

Good practice in the development of assessment strategies for NVQs and SVQs

August 2000

Introduction

The Projects and Standards Approvals Group (PSAG) has established the development of assessment strategies for N/SVQs as a key funding priority. By December 2003, it is required that the majority of NVQs and SVQs within the framework will have an assessment strategy attaching to them. Milestones in moving towards this position are as follows:

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| April 2002 | All Standards setting bodies to have commenced work in the development of full assessment strategies for all N/SVQs in their sector which are planned to remain in the framework |
| July 2002 | No NVQ/SVQ will be accredited which does not have an assessment strategy |

Standards setting bodies are responsible for the determination of the assessment strategy to be adopted for an N/SVQ, working in close co-operation with the Awarding Bodies concerned. These responsibilities are formally recognised¹ in the regulations governing accreditation of qualifications and are detailed below. Specifically, they require that standards setting bodies must:

1. *recommend* how external quality control of assessment will be achieved. This will normally be through the use of independent assessment. Where independent assessment is not recommended, other equally effective measures must be given;
2. *define* which aspects of the national occupational standards must always be assessed through performance in the workplace;
3. *define* the extent to which simulated working conditions may be used to assess competence and any characteristics that simulation should have, including definitions of what would constitute a 'realistic working environment' for the qualifications concerned;
4. *define* the occupational expertise requirements for assessors and verifiers in consultation with awarding bodies.

Figure 1: Text in italics has been extracted from the regulatory criteria (see Footnote 1 for reference)

In submitting an NVQ or SVQ to the accrediting bodies, awarding bodies must, among other criteria, 'adopt the general principles for assessment and external quality control specified by the relevant standards setting body, and approved by the regulatory bodies, including,' implementation of the assessment strategy specifications proposed by the standards setting body on respect of points 1 to 4 above.

Standards setting bodies are required to submit their recommendations for an assessment strategy to PSAG² for approval, along with supporting evidence. Usually this will be done at the same time as they submit the national occupational standards and qualification frameworks for approval.

¹ See documents, *Guide to the arrangements for the statutory regulation of external qualification in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, QCA/99/367*, in particular Criterion 13 of the criteria for NVQs and *SQA Accreditation Criteria, SQA/1999/D0688*, in particular criterion 2.5 of the Criteria for Scottish Vocational Qualifications

² This group comprises representatives of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA), Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), Awdurdod Cymwysterau Cwricwlwm ac Asesu Cymru (ACCAC), the Training and Employment Northern Ireland Agency (T&EANI), the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), the Scottish Executive and the Office of the Welsh Assembly.

This document summarises guidance on the steps and processes that should be taken to ensure that the submitted assessment strategy is based on:

- the outcomes of a rigorous review of current assessment and quality control in the occupational sector;
- consultative processes which include feedback from employers, awarding bodies, candidates and other key interest groups;
- thorough and proper consideration of the appropriateness of proposed assessment regimes and quality control mechanisms within the NVQ(s) or SVQ(s) covered;
- partnership between standards setting bodies and awarding bodies to ensure that the recommendations are rigorous and cost-effective.

The guidance offered in this document complements and builds upon previous guidance, in particular that given in the document “Developing an assessment strategy for NVQs and SVQs”. It is aimed at providing specific information for those people in NTOs and awarding bodies involved in the detail of assessment strategy development, and at the consultants who support them in this work. There is an executive summary of this document available for those who have a more general interest and need to have an overview of assessment strategy development.

This guidance is based upon the experiences of a range of standards setting and awarding bodies. The examples given are used to illustrate good practice in the context in which that body was working. Other, equally effective approaches may be found. It is of paramount importance that assessment strategies are fit for purpose and context, so bear in mind that what has proven the best approach in one situation, might be less acceptable or effective in another.

What is an assessment strategy?

An assessment strategy is the set of recommendations and specifications made by the standards setting body about the approach to the assessment arrangements associated with an N/SVQ to meet the requirements set down in the regulatory criteria. There are four components to an assessment strategy (see introduction) ie:

- external quality control methods
- details of those aspects of the standards which must be assessed through performance in the workplace.
- Use of simulation and the nature of a realistic working environment.
- Occupational expertise of assessors and verifiers.

An assessment strategy applies to an N/SVQ or group of N/SVQs. It is perfectly possible to have different assessment strategies for different N/SVQs at different levels and/or for there to be different aspects of the strategy for occupational groups within a common framework. It is also perfectly acceptable for one strategy to cover a number of N/SVQs. The important criterion is that the strategy is appropriate to each and all the N/SVQs to which it applies.

Why have an assessment strategy?

Of the four components to an assessment strategy, most of the aspects involved have always been incorporated within the assessment arrangements for N/SVQs. The consideration of independent assessment with the external quality control system,

however, is unfamiliar to most N/SVQ provision. Accordingly, it is worth briefly reviewing the grounds upon which it was introduced into the regulatory requirements for N/SVQs.

Research³, carried out over the last few years, identified that consistency and credibility issues have been major concerns with regard to the assessment of N/SVQs. In addition, there were lessons to be learned from research examining other vocational qualification systems in the UK and other nations, where the use of an independent aspect to some part of the assessment is a significant component of the vast majority of credible systems.

Consultations by the regulatory authorities among the NTO and Awarding body communities revealed an openness to the consideration of some form of independent component as part of the overall approach to quality, providing the suitability of any approaches within the sector can be taken into account.

The response to this background has been to incorporate a role for independent assessment within external quality control in N/SVQs, specifying this within the regulations governing N/SVQ accreditation (see earlier).

How does an assessment strategy relate to the assessment arrangements and materials which an awarding body produces?

All awarding bodies who seek to offer the N/SVQ(s) to which the strategy applies must comply with its principles.

The awarding body implements the strategy by designing assessment arrangements which comply with the recommendations for each component. Different awarding bodies may design different approaches to suit their particular candidate population, but they must all comply with the strategy recommended by the standard setting body.

For example, one standards setting body might determine that, in the interests of improving the reliability of assessment, there should be **independence within the candidate/assessor relationship** for assessment of the mandatory units of the N/SVQ. The two awarding bodies who will deliver the N/SVQ each develop a different methodology to meet that principle. Awarding body A decides to use peripatetic assessors to visit the candidate at his/her workplace. Awarding body B establishes a process whereby a second assessor is present for certain assessments of the mandatory units; the assessor being internal to the consortium making up the approved centres, but not in routine contact with the candidate and with no line management relationship to him/her.

What is NOT part of the assessment strategy.

Details of the amount of evidence that a candidate should be asked to produce and/or detail of the sorts of situations in which a candidate may be able to obtain evidence of his/her competence and/or descriptions of different examples of suitable evidence are **not** part of the Assessment Strategy.

Guidance for the awarding bodies in determining the sampling of evidence to provide effective coverage of the scope of a standard may be appropriate in a few situations. For example, where the standards are of a highly generic nature in which the scope or range of contexts to which they apply is not obvious and/or where the award in question may be offered in a wide range of contexts. In such situations, it will be important to ensure that any descriptions included remain at the level of principle and do not drift into fine detailed specifications of the types and quantities of evidence.

³ Including the Review of 100 and Review of All projects, among other research.

For example, in N/SVQs, in which the national occupational standards incorporate range or scope type statements, these statements, together with the recommendations made in respect of mandatory assessment through workplace performance and the use of simulation, would more than adequately provide this guide to evidence sampling. Details of particular assessment methods to be used or combinations of evidence of different types, however, are the responsibility of the awarding bodies to generate and should not appear within the standards nor assessment strategy.

Where standards setting bodies do produce evidence requirements/assessment guidance, and where this has been undertaken in conjunction with the ABs for the N/SVQ concerned, such material may be annexed to the assessment strategy. However, please note that it will not form part of the assessment strategy and will not be considered or in any way approved by PSAG. In addition, PSAG funding would not normally be available to support the development of detailed assessment guidance, since this is the responsibility of the awarding bodies.

