



Scottish  
**Social Services**  
Council

# **External Assessment of Mental Health Social Work Programmes in Scotland**

**A Manual for External Assessors**

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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1 This manual describes the role and functions of External Assessors and the administrative procedures concerned with the external assessment of Mental Health Social Work (MHSW) programmes.
- 1.2 MHSW programmes are required to assure the quality of training for candidates undertaking the Mental Health Social Work Award by preparing them for assessment of their competence in mental health social work. Successful candidates qualify for the SSSC Mental Health Social Work Award.
- 1.3 MHSW programmes are designed to ensure the competence of social workers who are to be appointed by employers to carry out statutory duties under the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984. These staff are known as Mental Health Officers or MHOs.
- 1.4 MHSW programmes are also linked to the SSSC's Framework for Post Qualification credits and awards.

## 2. External Assessment and Quality Assurance

- 2.1 External assessment plays a major role in the process of assuring the quality of the MHSW and PQSW awards. It is linked to the SSSC's system for approving, reviewing and inspecting its schemes and awards shown. The principles and procedures of this system are common to all SSSC-approved schemes and awards providing an accountable and cost-effective means for the SSSC to fulfil its statutory duties.
- 2.2 External Assessors play an essential role in quality assuring competence by confirming that candidates who have gone through a programme's assessment process have achieved a specified standard. They confirm to candidates, programmes, PQ consortia, employers and SSSC that the results of assessment are:
  - **valid** as a measure of the extent to which assessment actually assesses what it claims to assess and not irrelevant, extraneous achievements or characteristics;
  - **reliable** in that the same results would be obtained under different circumstances e.g., if a different assessor or different occasion had been chosen;
  - **comparable** between programmes UK-wide.
- 2.3 The procedures for verifying the decisions that determine whether a candidate has or has not successfully completed a MHSW programme need to be informed

by the SSSC's statement on equal opportunities. This statement has been adopted directly from that previously operated by CCETSW:

"The SSSC promotes education and training designed to produce competent social care and social work staff who can provide high quality services in our diverse society. The SSSC recognises that equal opportunity is something each individual wants for themselves and to which they have a legal right.

"Candidates therefore will:

- accept and respect individual rights and circumstances and understand how these affect the delivery of services for children and adults, families and communities;
- learn how to counter unfair discrimination, racism, poverty, disadvantage and injustice in ways appropriate to their situation and role.

"Providers of social care and social work education and training and assessment centres will:

- eliminate unfair discrimination and disadvantage in all aspects of their work regulated by the Council;
- demonstrate this consistently through the quality assurance process.

"The SSSC will:

- take action through the quality assurance process to ensure the implementation of Council policies".

2.4 External assessment procedures are located within the wider framework of arrangements to maintain and improve the quality of assessment, key features of which are the work of SSSC Liaison Advisers, the GSCC, and the programme's own quality assurance arrangements. Together these arrangements help to maintain the value of the MHSW and PQSW awards to candidates and employers.

2.5 The external assessment of MHSW programmes will not seek to replicate the work of the provider's own quality assurance system.

### **3. Recruitment to the Approved List**

3.1 External Assessors are recruited on a UK-wide basis in open competition by the General Social Care Council (GSCC)\* in conjunction with the SSSC. They are selected on the basis of their suitability and competence (see para. 5) from the information contained in the application form in the light of the advertised specification, within the constraint of maintaining an appropriate balance of interests in the Approved List. The selection panel includes staff from each of the UK countries' regulatory bodies and would normally be chaired by GSCC External Assessors Coordinator.

\* The SSSC operates a service level agreement with the GSCC to provide for the recruitment, induction, training and ongoing support of External Assessors. This includes the organisation of an annual UK-wide Standardisation Event. SSSC staff work closely with the GSCC in respect of this.

- 3.2 The Approved List of External Assessors of the MHSW award contains details of the experienced practitioners recruited and inducted by the GSCC and takes into account education, employment interests, i.e. statutory social services, the voluntary and independent sectors, and race, gender and disability.
- 3.3 It is practice for appointments to the Approved List to be for a period of five years. Copies of the Approved List are issued by the GSCC to External Assessors and to MHSW programmes.

