minutes/records. These include the following.

- How is the centre operating during the pandemic? (this could include anything from all assessment is suspended, to all is continuing)
- What is the centre doing in relation to amending candidate assessment plans in the current circumstances?
- How is the centre dealing with observation and observation shortfall in candidate evidence?
- What has the centre agreed is acceptable use of other methods of observation such as using video etc?
- How and when will the centre review ongoing delivery of SVQs during the pandemic?

### **Registration with the SSSC – qualification conditions**

The SSSC has extended the time for new workers to register after starting work from six to 12 months. We have also given current registrants with a condition to gain a qualification, an extra 12 months to gain it, while working as normal. We will consider situations where individuals are unable to evidence achievement of qualifications within the required timeframe due to the demands the pandemic. [You can read about these changes on our website.](#)

We have developed guidance for employers and staff on [core learning required for those who are redeployed, volunteer or are temporary members of staff.](#)

For information about how assessors and verifiers are continuing to deliver SVQ qualifications across Scotland, please see our [SVQ assessment examples.](#)