Excessively detailed assessment arrangements. Standards setting bodies may identify 'sector-friendly' methods of implementing the quality control approach they propose. For example, having identified that independent assessment applied through the use of externally devised assessment instruments is the best strategy to follow, they may recommend that an open written response assessment might be a cost-effective approach for the candidates in question. However, this level of detail is for the awarding bodies to develop and should **not** form part of the assessment strategy.

Steps in the review and development of an assessment strategy

Like all development work, the production of a clear and viable assessment strategy needs to be a planned and managed process. A diagram showing the five main steps that you will need to go through is given in Figure 2 below. Each step, and the aspects which make it up, is then discussed in the sections which follow. Standards setting bodies should ensure that project proposals submitted to PSAG address steps 2-5 below; Step 1 should take place when the project is being developed and before submission to PSAG.

Figure 2 Steps in the development of an N/SVQ assessment strategy

Step 1: Plan the development process

- a. Specify your objectives.
- b. Determine and agree a realistic timetable
- c. Determine the research, management and decision-making structures.
- d. Decide on the information you will need and the sources from which you can get it.
- e. Establish roles and responsibilities and maintain communications

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Step 2: Research current practice

- a. Review current practice
- b. Identify and obtain details of strategies applying to imported units
- c. Consult with awarding bodies and key interest groups in the sector
- d. Evaluate the current system

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Step 3: Decide on the assessment strategy

- a. Select the external quality control approach to recommend
- b. Define those aspects of the standards which must always be assessed through performance in the workplace
- c. Define the use and characteristics of simulation
- d. Define the occupational expertise requirements of assessors and verifiers
- e. Draft and get agreement to the strategy from the awarding bodies and sector

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Step 4: Submit the strategy for approval

- a. Collate the information.
- b. Work with the regulatory authorities

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Step 5: Implement, monitor and review the strategy

- a. Advise the awarding bodies
- b. Monitor implementation and review the strategy

Step 1: Plan the review and development of an Assessment strategy

a. Specify your objectives.

These need to be clear and agreed by all key interest groups and include the involvement of the relevant awarding bodies from the outset. In broad terms you will need to:

- identify and review current assessment policies and practices against the key principles of assessment;
- identify where there is value in improving current policies and practices in relation to the standards and N/SVQs being considered;
- systematically identify, evaluate and select options in relation to each component of the assessment strategy;
- ensure that all stakeholders have a fair opportunity to contribute to the development process;
- draft and agree your assessment strategy with the awarding bodies and sector;
- submit your assessment strategy for approval.

For example: one NTO is carrying out research into the current assessment system in place for N/SVQs within its sector, knowing that the N/SVQs in question will be replaced by revised N/SVQs within the next 12 months. The objectives they have established in terms of the review stage of their work are as follows:

1. *to establish whether or not the assessment arrangements currently in operation for all NVQs/SVQs in the sector satisfy the criteria set by the regulatory bodies, particularly with regard to independent assessment;*
2. *to establish whether or not additional or alternative quality control on assessment can add value to and improve the credibility of the assessment arrangements; and, if so...*
3. *to identify the appropriate method for the sectors to use, establishing the actual cost implications of doing so;*
4. *to obtain firm evidence of the likely benefits (or otherwise) of using independent assessment in some form within the overall arrangements.*

b. Determine and agree a realistic timetable.

A systematic approach to the development of an assessment strategy will pay off in the end but there must be adequate time set aside or quality will inevitably be squeezed. Areas where the time allowed can have real impact on quality include:

- allowing sufficient time for awarding bodies and other stakeholders to give a considered response to proposals, especially if they are acting to cascade out and collect in views from centres;
- allowing sufficient time to collect information and review all the options in a systematic and considered manner;
- allowing sufficient time to consult effectively;
- allowing sufficient time post-consultation to negotiate and implement necessary changes;

- allowing sufficient time to obtain and collate all the information needed for submission.

It is also recommended that you specify milestones and get commitment to them, and to the overall timetable, from everyone taking part in the development work. In broad terms it is recommended that you allow a period of from 6 - 9 months for the development of an assessment strategy, to enable full and thorough review to take place and inform the decisions taken.

c. Determine the research, management and decision-making structures.

The ways in which standards setting bodies have chosen to carry out the development work, and therefore the people they have deployed to undertake the research and make decisions, varies as a result of a number of factors including:

- whether the assessment strategy is being developed as part of a larger standards and NVQ/SVQ development or review process;
- the levels of expertise in assessment issues among NTO staff and/or sub-contractors;
- the time and budget available to carry out the work;
- relationships with awarding bodies associated with existing N/SVQs or expected to offer a new N/SVQ.

Various alternative approaches to carrying out and managing the development process can be successful, including:

- making use of an existing standards development/review project steering group to manage the development process and take formal decisions;
- retaining the decision-making process within the standards setting body's internal committee structure, and using consultative mechanisms to enable key interests to have an input;
- out-sourcing some or all of the research and development work, under the day to day project management of an internal officer;
- SSB and awarding body staff conducting the majority of the information gathering and evaluation directly.

For example, one standard setting body (SSB) ensured that assessment strategy development was a standing item at all meetings of the steering group set up to coordinate a major standards and NVQ/SVQ review project. Another SSB, which developed the assessment strategy after standards development was largely completed, continued the same steering group to oversee that process. A third SSB worked with a Consultative Group of sector interests, including the awarding bodies, while developing the strategy which was then reviewed and endorsed by the Board, before submission to PSAG. A fourth is using a research organisation to compile information to help evaluate its systems.

You will anyway need to work closely with the relevant awarding bodies for the N/SVQ(s) in question. For an existing N/SVQ, that means **all** the awarding bodies who currently offer it and any who have expressed a strong interest in doing so. For a new N/SVQ, you will need to form a view of the most likely awarding bodies and seek their involvement. It is good practice to ensure that you seek to work with experienced awarding bodies when considering a new N/SVQ.

However you take the work forward, it is crucial that your research/development team and decision-makers can, collectively, bring all of the following attributes to the process:

- expertise in assessment design and implementation;
- understanding of the employment contexts for the standards in the N/SVQ;
- expertise in research and development;
- in depth understanding of the criteria set by the accrediting bodies and on submission procedures;
- ability to commit the required time and effort over the duration of the work.

d. Decide on the information you will need and the sources from which you can get it.

You will need to collect information that will allow you to systematically and reliably determine each of the four different components of your assessment strategy.

Some of the information you will require is factual, other information will come from opinions and views expressed by key interests within the sector. (See step 2 and annex 4 for more details).

To gather the information you may choose to conduct the research directly, employ a research organisation and/or allocate particular tasks to different organisations or individuals.

However you elect to collect it you will need to ensure that some basic research principles are met ie

- be systematic in your approach and give each option the same, full and fair consideration
- ensure that surveys, workshops and other consultative processes return representative views and are accessible to participants from all four home countries of the UK;
- keep accurate and full records of decisions reached and the information upon which they are based;
- make sure you seek information in good time to get it in before you need to use it.

e. Establish roles and responsibilities and maintain communications

The development process is made easier if there are clear and agreed allocations of roles and responsibilities.

Good practice means using the strengths and networks offered by the different members of your project team to full advantage.

For example, one SSB negotiated an agreement with the awarding bodies in its sector so that they took charge of seeking and feeding in responses from assessors and candidates to a series of questions on the acceptability of the developing assessment strategy. A mixture of postal questionnaires, distributed to all approved centres (employer-based and others), and workshop events were used; the questionnaires being returned directly to the research team for scrutiny.

Annex 6 shows the responsibilities, strengths and constraints of the standards setting bodies (SSB), the awarding bodies (AB) and PSAG involved in assessment strategy development. Note that the pressures given are those revealed through the research which led to this guidance and will not apply equally or necessarily to all standards setting and awarding bodies.

Whatever the allocation of roles and responsibilities, the various parties involved in the research and development of an assessment strategy need to exchange information effectively throughout the development process.