#### **4. Induction of External Assessors**

Before being confirmed on the Approved List and selected for appointment, External Assessors are required to attend a one-day induction programme organised by the GSCC.

#### **5. The Competence of External Assessors**

External Assessors are appointed to the Approved List on the basis of their expertise and previous relevant experience. They will have demonstrated their credibility to others through their involvement in higher education and/or practice settings at post qualifying or advanced levels. Their knowledge and experience of assessment will enable them to provide critical evaluation of programmes' assessment practice. Understanding of the responsibilities, roles and functions of MHOs is also essential in respect of external assessment of these programmes.

#### **6. Appointment of External Assessors by Programmes**

- 6.1 Programmes are required to select and appoint one External Assessor from the Approved List. This should be at the beginning of the intake for which the Assessor undertakes responsibility. Programmes may not enter into reciprocal arrangements for the exchange of External Assessors.
- 6.2 Programmes should give a copy of the approval submission to the proposed External Assessor and discuss the nature, scope and particular features of the programme's provision. When they have established that the External Assessor is willing to take on the appointment they must confirm the appointment in writing and send a copy of this correspondence to the GSCC External Assessor Coordinator and to the SSSC Liaison Adviser.
- 6.3 If the External Assessor is unwilling to be nominated, or there is a conflict of interest, the process is repeated.
- 6.4 Programmes must notify the GSCC External Assessor Coordinator and the SSSC Liaison Adviser of any subsequent changes in the appointment of External Assessors.

- 6.5 Programmes assessing candidate work in languages other than English or Welsh are expected to facilitate external assessment by providing translation or interpretation as necessary.
- 6.6 The SSSC and GSCC expect programmes to establish clear and comprehensive agreements with appointed External Assessors to ensure that the specifications and guidelines set out in this manual are fully covered by their terms of reference and conditions of service. It is recommended that agreements include details of the duration and review of appointments, clarification of mutual responsibilities and tasks, and timescales for work to be undertaken.
- 6.7 External Assessors may be appointed by more than one programme. External Assessors are not expected to work with more than two programmes. Good practice would indicate that in the light of the specifications and guidelines set out in this Manual, three concurrent appointments would only arise in exceptional circumstances.
- 6.8 The GSCC and SSSC expect the period of appointments to be for no more than five years. There should be no re-appointment of the same External Assessor within the further five years following the end of an appointment. The written agreement of the GSCC is necessary when in exceptional circumstances the programme would wish the appointment to be extended beyond the five years.
- 6.9 Programmes assessing a very large number of candidates may seek the permission of the Liaison Adviser to appoint an additional External Assessor, in respect of whom the specifications and guidelines set out in this manual will apply in full.

## 7. The Role of External Assessors

- 7.1 The role of the External Assessor is to verify that those responsible for the programme assessment arrangements make fair assessment decisions based on valid evidence and to check that the assessment system generates decisions that provide assurance of competence. This does not mean inspecting the quality of every assessment by doing the assessment again. The role is to **verify** assessment practice, not to assess candidates.
- 7.2 External Assessors are required to **certify** the assessment decision in respect of each candidate for the MHSW Award, including decisions relating to the non-continuation of candidates who have been failed or referred or deferred, in accordance with the SSSC requirements.
- 7.3 The External Assessor must ensure that pass recommendations are based on evidence that candidates have adequately demonstrated that all of the requirements for the MHSW Award have been met.

7.4 In line with the common principles and procedures for external assessment recognised for quality assuring all awards and schemes, it is recommended good practice for External Assessors to:

- have **direct contact** with the programme at a minimum of three identifiable points each year. Such contact may be by letter or telephone. However an External Assessor will be expected to visit the programme on at least one occasion and to attend at least one assessment board meeting;
- verify the programme assessment practice and procedures by **sampling** the material submitted by candidates for assessment and **examining** all work assessed as marginal or failing. If they find instances where the assessment evidence does not appear to justify the assessment decision, they should bring this to the attention of the assessment board;
- **clarify** with the Liaison Adviser (the SSSC Learning and Development Adviser allocated to the programme) the specific interpretation of a requirement;
- **Report** annually on their findings and judgements to the SSSC, copying this to the programme.