Good practice suggests that the following features all help to ensure that communications are clear and the progress of work can be maintained:

- regular, scheduled meetings;
- effective deputisation if a named contact is unavailable;
- recording of decisions taken;
- agreed pathways and timetables for responding to communications received.

Awarding Body fora, where they exist, offer an excellent vehicle for discussion of assessment strategy issues. Since the debate ranges over matters of principle as opposed to detail of implementation, issues of commercial confidentiality need not arise.

For example, many SSBs made use of existing, regular meetings with the awarding bodies and with sector representatives, but called additional meetings where particular issues emerged. One SSB found that keeping clear records of all decisions taken, by whom, and the basis on which they were reached, saved the need to go over 'old ground' in meetings when the contact at an awarding body was changed. Another established an agreement between all parties as to the deadlines by which responses to iterative consultations had to be received and who would be responsible in each organisation for the feedback process. One SSB agreed with the awarding bodies making up the forum in its sector that they would, collectively, review the verification sampling levels and frequencies they each used with a view to devising a common, improved specification.

Step 2: Research current practice

a. Review Current Practice

For N/SVQs that have been running for some time it will be important to check on the effectiveness and acceptability of the current assessment and quality control mechanisms being used. Effective liaison with the awarding bodies will be of major importance in this step.

Your review of current practices needs to take account of any changes that might have occurred in the occupational area for which the N/SVQ(s) is intended and/or in the types of approved centre offering the N/SVQ. For example:

- changes in the nature of the occupation as reflected in any revised standards eg *increased use of technology;*
- changes in the number and structure of approved centres offering the N/SVQ eg *an increase in the number of consortia approaches;*
- changes in candidate profile eg *more freelance workers than employed candidates;*
- changes in progression opportunities eg *there are now two levels of N/SVQ with some shared units where before there was only one.*

For example, one SSB is developing an assessment strategy for a higher level N/SVQ which is likely to involve colleges as part of approved centre consortia. This is the first time non-employer based approved centres will have played any part in N/SVQs within this sector and the SSB and the awarding bodies are looking closely at how to adapt current systems in order to accommodate this change and maintain quality.

It is important that your review is thorough. Factual information should be collected to allow you to develop a clear description of the current assessment and quality control systems being applied and which will need to be taken into account in determining the best approaches to follow. This would include, as far as possible:

- the direct and indirect costs associated with the assessment instruments and processes being applied;
- the variability/consistency of assessment decisions;
- the number and frequency of use of different types of evidence in relation to each unit within the N/SVQ;
- the availability of assessors and verifiers with the kinds of occupational expertise requirements you are proposing;
- the numbers of candidates taking the qualification in any one year;
- the numbers of candidates taking individual units or groups of units only, rather than the full N/SVQ, in any one year;
- the frequency and rationale behind the use of simulations;
- any forms of assessment used as a check on the development of candidates' competence;
- the types and numbers of approved centres and their geographical distribution;
- the current patterns of verification in use, including sampling levels and how they were derived;

- the typical ratios of assessors to candidates; of internal verifiers to assessors and of external verifiers to centres.

The awarding body(ies) are the obvious source for most of this information.

For example, one SSB has asked each awarding body to provide a summary of information on many of the above issues. Another has negotiated access to a range of approved centres across several awarding bodies so that an independent researcher can conduct visits and interviews to collect data on current practices. A third, responsible for a small sector with only 20 approved centres and one awarding body, maintained direct contact with each centre to obtain details of their experiences.

In addition, you will need a clear understanding of the candidate profile for the N/SVQ(s) in terms of any issues which might affect assessment. This would include such matters as:

- the proportions of candidates whose first language is a community language, or Welsh and where assessment in that language could be appropriate;
- the proportions of candidates for whom literacy levels may be low and for whom any form of written assessment approach would be inappropriate;
- the proportions of candidates who take the N/SVQ alongside other related qualifications so that there may be scope for common types of assessment approach;
- the proportions of candidates in full or part time employment and, therefore, the accessibility of assessment opportunities within the workplace or elsewhere.

Some of this information may be able to be provided by the awarding bodies; other aspects will be known to the SSB/NTO through occupational mapping processes.

Finally you will also want to obtain information on the following:

- what systems of assessment and quality control are being used within other N/SVQs in your sector, within N/SVQs which may be related to those for which your strategy is to be designed, and/or other awards which are offered in similar sector contexts;
- the assessment strategies applying to imported units which are to be used within the N/SVQ, and any changes being proposed to those.

Review of the strategies adopted in related and/or similar N/SVQs and other vocationally related awards may suggest options which might be able to be adapted for use within the N/SVQ and could offer enhancement of current approaches. Examination of other awards will be particularly relevant where there are progression or other links between the awards and the N/SVQ.

Annex 4 gives a list of information requirements and suitable sources.

Note that for new N/SVQs you will still need to gather information in relation to the above points. However, since you have no specific experience from the N/SVQ to draw upon, you will need to make judgements which will amount to 'best guesses'. To ensure that these judgements are as informed as possible, you should work very closely with the awarding bodies in order to draw on their wider experiences and pay particularly attention to the following:

- the characteristics of the candidate population;
- other award systems in place in the sector/for that candidate population and how they operate and are perceived;

- sector practicalities and preferences.

It is likely that PSAG will set a requirement for early review of an assessment strategy approved for a new N/SVQ.

b. Identify and obtain details of strategies applying to imported units

Whether you are reviewing an existing N/SVQ which contains units of competence imported from another standards setting body's suite of national occupational standards, or developing a new N/SVQ with the expectation of using imported units, you will need to contact the original standards setting body to obtain details of the assessment strategy applying to those units.

You will need to consult with the standards setting body responsible for any units you import at two main points:

- when you start - to advise them of the possible use of their units and to obtain information on their assessment strategy, if they have one;
- when you carry out any consultations on proposals for the assessment strategy you are developing.

Be sure to check that you are working from the latest drafts of the units and ask to be kept informed of any intention the originating body has to revise or develop an assessment strategy. The assessment strategy you are developing must be fit for the context in which it is to be applied, but it is good practice to ensure, wherever practicable, that you take account of assessment strategy recommendations applying to the imported units.

c. Consult with key interest groups

In addition to the technical review work of current practices, you will also want to obtain the views of key employment interests within the sector (employers, practitioners, training providers, unions, professional associations and so on) as to their preferences and perceptions about the validity, reliability and practicality of different assessment and quality control approaches. If assessment strategies are already in existence for other N/SVQs in use in the sector, you be able to ask for views on the applicability of aspects of those strategies to the N/SVQ(s) you are considering.

In particular you will need to learn about:

- how employers deal with commercial confidentiality issues in relation to the current system and which might suggest opportunities and constraints on introducing independence into the assessment decision;
- views on whether the 'right' aspects of the standards have been identified as those which should always be assessed through performance in the workplace;
- views on how realistic current simulations are and examples of 'good practice';
- views on how validly current methods assess competence;
- views on the reliability and fairness of the current assessment and quality control system;
- views on the ease of use of the current assessment and quality control system;
- views on any factors which limit candidate's ability to access effective assessment;

- views on how well the system as a whole hangs together and perceived strengths/weaknesses;
- any changes which key interests would want to introduce to the assessment system, and why;
- what sort of assessment is carried out as candidates are developing their competence and when;
- how N/SVQ assessment and quality control processes are integrated within on-going personnel development and appraisal systems;
- what levels of occupational expertise it is generally believed that an assessor, internal verifier or external verifier should have to ensure confidence in their ability to make valid and reliable decisions, and any constraints on recruitment of suitably qualified people;
- views on the strengths and weaknesses of assessment and quality control within other N/SVQs and/or related awards within the sector.

A variety of consultative methods are suitable and can be used effectively.

A key message to bear in mind from current practice is that many of the concepts used in developing an assessment strategy are unfamiliar to sector representatives and will need to be carefully presented. PSAG will be producing a short summary to assist.

For example, one SSB piloted a consultative document with a sample of respondents before sending it out in order to ensure it was clear and able to be understood by all readers. Another changed the format of the workshops it ran and the materials sent to attendees after it became apparent that the original presentation assumed greater familiarity with terminology than was the case.

Once you have developed proposals for your assessment strategy, you may want to consult again on the proposals to ensure sector support, particularly if the strategy differs significantly from the current position.

d. Evaluate the current system

Having gathered information on current practices and sought views from key interests, the questions your evaluation of the current system needs to answer are as follows:

- are the assessment instruments and processes **relevant** to the characteristics of competence as set out in the standards for the N/SVQ, leading to **valid** assessment decisions?
- are the assessment decisions **reliable** and **repeatable** and are processes being applied **consistently**?
- are the assessment processes **fair** to candidates and is there equality of access and opportunity for assessment?
- does the assessment cover the **scope** of the standards making up the N/SVQ in a balanced fashion, bearing in mind the criticality of different components?
- is the assessment accepted as **reasonable** and **robust** by the stakeholders of the assessment system - the candidates, assessors, employers and awarding bodies, and if not, why not?
- is the assessment and quality assurance system **practical** to use?

- does the current assessment system provide the **maximum valid information** for the minimum cost and effort?
- do the assessment instruments have an **acceptable shelf-life** in relation to the amount they cost to develop?
- is **simulation**, if permitted, being designed and used effectively?
- are the current occupational expertise requirements of assessors and verifiers sufficient to ensure that they can make **valid and reliable** decisions within their roles?
- are the current occupational expertise requirements of assessors and verifiers **realistic** and **sufficient**?

and crucially,

- what opportunities are there for **improvement** in any or all of the above aspects?
- if a change is made to one aspect of the system, what **impact** will that have on other aspects *eg if we include an independent component into the assessment process, what reduction in external verification could be made?*

It will be important to carry out your evaluation in a systematic manner and to carefully record the outcomes. Evidence of the review undertaken and outcomes of evaluation will be needed to support the submission of the assessment strategy to PSAG.

For example, one SSB used a workshop of sector representatives to conduct a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats) style review of its current practices in relation to each component of the assessment strategy. Another identified that while its current system had many acceptable aspects, the specification for occupational competence of assessors and verifiers was weak and was being differently interpreted by the various awarding bodies, leading to inconsistent and unreliable assessment decisions being made. They have now specified requirements which all awarding bodies will need to apply.

Step 3: Decide on the assessment strategy

Having reviewed and evaluated current practices, the occupational area and sector preferences, you will now need to determine the recommendations that will lead to the most robust, practical and acceptable assessment of the N/SVQ(s).

It is likely that, for existing N/SVQs, improvement may be possible in a number of areas and that your review will have identified potential opportunities to make those improvements. For new N/SVQs, a review of existing practices will have given insights into the strengths and weaknesses of current systems in relation to each component of the assessment strategy; information which will help you determine the best approach for the N/SVQ you are now considering.

If your research and review clearly demonstrate that the current assessment system is of very high quality, and no improvements are indicated, then the assessment strategy is already determined and all that remains is to state it in terms of the four components now required. The guidance that is given below will help in the clear specification of each component.

Further guidance on determining the best approach to each component of the assessment strategy in turn is given below. However, you should note that, while you must consider each component of the system in turn, you should also be sure to consider the overall coherence of the strategy as it develops; a strengthening of one component may reduce demands on another or create opportunities for overall efficiencies.

a. Select the External Quality Control approach to recommend

There are two main classes of external quality control approach ie

- the introduction of an element of independence into the assessment process;
- the monitoring and standardisation of assessment decisions against quality expectations.

The first applies an independent assessment component which can be undertaken by all candidates and can be used as a benchmark to evaluate the quality of assessment decisions; the second depends on monitoring assessment decisions and processes over time to evaluate quality.

Presently, most N/SVQs depend exclusively on monitoring and verification to maintain external quality control over assessment, and only a few incorporate independent assessment in the systems they use. Most other qualification systems in the UK also employ monitoring and standardisation approaches. But they additionally make use of assessment approaches in which **some** component of the assessment decision is taken in a way that is demonstrably independent of anyone with a vested interest in the outcome of assessment and/or they use moderation to ensure the consistency of assessment decisions.

Currently, only a few N/SVQs make use of external quality control methods which involve independence in the assessment process itself. However, in a number of cases, the introduction of such approaches could have benefits by:

- enhancing public confidence in the rigour, fairness and reliability of the N/SVQ;
- cutting the costs of assessment;
- improving candidate access to assessment;

- facilitating career progression;
- confirming and supporting assessor reliability.

At annex 1 you will find a list of various situations in which these benefits can be found.

The regulatory requirements state that external quality control of assessment will 'normally be achieved through the use of independent assessment.' It is a PSAG requirement that consideration be given to whether or not independent assessment should feature as part of the overall assessment arrangements.

In summary, the three main approaches to introducing independence are:

- the use of independent assessors visiting/meeting with a candidate to examine a common sample of all candidate's work;
- the use of local, regional or national assessment sites at which a candidate's ability to perform a given activity can be assessed in a standardised way by someone with no direct connection to the candidate;
- the use of externally set or guided assessments which can be objectively marked and the results independently confirmed.

Each has merits and disadvantages which need to be considered in the light of the context for which the N/SVQ(s) is being developed and the results of the review process. Annex 2 to this document gives further details on the characteristics and constraints of different forms of independent assessment and the assessment methods associated with them. Situations which would offer opportunities for developing and introducing particular forms of independent assessment within the overall quality control are shown in Annex 3.

You will need to evaluate the different options and ensure any selection will:

- lead to valid and reliable assessment of important enough aspects of the standards to act as a means of ensuring the overall quality of the assessment;
- not introduce other skills or requirements beyond those specified by the standards;
- not increase costs unacceptably and ideally lead to overall savings;
- be acceptable on practical grounds to employers and candidates.

The step wise approach shown in Annex 7 has worked well for a number of standards setting bodies. It is good practice to follow this or a similar process to ensure a full and fair consideration of the options, beginning with a consideration of independent assessment.

Where independent assessment is not going to be desirable and/or practicable, for reasons which can be justified, follow the process through again to determine what enhancements you can introduce through a monitoring and standardisation approach to external quality control

Note that, where independent assessment is rejected, PSAG will need to see evidence of:

- which methods of independent assessment were considered;
- a clear rationale for their rejection;
- the process by which decisions were reached;
- the interest groups who were consulted;

- in what way the alternative external quality control mechanism proposed is equally robust.

As stated above, most current NVQs and SVQs depend primarily on monitoring and verification to provide external quality control. Typical internal and external verification systems within N/SVQs involve the verifiers reviewing all or a sample of assessment decisions and evaluating the implementation of assessment systems. Verifiers also seek to standardise the way in which assessors and other approved centre personnel interpret the awarding body requirements. Most monitoring and verification processes happen after the assessment events have taken place and are therefore characterised by the fact that the outcomes influence *future* assessment decisions and processes, rather than *current* assessment decisions.

Other monitoring approaches which are becoming more widespread include statistical monitoring of assessor, verifier and centre outcomes and risk rating of centres.

Enhancements and additions to the monitoring and standardisation approaches in use can be achieved through one or more of the following approaches:

Increased and common levels of sampling of assessment decisions at both internal and external verification levels

For example, several SSBs are recommending higher levels of moderation by verifiers than previously, applied consistently by all awarding bodies

Use of statistical monitoring to provide more information on the performance of centres and assessors over time which will inform the deployment of moderating activities such as EV visits and training/development events

For example, the awarding body forum for one sector have committed to improving the use they each make of statistical information to inform the frequency of external verifier visits and the factors addressed during such visits.

Use of risk rating approaches to identify and evaluate the likely risks that assessment decisions may be unsound, so that moderating activities can be targeted effectively

As with statistical monitoring, risk rating is a way of identifying where verification should be directed in a systematic manner.

Increased and/or additional cross-centre standardisation

For example, one SSB is seeking to work with the awarding bodies to provide support for cross-AB networking to underpin consistency, building on informal arrangements that exist in some parts of the country.