7.5 Whether through sampling or by examining marginal or fail decisions, and irrespective of the assessment structure of the programme, External Assessors have the power to overrule and alter assessment decisions that are not well founded. Similarly, indications that assessment arrangements are failing to conform to the SSSC's equal opportunities policy should lead the External Assessor to raise the matter with the assessment board. The External Assessor should comment on the issues of standards and quality control raised by such discoveries.

7.6 External Assessors need to remain impartial if they are to monitor effectively the standards of assessment achieved by programmes. It would not be appropriate to provide a form of consultancy or to undertake development work with programmes to which they are appointed.

7.7 In sampling the work submitted by candidates, External Assessors will need sufficient material to check the quality of assessment. They are advised to use judgement about the amount of material necessary to establish their confidence in the standards being maintained by the programme. The SSSC expects External Assessors to be able to see any assessment evidence they require for the purpose of constructing an adequate sample, which it is suggested should form 10 per cent of the assessment material of the candidates under consideration. The sample should include the full range of abilities shown by candidates, practice assessment, and ensure coverage of all aspects of assessment on the programme.

7.8 Whenever External Assessors judge that improvement to assessment practice and procedures is needed, they should give a clear recommendation to the programme. Such a recommendation is not expected to specify a plan of action. It is for the programme to do this. It will be sufficient for the External Assessor to

identify clearly the issue that the programme needs to address, and to comment in the next annual report on action taken by the programme. This aspect of the role of External Assessors can initiate or contribute to the SSSC's process of calling a Preliminary Investigation, which may result in an inspection.

## **8. The Duties of External Assessors**

8.1 The duties of External Assessors are:

- (i) to attend meetings of the programme's assessment board;
- (ii) to verify that candidates who have passed the formal assessment for the award of the MHSW Award have demonstrated the values, knowledge, and competences needed to achieve competence in mental health social work;
- (iii) to determine how well a programme's assessment arrangements are operating and to confirm that assessment meets the SSSC's requirements;
- (iv) to satisfy themselves that programmes have effective internal procedures to ensure the quality and consistency of assessment;
- (v) to be aware of the resource implications of complex assessment provision, and to comment on the extent to which the expenditure of time and resources to secure assessment outcomes is realistic/reasonable;
- (vi) to sample assessment evidence and judgements;
- (vii) to examine evidence relating to candidates whose work has been assessed as marginal or failing, and where appropriate alter assessment decisions in respect of an individual candidate;
- (viii) to certify the assessment decision in respect of each candidate, including decisions relating to the progress or non-continuation of candidates who have failed or been referred or deferred;
- (ix) to ensure the programme upholds, throughout its assessment arrangements, its commitment to the SSSC's equal opportunities policy;
- (x) to advise the SSSC formally through the provision of annual reports about the adequacy and appropriateness of standard setting and assessment tasks, processes and procedures within the programme;

## **9. Conduct of External Assessors**

9.1 In setting out specifications and guidelines for External Assessors on MHSW programmes, the SSSC follows custom and practice previously established by CCETSW in respect of external assessment generally. It recognises good practice concerning the conduct of External Assessors, which emphasises, in particular, that:

- (i) External Assessors are expected to carry out their work objectively and in accordance with policies on equal opportunities;
- (ii) they should be capable of independent judgement, be seen to be independent and at all costs avoid conflicts of interest. External Assessors

may not be employed by or have any contractual or financial relationship with any agencies or educational institution involved with the programme to which they are appointed. Where they have a personal interest in any candidate, agency or educational institution concerned, they should declare the interest;

- (iii) all work presented by candidates and other reports used in the process of assessment are owned by the authorised bodies undertaking that assessment (programme assessment boards). Furthermore, all such material must be treated as strictly confidential. External Assessors may not disclose the content of any material used in assessment, or information about candidates, to those not authorised to receive it. This would, for example, preclude the use of such material for training elsewhere.

## **10. External Assessors and the GSCC**

The GSCC is responsible for recruitment and appointment to the Approved List of External Assessors, UK-wide induction and standardisation activities, and specification of the role and functions of external assessment.

## **11. Relations with the SSSC's Liaison Advisers**

- 11.1 Programme approval, review and inspection processes are undertaken by the SSSC.
- 11.2 The SSSC is directly accountable to Council for the standards that are achieved.
- 11.3 Under the current quality assurance arrangements, SSSC Liaison Advisers are allocated to programmes to monitor standards through the Annual Quality Assurance Returns provided to them by programmes and through the annual reports provided to them by External Assessors (see para. 13.)
- 11.4 It is the responsibility of the GSCC and the SSSC to liaise with individual External Assessors, provide clarification of the SSSC's requirements and to respond to reports.
- 11.5 It is for the programme to act on the recommendations of the External Assessor.
- 11.6 If the programme fails to take action as recommended, the External Assessor is expected to make reference to this in subsequent reports.
- 11.7 The Liaison Adviser is responsible for deciding whether work undertaken by the programme to meet the SSSC's requirements is satisfactory or whether a recommendation for a Preliminary Investigation/Inspection should be made to the Head of Learning and Development.

## **12. External Assessor Contact with the Programme**

- 12.1 External Assessors should find it helpful to plan their use of time to give attention to programmes in line with these specifications and guidelines. Liaison Advisers may be contacted for advice on these plans, which can be usefully shared and discussed with them.
- 12.2 The External Assessor's key points of reference are the programme's documentation including its approval submission, the agreement covering the appointment by the programme, this Manual and the quality assurance documents: *Assuring Quality for Mental Health Social Work: Requirements for the Training of Approved Social Workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and of Mental Health Officers in Scotland* (March 2000) and *Amendments to Assuring Quality for Mental Health Social Work Requirements for the Training of Approved Social Workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and of Mental Health Officers in Scotland* (May 2001).
- 12.3 During the course of a year, an External Assessor will be expected to have considered each aspect of assessment identified in the requirements for MHSW in order to verify that the outcome is satisfactory.

## **13. Annual Report**

- 13.1 External Assessors are required to report annually to the SSSC, and to copy this report to the programme. This should normally be one month prior to the programme's completion of its Annual Quality Assurance Return to the SSSC. This should allow the External Assessor's report to inform the programme in the completion of their Annual Quality Assurance Return.
- 13.2 The SSSC will notify programmes of the date on which return of the completed Annual Quality Assurance Return to the SSSC is due.
- 13.3 The SSSC will notify External Assessors of the date on which return of annual reports to the SSSC is due.
- 13.4 External Assessors are encouraged to record their findings following each of their points of contact with the programme. This shall assist them in compiling their annual report to the SSSC.
- 13.5 If, during the year before the report is due, the External Assessor needs to raise concerns urgently with the programme they should do so, confirming these in writing to the programme. The External Assessor should send a copy to the SSSC Liaison Adviser. Reference to urgent concerns raised in this way, and any subsequent action taken by the programme, should be included in the External Assessor's annual report.
- 13.6 The Liaison Adviser will consider the contents of the External Assessor's report and the programme's Annual Quality Assurance Return, take note of any

recommendations given and action taken, and provide written responses to the External Assessor and the programme. If urgent discussion is required, the Liaison Adviser may visit the programme.

- 13.7 External Assessors may find instances of assessment practice that are good or that need improvement. These should be reported. Programmes and the SSSC should be given clear recommendations for improvements in assessment practice.
- 13.8 The SSSC expects reports to be sent on time. They should be of an appropriate standard, in line with the specifications and guidelines described in this Manual. The responsibility for ensuring that this expectation is met lies with the SSSC.
- 13.9 Responsibility for failure of External Assessors to report on time or to standard is located with the SSSC. External Assessors are reminded that the absence of adequate quality assurance information may call into question the continuing approval of the programme. This aspect of external assessment can initiate or contribute to the process of calling a Preliminary Investigation, which may result in an Inspection.

#### **14. Attendance at CCETSW's Standardisation Meetings**

- 14.1 External Assessors working with MHSW programmes will be invited to participate in annual UK standardisation meetings organised specifically for them to ensure the maintenance of standards. While this will not be a formal requirement, External Assessors are encouraged to attend these meetings, which will be called by the GSCC. The sharing of experience will be an important element of these meetings.
- 14.2 The SSSC also runs other events, including standardisation sessions, that External Assessors would be encouraged to attend.