It is a current requirement that the assessment of N/SVQs is subject to:

- the moderation of assessment decisions made by assessors and internal verifiers;
- external verification to guarantee standards are being maintained;
- a comprehensive and nationally applied strategy for sampling assessment.

It should be noted that the use of independent assessment should not be taken to cancel out the continuing use of monitoring and standardisation approaches, although it may allow more efficient use and direction of those aspects. An external quality control system that is fit for purpose and appropriate to the context of the N/SVQ is likely to depend on a mixture of approaches.

b. Define those aspects of the standards which must always be assessed through performance in the workplace

The standards setting body is best placed to determine which aspects of the standards should always be assessed through evidence from a candidate's performance in the workplace. Much of this determination will arise naturally during the standards development process.

Employers want to be sure that a person holding an N/SVQ in a particular occupational area is competent to work to the standards of performance in that sector. It follows that the most valid evidence of competence comes from assessment through performance in the workplace. Accordingly, the general expectation of most standards setting bodies is that the default position for assessment of N/SVQs is characterised by:

- the use of the workplace as the primary assessment location;
- and
- the use of naturally occurring workplace evidence (activities and products) as the primary evidence source.

In reviewing current practices, some standards setting bodies have discovered that these principles have not been applied consistently across awarding bodies or between approved centres. Providing clearer specification of the expectations regarding assessment through performance in the workplace is a means of underpinning the use of valid, reliable and consistent assessment.

Consideration as to which aspects of the standards must always be assessed through performance in the workplace for all candidates has to be informed by judgements about:

- how **critical** to a valid assessment of competence individual aspects of the standards might be;

For example, one SSB identified that the coordination of activities in certain situations called for a high level of skill and flexible responsiveness to the situation. In other situations a more routine approach was likely to be involved. It determined that assessment through performance in the workplace in both situations was the most valid means of evaluating candidate competence and would be essential before competence could be confidently ascribed to a candidate. The awarding bodies advised that simulation was not an option because of the excessive costs involved in ensuring the levels of realism needed; neither would other forms of assessment be capable of generating sufficiently valid evidence.

- what **practical** constraints might apply on assessment through workplace performance.

For example, one SSB identified that while performance in the workplace was the preferred option, the difficulties of obtaining such evidence for practical aspects of the standards which candidates typically carry out in isolation, in client premises, meant that it was unrealistic to demand that it be provided for all candidates. The awarding bodies are working to determine suitable alternative assessment approaches and the SSB will not be stipulating that assessment through performance in the workplace must always be undertaken for those aspects of the standards.

You must state your expectations in sufficient detail to ensure that any awarding body seeking to implement the strategy is in no doubt about the **extent** of the demand for assessment to draw upon evidence of performance in the workplace. But note that this is **not** the same as specifying the amount of evidence needed, nor of defining particular combinations of evidence that should be sought.

c. Define the use and characteristics of simulation

It is the standards setting body's responsibility to define the acceptability of evidence from simulations in the context of the standards and N/SVQ(s) covered.

Simulation is most likely to be indicated where the achievement of valid and reliable assessment calls for evidence of performance under workplace conditions, but where it would be difficult to assess through normal working practice. This would usually be as a result of one or more of the following constraints applying:

- the aspect of the standards deals with activities which are inherently hazardous and where mistakes made in carrying them out would pose unacceptable risks to the candidate, other people, animals or property (*eg electricity and gas sectors, fire service etc*);
- the costs of making mistakes in the activity covered by the standards would be unacceptably high, so there is a need to 'prove' competence before the candidate is 'let loose' on real work (*eg in some manufacturing situations and/or when candidates are involved in handling rare or precious objects*);
- the aspect of the standards deals with activities or situations which are sufficiently rare that to wait for real workplace evidence would cause unacceptable delays in the recognition of a candidate's competence (*eg in some processes where the process may only be shut-down on an annual or even longer basis*);
- the standard deals with situations where the qualities and outcomes of the candidate's behaviour are almost impossible to distinguish from those of peers or colleagues, making authenticity uncertain (*eg in some teamwork contexts*);
- the timescale between the candidate's performance in the workplace and the outcomes of his/her actions being felt is so long that to wait for real workplace evidence would cause unacceptable delays in the recognition of a candidate's competence (*eg in some management or financial situations*);
- the collection and/or review of evidence of workplace performance would intrude unacceptably on personal privacy or confidentiality or would significantly alter the nature of an interaction or relationship (*eg in some health care situations*);
- the standard involves a requirement to work with new technologies and/or work practices which may not yet be found in all workplaces.

Simulations can take one or a combination of two forms ie

- they present candidates with an activity to perform using equipment and/or in a location which models that found in the workplace;
- they present candidates with a situation to which they must respond, taking and playing the role they would expect to play in the workplace.

Properly designed and implemented, simulations can yield high quality evidence of both the processes which a candidate follows and the outcomes which s/he generates. This component of the assessment strategy needs to clearly and unambiguously specify where the use of simulations is permitted. This may be in relation to particular situations (see above list) at the level of the entire N/SVQ, or in the context of only certain units or parts of a unit.

For example, one SSB has identified that simulation is permitted for all units in the N/SVQ, but must be carried out within a real working environment (see also below). Another has stated that simulation is not permitted in respect of the mandatory units but is allowable in relation to contingencies involving a response to risks to health, safety and/or security.

Some standards setting bodies have elected to declare the acceptability or otherwise of simulation within the documentation accompanying the standards themselves. If that approach is followed, it is imperative that the assessment strategy makes reference to where within the standards such details can be found and states the general principles which led to the use of simulation being indicated.

The standards setting body's role extends to defining the parameters of a 'realistic workplace environment', which awarding bodies should match when designing, setting up and implementing a simulation. This could include defining the parameters of:

- the activity or situation to be faced;
- tensions and constraints which would apply in the workplace;
- the environment in which the activity is to be carried out;
- people, equipment and materials that would occur in the workplace.

For example, one SSB stipulates that simulations must be designed to provide environments that occur in the natural performance of the job and, among other attributes:

- ◆ *involve the same personnel as would normally be included;*
- ◆ *involve the same facilities, or lack of them....*

Another has detailed that simulations must be designed to mirror the same activity as it would be carried out in a workplace environment, including, among other features:

- ◆ *the urgency with which the activity must be carried out and the time needed to complete it;*
- ◆ *the number and sequence of actions needed to complete the activity;*
- ◆ *the number and complexity of the factors affecting the activity....*

It is important to liaise with the awarding bodies to ensure that the definition of what would constitute a realistic workplace environment is clear and capable of implementation.

d. Define the occupational expertise requirements of assessors and verifiers

An important aspect of ensuring that assessment and quality control is rigorous is that it should be conducted by competent and qualified assessors and verifiers capable of correctly and consistently interpreting the national occupational standards and guidance received from standards setting and awarding bodies.

Standards setting bodies are responsible, in consultation with the relevant awarding bodies, for defining what constitutes appropriate occupational expertise for assessors and verifiers in their sector.

When determining the requirements, consideration should be given to the need for assessors and verifiers to have sufficient occupational expertise to ensure:

- an up to date working knowledge and experience of the particular aspects of work they are assessing;
- a sound, in-depth knowledge of the standards;
- sufficient depth of occupational knowledge and experience to be effective and reliable when making judgements about candidate competence.

Consideration should also be given to any need for particular expertise in specialist areas, such as in relation to particular sub-sectors or, for example with regard to IT, health and safety, or Key and/or Core skill aspects of the standards.

For example, one SSB has stated that internal verifiers must have two years industry experience at operational and supervisory/management level. Another has stated that assessors must have had direct experience of performing the competences under review or have recent and relevant experience and a thorough technical knowledge of what constitutes effective performance under current working practices and conditions in the sub-sector context in which assessment is to take place. They go on to say that it is unlikely, although not impossible, that an individual of less than three years experience in the industry would have sufficient occupational or vocational competence to be an effective assessor. The same SSB stipulates that external verifiers must have significant experience and understanding of the occupational and vocational (sub-sector) areas covered by the N/SVQs. Discussion with AB partners confirmed the likelihood of suitable people being available.

Note that assessors and verifiers will also require competence in other areas of their role in the N/SVQ system, but these are catered for by requirements placed on the awarding bodies by the regulatory authorities and need not be reproduced in the assessment strategy.

e. Draft and get agreement to the strategy

Your strategy should be written as succinctly and clearly as possible. It must contain statements with regard to the **each** of the four components of an assessment strategy ie:

- your recommendations as to how external quality control of assessment will be achieved;
- definition of which aspects of the national occupational standards must always be assessed through performance in the workplace;
- definition of the extent to which simulated working conditions may be used to assess competence and any characteristics that simulation should have, including definitions of what would constitute a 'realistic working environment' for the qualifications concerned;
- definition of the occupational expertise requirements for assessors.

It is good practice to ensure that drafts of the strategy are circulated to relevant key parties to ensure that the final version has the firm agreement of all concerned.

Once you have your final draft, it is vital that you obtain written confirmation from the awarding bodies associated with the N/SVQ(s) that they accept it in full and are committed to supporting it. Be sure to allow sufficient time for them to receive and review it internally.

Finally, you should ensure sector support through continuing discussions with sector representatives. A further consultation may well be called for, particularly if the strategy you have developed differs significantly from the current system or is for a totally new N/SVQ. If you can anticipate this need, then it should be built into your project plan and submission from the outset.

For example, one SSB developing the standards and strategy for a new N/SVQ worked with a project group made up of sector representatives and awarding body staff to review and develop their strategy proposals. They then consulted upon those proposals through a postal survey before finally agreeing them for submission. An earlier survey had collected views on different options to feed into the decision-making process. For cost-effectiveness, questions relating to the assessment strategy were included within consultation papers also seeking views on the developing national occupational standards.

Where research and review have clearly demonstrated that there is no scope for improvement to the current assessment system, then your assessment strategy should be drafted so as to present the current approach in respect of each of the four components. As with all assessment strategies, you will need to supply evidence of your research and review processes and outcomes when making a submission to PSAG (see below).

Step 4: Submit the strategy for approval

a. Collate the required information

Having drafted your assessment strategy, and gained the agreement of relevant parties to it, you will need to prepare it for submission. The material you need to provide specifically with regard to the assessment strategy is given in the checklist below:

- an executive summary giving the key aspects of your proposals and the rationales behind them;
- your assessment strategy (see above for guidance on drafting the strategy);
- details of the review process undertaken and its outcome;
- details of the rationales behind the proposals for each component of the strategy and, if independent assessment has been ruled out, the basis for its rejection;
- an indication of what enhancement your proposals provide over current practice;
- details of how the strategy is to be made available to awarding bodies and of their involvement in its determination;
- letter(s) of support from the awarding body(ies) *(NB these can be sent directly to the regulatory authorities by the awarding body(ies) if preferred)*.

If the assessment strategy is being submitted separately from the standards and qualification framework it covers, you will need to supply details of these in addition to the material above.

The usual process for submission of materials to PSAG applies; PSAG meets monthly and all paperwork needs to be submitted two months in advance in order to allow time for officers to consider the proposal and provide initial feedback. The timetable of PSAG meetings and corresponding NTO submission dates is published by PSAG.

b. Work with the regulatory authorities

The regulatory authority officers with whom the standards setting body normally works will be the first point of contact for advice on all aspects of assessment strategy development as the process begins and an initial funding proposal is made. Subsequently, as the development work progresses, the awarding bodies may be able to provide more detailed input on technical issues. It is good practice to ensure that your regulatory authority officers are kept fully briefed on the development process at all stages.

PSAG expects that any negotiations and agreements over the use of imported units, whether using the original assessment strategy or a negotiated version, will be settled before submission is made for approval. PSAG also expects that any disagreements between the standards setting body and any of the awarding bodies for the N/SVQ will have been resolved before submission.

Where a submitted assessment strategy is rejected by PSAG or referred back to the standards setting body, details of the grounds for rejection or referral will be provided.

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Step 5: Implement, monitor and review the strategy

At this stage, few assessment strategies have been approved and in place long enough for extensive experience in their implementation to have been developed. However, as the development and implementation of assessment strategies for all N/SVQs in the frameworks progresses, there will be a need to monitor implementation and to use the information gained to support the subsequent review and continuous improvement of the strategy.

a. Advise the awarding bodies

It is the responsibility of the standards setting body to advise the relevant awarding bodies that a submitted assessment strategy has been approved. It is then the awarding bodies responsibility, when seeking accreditation of the N/SVQ, to submit detailed proposals for assessment and guidance which adopt the general principles set out in the assessment strategy as approved by the regulatory authorities.

Should awarding bodies, other than those initially involved in development of the assessment strategy, subsequently seek to offer the N/SVQ, the assessment strategy must be made freely available to them.

b. Monitor implementation and review the strategy

Since implementation of the N/SVQ is the responsibility of the awarding bodies, they must clearly take charge of gathering much of the information needed to monitor the impact of the strategy.

However, the standards setting body will also want to assure itself that the assessment strategy it has developed is capable of being implemented as intended and that no unforeseen problems emerge which could impact on the uptake and quality of the N/SVQ(s).

Discussions at awarding body forum meetings and other exchanges can be structured to raise and probe the ways in which awarding bodies are implementing a particular strategy and identify any difficulties that may have arisen.

For example, one SSB and the relevant awarding bodies intend to raise the assessment strategy as a regular item at Awarding Body Forum meetings so that each can feed in experiences and deal collectively and quickly with any issues that arise. Another has agreed with the awarding bodies that they will regularly monitor implementation and provide the SSB with a report on a number of agreed points every six months. The SSB will be collecting feedback from employers through its usual consultative channels.

Monitoring of the implementation of the N/SVQ should be set up to collect information that will allow determination of whether the benefits it was designed to deliver, in terms of the technical quality and acceptability of assessment, are being realised in practice. If monitoring is effective, when the N/SVQ comes up for review and renewal, the information upon which to determine whether the strategy works (see the section on reviewing current practices in this guidance), and what if any improvements could be made to it, will already be to hand.

The regulatory authorities will review and evaluate the on-going development and implementation of assessment strategies.

Annex 1: Benefits that can arise from using independent assessment methods and opportunities for its introduction

Key benefits that can arise from the use of independent assessment as a component of the external quality control system for an N/SVQ, and the sorts of situations where they can be achieved are as follows:

Benefit	Indicative situations
<p>Enhancing public confidence in the rigour, fairness and reliability of the N/SVQ <i>Confidence can be increased through introducing a highly visible commitment to quality control through some aspect of independent assessment</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Where research has indicated that employers and practitioners have lower confidence in the N/SVQ than should be the case ◆ Where the public accountability of assessment decisions is important to the value base of the sector and/or there is a legal requirement regarding competence ◆ Where research has indicated high levels of inter-assessor and/or inter-approved centre variability in assessment decisions ◆ Where other, vocationally related awards in the sector use independent assessment for some part of the award and are valued by the sector as being valid, fair and reliable.
<p>Cutting the costs of assessment <i>NB Costs can be direct in terms of development, administration and delivery by the awarding body and approved centre; or indirect in terms of the time and resources of the candidate/employer.</i></p> <p><i>Up-front development costs may be high for some methods, but may be able to be off-set against reduced costs in the longer term.</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Where constraints mean that external verification is very expensive if carried out at sufficient level to ensure quality is maintained ◆ Where the collection of sufficient evidence of good enough quality has to otherwise take place over a lengthy period of time ◆ Where an independent assessment method can be used to replace another method that is more expensive for the candidate/employer and/or assessor to undertake
<p>Improving candidate access to assessment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Where individual workplaces may be unable to provide access to all assessment contexts required ◆ Where typical candidates work in a freelance capacity and/or spend a lot of time working in isolation and/or are in full-time training
<p>Facilitating career progression <i>Progression between N/SVQs and between N/SVQs and vocationally related awards may be able to be supported</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Where there are shared units or other aspects of an award with common progression links with the N/SVQ ◆ Where the use of independent assessment is already a part of the overall quality control for a linked award
<p>Supporting assessor reliability <i>The use of an independent component provides assessors with an immediate yardstick against which to compare their own decision-making</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Where assessor numbers per approved centre are low ◆ Where opportunities for cross-assessor networking are low