#### **15. Resignation of External Assessors**

The SSSC recommends that, as a matter of good practice, External Assessors should give programmes three months' notice of their intention to resign their appointment. Intimations of resignation should be copied to the SSSC Liaison Adviser for information purposes. Programmes should notify the GSCC and the SSSC of new appointments made to fill vacancies created in this way (see para. 6.4).

#### **16. Disputes between External Assessors and Programmes**

- 16.1 External assessment involves the provision of information, judgement, advice, and recommendations. Circumstances may occasionally arise which lead to dispute. Resolving these is the responsibility of the programme in conjunction with the External Assessor. The SSSC would expect to be notified, at an early stage, where there are disputes that may require mediation.

- 16.2 Programmes are advised to include a procedure for dealing with disputes in their agreement with the External Assessor.
- 16.3 In the event of an apparent failure by a programme to meet satisfactorily the requirements of the MHSW award, the Head of Learning and Development can institute a Preliminary Investigation which may result in an Inspection.

## **17. Unsatisfactory Work**

- 17.1 Approved programmes have given CCETSW an undertaking that they recognise the roles and tasks of External Assessors according to the SSSC's requirements as detailed in this Manual.
- 17.2 MHSW programmes and their appointed External Assessors are expected to follow the specifications and guidelines set out in this manual.
- 17.3 If an External Assessor does not fulfil the conditions of appointment specified in this Manual, or their suitability is called into question in other ways, the Liaison Adviser allocated to the programme will investigate and attempt to resolve the matter.
- 17.4 If the Liaison Adviser is unable to resolve the situation to the satisfaction of any of the parties concerned, the Head of Learning and Development will be formally notified and will investigate and determine the issue.
- 17.5 Unsatisfactory work could result in removal from the Approved List. This decision is made by the SSSC in conjunction with the GSCC following the use of the procedures specified above. External Assessors have a right of appeal.

## **18 External Assessor Unsuitability for the Approved List**

- 18.1 In exceptional circumstances, the SSSC reserves the right to remove an External Assessor from its Approved List to protect the standing of candidate assessment.
- 18.2 This procedure will be used in situations where an External Assessor's behaviour or conduct is considered to be unsuitable. Any failure to meet the terms or conditions set in relation to appointment to a programme will be dealt with under the procedure detailed in 17. above.
- 18.3 If the suitability of the External Assessor is called into question, the SSSC expects the External Assessor to be given the opportunity of contributing to the resolution of the issue.
- 18.4 If the matter cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of the parties at this stage, the SSSC and the GSCC will investigate and determine the issue. This could result

in removal of the External Assessor from the Approved List. External Assessors have a right of appeal.

- 18.5 Removal from the Approved List means that the External Assessor is no longer able to continue with existing appointments. It also means that the External Assessor is no longer available for further appointments to MHSW programmes. Removal from the Approved List removes from the External Assessor the power to certify assessment decisions from a date decided by the GSCC.

## **19. Honorarium and Expenses in Scotland**

- 19.1 External Assessors appointed to work with MHSW programmes are paid an annual honorarium by the SSSC payable on receipt of the External Assessor's annual report.
- 19.2 The SSSC will also meet travel, subsistence and other expenses incurred in carrying out External Assessor duties in respect of MHSW programmes. Expenses must be claimed on forms provided by the SSSC with supporting evidence.
- 19.3 The GSCC will be responsible for travel, subsistence and other expenses incurred in carrying out External Assessor duties incurred in attending UK standardisation or other UK events.

## **20. Insurance for External Assessors**

Since External Assessors are not employees of the SSSC or the GSCC, they are not covered by either agency's liability and are not insured for any risks associated with public liability.

## **References**

CCETSW (March 2000) *Assuring Quality for Mental Health Social Work Requirements for the Training of Approved Social Workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and of Mental Health Officers in Scotland*

CCETSW (Scotland) (May 2001) *Amendments to Assuring Quality for Mental Health Social Work Requirements for the Training of Approved Social Workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and of Mental Health Officers in Scotland*