Annex 2: Different forms of independent assessment

Forms of independent assessment	Characteristics and constraints on use	Relevant assessment methods
<p>Independence in the relationship between candidate and assessor - assessor moves to the candidate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Can be used in relation to naturally occurring workplace evidence or in relation to simulations or other practical exercises such as work sampling, undertaken away from productive work ◆ May be unacceptable on the grounds of commercial confidentiality where it involves the assessor in examining workplace products or observing commercially sensitive processes ◆ May be costly where candidates are limited in number and/or widely spread or where the outcomes being assessed are very diverse 	<p>Peripatetic assessment (Observation of process) Assessor observation of practical activities carried out by the candidate - may be combined with the assessor asking the candidate to explain what they are doing, and why, as they carry out the activity</p> <p>Peripatetic assessment (Observation of products) Assessor evaluation of the outputs of practical activities carried out by the candidate</p> <p>Peripatetic assessment (Oral questioning) Assessor asks direct questions of a candidate who is not involved in any other activity at the time. Assessment interviews and viva voce would come into this category</p>
<p>Independence in the relationship between candidate and assessor - candidate moves to the assessor</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Can be an excellent way of obtaining a great deal of evidence in a short time period ◆ Assessment centres and simulators can be expensive to set up, but may be worth it if the aspect of competence is highly critical and other forms of assessment would be inappropriate for whatever reason; there are economies of scale allowing more realistic simulations than one centre might be able to afford ◆ May be relevant where many candidates work in a freelance capacity and/or in workplaces which cannot enable generation of the full evidence requirement 	<p>Independent assessment centres Standard definition is the use of multiple assessments, multiple assessment methods and multiple assessors. Centres may be permanent or temporary.</p> <p>Sites set up to provide simulations using equipment and environments which model that found in the workplace and which can be used to model situations which may be rare or dangerous.</p> <p>Sites set up to provide practical tests based on work samples in which candidates carry out practical activities using real equipment, materials, information or resources from the workplace. Sites may be in the workplace, but away from productive</p>

Independence through the use of externally developed assessment instruments

- ◆ Assessors can benefit from experience of a wide range of candidates; conversely they can become divorced from the occupation if full - time at the assessment location - occasional use of assessors from within the industry at 'neutral' locations can avoid that

work, or in a completely different location.

- ◆ Development costs can be both high and low and shelf-lives limited or extensive, depending on the type of instrument
- ◆ May be of limited scope in their coverage of the standards but can be designed to bring together requirements common to a number of units in a holistic manner
- ◆ Danger of drift in that learners work towards the assessment instruments rather than achieving competence; direct and auditable relationship to the standards can help avoid this

Assignments Problem-solving exercises with clear guidance and of specified length - may be practical and/or cognitive.

Case studies A description of an event concerning real life or a simulated situation to which the candidate must respond in a structured way.

Multiple choice tests - questions followed by a series of plausible alternative answers from which the candidate has to select the correct one. May be delivered via ICT.

Written examination - open response Typical examples would be essays and dissertations. Used principally to test recall, evaluation and synthesis of information and ideas.

Written examination - short answer A series of questions to which there is a fairly standard answer, usually consisting of a few words. Used principally to assess the ability to recall information

Annex 3: Opportunities for introducing different forms of independent assessment.

Opportunities for developing independent assessment

- ◆ arrangements for performance evaluation by people external to the candidate's workplace already exist
- ◆ appraisal systems in common use in the sector involve a second person who works in a different part of the organisation from candidates
- ◆ local/regional consortia to support training and access to assessment already exist
- ◆ specialist training facilities which simulate a typical workplace are available and used within the sector to develop candidates and assess progress towards competence
- ◆ local/regional consortia to support training and access to assessment already exist
- ◆ simulations are already in widespread use within the N/SVQ
- ◆ use of centrally developed instruments to assess progress towards competence is commonplace
- ◆ practical and/or written knowledge tests are already in use

Potential form of independent assessment indicated

Independence in the relationship between candidate and assessor - assessor moves to the candidate

Independence in the relationship between candidate and assessor - candidate moves to the assessor

Independence through the use of externally developed assessment instruments

Annex 4: Information requirements and possible sources

Information needed....and why

details of the validity, reliability, cost and practicality of current assessment approaches used within the N/SVQ in question and in relation to each unit specifically

needed to help you decide where improvements may be required

information on the assessment strategy requirements associated with any imported units

*so that they can be taken into account when developing your strategy, ensuring that unit integrity is maintained between N/SVQs and contexts. **NB** see also the Guidance on Tailoring*

Possible sources

ask the awarding body(ies) to feed in details from monitoring and evaluation systems eg *EV reports* and for information on costs eg from a survey approved centre staff with regard to the costs, both direct and indirect, of assessment approaches. You will also need details of current guidance documents, materials and instruments used.

review HMI reports (Scotland) and/or reports produced by the Training Standards Inspectorate, FEFC, ESTYM and regulatory body reports such as your Stage 2 review report (*NB in the future QCA audit reports may be available in the public domain*)

work jointly with the awarding body(ies) to evaluate practices compared with policies

hold joint workshops with the awarding body for assessors and verifiers to provide feedback on their experiences

collect feedback from employers on their views and experiences

collate and evaluate feedback you have already received on the standards and N/SVQs

write to the originating body early in the process to explain your position and maintain a dialogue with them as your strategy develops; check whether units currently in any N/SVQ under review are likely to continue

details of assessment methods, external quality control measures, assessor/verifier competence, and the demand for particular types of evidence within other similar or related N/SVQs or other awards which are designed to address similar occupational contexts

provides additional options for you to consider when you review the opportunities open to you; especially of interest where N/SVQs and other awards may be linked in career pathways

details of the technical strengths, cost-benefit profile, acceptability and weaknesses of possible improvements in external quality control

to help ensure that the recommendations you make will lead to assessment that is valid, reliable and cost-effective to implement

the acceptability of possible improvements to any aspect of the assessment system in the context of the occupational role, the candidate profile and the employment situation

to help you determine whether sector confidence in the rigour and viability of assessment will be maintained

exchange information with other standards setting bodies, both generically and specifically

ask your contacts in the accrediting bodies for information on other awards/sectors

carry out a desk review of assessment and quality control system details published by awarding bodies for related or similar N/SVQs and/or other relevant awards in the sector

ask the awarding bodies to bring their EVs/IVs together to discuss alternatives they know of being used elsewhere, for example as part of checks on training and learning progress and/or within other awards of direct relevance in the sector

seek input from awarding bodies based on their expertise on assessment design

review other guides and literature sources on assessment methodologies

ask the awarding body for input, eg from a survey of approved centre staff

conduct a cost benefit analysis of different approaches

draw upon your own expertise with regard to the sector and/or desk review of occupational and functional maps, LMI, skills needs analyses etc

consultation with employers, candidates, verifiers and assessors

discussion with awarding bodies

expectations as to which aspects of the standards must always be assessed through performance in the workplace for the N/SVQ to be seen as valid and rigorous

to help ensure that the strategy will lead to assessment that genuinely evaluates a candidate's occupational competence in all critical aspects

information on when the use of simulation can be accepted as valid, reliable and practical within the N/SVQ

to help ensure that the strategy will lead to assessment that genuinely evaluates a candidate's occupational competence in all critical aspects

information on what should constitute a realistic workplace environment

so that you can produce clear specifications which the industry will accept as enabling the assessment of occupational competence

technical and practical requirements and constraints on the occupational expertise which assessors and verifiers need to have, including such matters as the speed of change in working practices and technologies, the likely numbers of people with the kind of expertise and qualifications to act as assessors or verifiers

so that there is consistency across awarding bodies and to ensure that sector confidence in the ability of assessors and verifiers is maintained

collate and evaluate feedback you have already received on the standards and N/SVQs; draw upon information from any standards review and development processes

survey sector contacts for their views on the criticality of assessment through performance in the workplace

ask the awarding body(ies) to feed in a technical perspective, to offer information on the practicalities of mandatory assessment through performance in the workplace and provide details on this aspect from monitoring and evaluation systems eg *EV reports*

collate and evaluate feedback you have already received on the standards and N/SVQs

collect feedback from employers on their views and experiences

ask the awarding body(ies) to feed in details from monitoring and evaluation systems eg *EV reports*

draw upon your own expertise with regard to the sector and/or desk review of occupational and functional maps, LMI, skills needs analyses etc

consultation with employers, candidates, verifiers and assessors

review of published reports by agencies such as the Training Standards Inspectorate, FEFC

draw upon your own expertise with regard to the sector and/or desk review of occupational and functional maps, LMI, skills needs analyses etc

consultation with employers, candidates, verifiers and assessors

discussion with awarding bodies

Annex 5: Glossary of selected terms and acronyms used in this document

AB	Awarding Body. An organisation or consortium recognised by a regulatory authority for the purpose of awarding specified qualifications
External assessment	A form of independent assessment (see below) in which an awarding body sets or defines assignments, tests or examinations, specifies the conditions under which they are to be taken (including details of supervision and duration) and assesses candidates' responses.
Independent assessment	Assessment which is carried out in a manner which is demonstrably independent of anyone who might have a vested interest in the outcome of the assessment decision
Fairness	National occupational standards and assessment must be free from bias. Assessment methods and procedures should be consistent with best practice about equal opportunities and N/SVQs should be open to all who are capable of demonstrating the required competence.
Monitoring	The process of checking the behaviour of an assessor or approved centre over time against a set of pre-determined criteria. Used to provide a statistical or more qualitative evaluation of the quality and consistency of assessment.
Realistic Workplace Environment	A description of the factors that would need to be present for a setting to be sufficiently like a real workplace that assessment of candidate performance within that setting could be accepted as a valid measure of their competence within a genuine workplace. Different SSBs define a realistic workplace environment (RWE) in different ways.
Reliability	The ability of a specific method of assessment to ensure consistent results for different assessors on each assessment occasion. Reliability in N/SVQs is about ensuring the highest levels of consistency in assessors' decisions. Judgements about the validity and sufficiency of evidence should be the same between assessors across approved centres and across ABs
Simulation	An assessment method which is designed to generate the opportunity for candidates demonstrate their occupational competence under situations which model those of the workplace. Used where assessment through workplace performance is recommended but where there are limitations on access to suitable opportunities.
SSB	Standards setting body. An organisation - usually a national training organisation - recognised by a regulatory authority as responsible for formulating standards of competence for an employment sector and keeping them under review

Validity

Within N/SVQs, this is about the relevance of the assessment method used to assess occupational competence. In general terms, the more direct and obvious the link between the evidence collected by the assessment method and the competence being assessed, the higher the validity of the method.

Verification

The process of obtaining confirmation that standards and assessment systems are being applied consistently and correctly.

NB Academic literature on the subject of assessment provides further, more detailed definitions of the terms used to describe assessment processes.

Annex 6 : Roles and responsibilities of the SSB, AB and PSAG in relation to assessment strategies

Body Standards setting body (SSB)	Responsibilities	Strengths	Pressures
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ development of an assessment strategy for N/SVQs frameworks maintained and developed for the sector ◆ coordination of the research and development processes needed ◆ submitting the assessment strategy for approval ◆ collation of information to inform future review of the strategy via feedback from ABs and the sector 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ sector knowledge and understanding of employment contexts ◆ access to networks for consultations with key employment interests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ may have only limited technical understanding of assessment design and the quality control of assessment ◆ may have limited access to candidates and assessors/verifiers
Awarding body (AB)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ collaborating with the SSB and other awarding bodies to support development of the strategy ◆ endorsing the assessment strategy and committing to its implementation ◆ adopting the principles set out in the assessment strategy when developing and submitting an N/SVQ for accreditation ◆ evaluating implementation of an N/SVQ and compiling information to assist in future reviews of the assessment strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ technical expertise in assessment design and the operation of quality control mechanisms on assessment ◆ contacts within the approved centres ◆ information on the operation of existing N/SVQs and quality control systems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ commercial pressures may restrict ability to respond to some sector preferences ◆ commercial pressures may restrict the ability to share certain information

Projects and Standards Approvals Group (PSAG)

- ◆ to review and approve development proposals and submitted assessment strategies
- ◆ has an overview across sectors
- ◆ has access to technical expertise in assessment design and delivery
- ◆ must rely on documented and auditable approval processes so needs clearly evidenced and documented submissions

Annex 7 Determining an external quality control approach

A: Identify where opportunities exist for improving external quality control

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- refer to the information from your review

- *for example, assessment centres, or peripatetic assessors may already be a feature of the current system and acceptable to employers. One SSB's review identified that the question banks already used for the N/SVQ are well received by the sector and should be continued. Another identified that common assessment instruments were a feature of formative assessment anyway and could play a role. One identified that external verifiers were acting inconsistently and needed additional guidelines.*

B: Assess the strengths and weaknesses of each alternative in relation to those opportunities

—

- be systematic and include an assessment of impact on other aspects of the system

- *for example, one SSB identified that use of peripatetic assessors was beneficial to credibility for the higher level N/SVQs and the higher costs of the assessment were acceptable to candidates and employers. At lower levels, the use of common assessment instruments was deemed to be more cost effective and would allow evaluation of candidate depth of knowledge. Different verification sampling rates could be applied.*

C: Eliminate the unsuitable and inappropriate

—

- consider practicalities as well as technical issues

- *for example, one SSB rejected independent, peripatetic assessors on the grounds that the sheer geographical spread of candidates was so great that the cost burden would be excessive.*

D: Prioritise the possible and agree the best

- consult with employers, awarding bodies and other key interests

- *for example, one SSB identified a range of options for introducing independence and, although it has proposed a preferred approach, is willing to support any of those approaches as meeting the strategy principle that there be some degree of externality for all candidates.*

Additional support materials are being developed to assist in selecting between different forms of external quality control.

Annex 8 Organisations providing information to the research

This study was commissioned by the Projects and Standards Approvals Group (PSAG) to investigate good practice in the development and assessment strategies for NVQs and SVQs. The information was gathered by documentary analysis of approved and developing assessment strategies together with telephone interviews with a range of standards setting bodies and awarding bodies actively involved with the development of an assessment strategy. Two forum events for standards setting bodies and awarding bodies were held to discuss key issues emerging from the research and to review guidance requirements.

Examples

The examples given in the guidance are based on examples of assessment strategy development work undertaken by a variety of standards setting bodies in collaboration with relevant awarding bodies. We would like to thank the individuals who contributed to this study for their willingness to provide the required information and their openness and honesty in commenting on the processes used and the outcomes achieved in the development of N/SVQ (and other) assessment strategies. In particular we wish to register our thanks to contacts with regard to the following organisations:

Association for Ceramic Training and Development
Board for Education and Training in the Water Industry
CACHE
Chemical Manufacturing and Processing NTO
City and Guilds of London Institute
Cleaning and Support Services NTO
Construction Industry Council
Council for Administration
Cultural Heritage NTO
Early Years NTO
Edexcel
Electricity Training Association
Engineering Construction Industry Training Board
ECITB Awards
Hair and Beauty Industry Authority
Healthwork UK
Hospitality Awarding Body
Hospitality Training Federation
Intellect
Institute of Customer Services
Institute of Management
Insurance and Related Financial Services NTO
London Chambers of Commerce and Industry Examination Board
Management and Enterprise Training Organisation
NTO tele.com
OCR
Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons
Sports, Recreation and Allied Occupations NTO
SQA (Awarding Body)
United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting