

# Verification Visits: A Guide for Colleges, Employers and Training Providers

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# About this guide

This guide provides an update on our external verification policy and practice. It is mainly intended for those staff involved in the delivery and assessment of qualifications. It should help to explain the process of external verification, and help you to get the best out of external verification visits to your centre and make effective use of our other verification services.

We hope that it will assist you to work with us to ensure that our awards have the confidence not only of the candidates and those who fund them, but also of employers, colleges and other training providers.

Throughout this guide there are references to the terms *external verification* and *External Verifier*. We now use these terms rather than *moderation* and *moderator*.

# The Quality Framework

Qualifications have to be seen to be reliable — people must have confidence in the quality of the awards. This is why we have a quality assurance system. Each individual centre may be responsible for assessing many awards, so we have designed a system of checks to make sure that assessment is consistent and of high quality. The system is SQA's Quality Framework.

The Quality Framework involves a number of key processes. *Approval* and *external verification* are crucial parts of this system.

The system is based on the understanding that, once a centre has been approved, it then has responsibility for assessing the candidates it enters for certain qualifications, and also for maintaining correct and consistent standards of assessment.

Our task in SQA is to ensure that the standards of our qualifications are maintained wherever the qualifications are delivered. We do this by deploying Customer Support Managers (CSMs), whose role is to provide generic quality assurance advice to our centres. We also appoint and deploy a team of External Verifiers (EVs). EVs are subject experts, and their role is to confirm that the assessment decisions that centres make meet national standards.

We use different models of verification to maximise the effectiveness of quality assurance — we may use *central verification* or *postal verification*, and in these cases there will be little or no contact between the centre and the Verifier. This guide, though, focuses on visiting verification and the interaction between SQA and centres this involves.

# Quality assuring internal assessment

Internal assessment is where centres use assessment instruments to make assessment decisions about candidates' work. External assessment is where the awarding body takes on these duties, usually in the form of examinations or externally-assessed coursework. Only internal assessments are subject to quality assurance by verification.

## Customer Support Managers (CSMs)

All our Customer Support Managers have a background in quality assurance in education and training, as well as a variety of complementary skills and experience in auditing quality assurance systems. CSMs are responsible for groups of centres in their geographical areas. This allows them to become familiar with their centres, to get to know members of staff, and provide continuity in monitoring centres' quality systems. Your CSM will be glad to offer you help and advice on any general aspect of quality assurance, and he or she is a good source of information on operating quality assurance systems.

Your CSM will visit you from time to time to monitor your internal quality assurance system and to confirm that the systems required to support the delivery of our awards are operating effectively. You can also initiate a visit yourself through your centre's SQA Co-ordinator, but there is normally a charge for this service.

You probably already know who your CSM is, but you can check this by asking your SQA Co-ordinator, by contacting us on 0845 279 1000, or by visiting SQA's website: [www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk).

## External Verifiers (EVs)

Our team is made up of several hundred part-time External Verifiers. All Verifiers are experienced practitioners who are well-qualified in their subjects and are trained to carry out verification to the highest standards. The External Verifier not only plays a key role in the quality assurance of internally-assessed Units and Courses, but also has a responsibility to help centres to interpret standards correctly and to promote and disseminate good practice in all SQA qualifications.

External Verifiers come from a variety of backgrounds — they may be college lecturers, teachers, or representatives from professional bodies, industry and commerce. What links them is their commitment to implementing SQA's quality assurance strategy and their desire to improve standards in education and training.

All SQA Units and Group Awards are classified in occupational/subject groups known as *verification groups*. External Verifiers are allocated to these groups on the basis of their technical knowledge and expertise. Typically, each group is

composed of External Verifiers from a range of backgrounds and geographical locations. The group will meet at least once a year to keep abreast of new developments in their subject area and to carry out standardisation activities to ensure that the advice they give to centres is consistent.

Verification groups play an important role in SQA's quality assurance system. All the Verifiers working in a group can:

- ◆ discuss ideas and exchange experiences
- ◆ contribute to the review of SQA's qualifications
- ◆ agree a consistent national approach to the verification of Units within their verification group
- ◆ provide feedback to SQA
- ◆ identify future training needs

An External Verifier's duties are to:

- ◆ agree a visit plan with your centre
- ◆ carry out development, approval and verification visits
- ◆ contribute to SQA's decision-making on approval issues
- ◆ provide you with advice and support
- ◆ visit your centre to carry out external verification in a specific subject area
- ◆ make a return visit after a 'hold' has been placed on certification and work with you to seek ways of having the hold on certification released
- ◆ consider your centre's responses to conditions that were imposed during approval, and lift these conditions if that is appropriate
- ◆ write well-structured and informative verification reports which incorporate any development or action points that have been agreed with your centre
- ◆ 'prior verify' your centre's assessment instruments and provide you with evaluation reports giving clear advice on any improvements you might need to make so that you can use the instrument of assessment with confidence
- ◆ refer any issues identified during verification to colleagues in SQA, if that is required
- ◆ advise centres and SQA on assessment issues
- ◆ disseminate good practice

In carrying out all of these duties, External Verifiers are committed to maintaining confidentiality at all times.

## **How External Verifiers are selected**

External verifiers are selected, or reselected, by SQA Qualification Managers every year. Their re-appointment as a Verifier depends on their performance in

the preceding year and on their progress with Continuing Professional Development.

Verifiers need to have good organisational and interpersonal skills, and if they are engaged in verifying Higher National or Vocational Qualifications, they should ideally possess the Learning and Development Units A1, A2 and V1 (or equivalents).

All Verifiers should be:

- ◆ competent in the subject/occupational area to an appropriate level for the qualifications they will verify
- ◆ competent in assessment of the qualifications they will verify
- ◆ familiar with the procedures and documentation related to this qualification
- ◆ competent in internal verification
- ◆ free from any potential conflict of interest with the centres which they will verify
- ◆ prepared, where appropriate, to work towards achievement of the V2 Unit *Conduct External Quality Assurance of the Assessment Process*

We are committed to using External Verifiers who have up-to-date subject knowledge and expertise. This helps us to maintain breadth and depth across all vocational and subject areas, and gives you support from a trained and experienced professional.

## **How External Verifiers are trained**

Once External Verifiers have been appointed they attend induction training. Only when they have satisfactorily completed induction training are they confirmed in their appointments. Their subsequent performance is monitored by a regular analysis of their verification feedback forms from centres and any other observations on their performance that we receive.

External Verifiers are also trained in competence-based assessment, and attend regular updating sessions. This means we can be confident that our team of External Verifiers is competent and up to date with developments in their occupational or subject area, as well as being knowledgeable about our policies and procedures.

Supported verification visits are part of the training we give our External Verifiers. New External Verifiers are paired with an experienced External Verifier from the same verification group, where possible, to carry out what we call a 'double-banked visit'. The trainee External Verifier takes the lead and carries out all the usual activities. The experienced Verifier is there to assist, and to ensure that the correct procedures are followed during the visit.

As an awarding body, we are committed to ensuring that the External Verifiers who verify Higher National and Vocational Qualifications are working to the standards laid down in the V2 Unit *Conduct External Quality Assurance of the Assessment Process*. Each new External Verifier who has not yet achieved the Unit will start to collect evidence for it after his or her induction and training programme. Some of the evidence will be generated during visits to your centre, and you may be asked to supply written evidence that Verifiers have performed certain activities. While we recognise that this will involve you in some additional work, we hope that you will be able to supply these testimonials, if you are asked.

In addition to this, we ask you to feed back your comments on the conduct of any verification visit. You should send your comments directly to our Verification Team. Your feedback is invaluable to us in identifying training issues and in managing the activities of our teams. It will also help us to deliver a better quality assurance service.

## **The External Verification Section at SQA**

This team of around 15 SQA officers plans and manages all external verification activity, including:

- ◆ training verifiers
- ◆ reviewing the activities of External Verifiers
- ◆ dealing with all documentation on external verification
- ◆ supporting centres in the external verification process
- ◆ deploying External Verifiers
- ◆ reviewing the External Verifiers' reports and making decisions in the light of Verifiers' recommendations
- ◆ advising External Verifiers on verification issues
- ◆ reporting to the Assessment Panel on external verification issues
- ◆ advising you on external verification matters
- ◆ formally notifying you of the results of external verification visits
- ◆ selecting centres for verification

You can get more information from our Verification Section on 0845 213 5368, or on the Verification pages of our website: [www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk)

## **Making contact**

We will always ask our External Verifiers to make contact with your centre through your SQA Co-ordinator. The SQA Co-ordinator is the person nominated by your centre as the first point of contact with SQA.

## **Contacting Your External Verifier**

If there is something that you want to discuss, it may be possible for you to contact an External Verifier by telephone. All you have to do is contact the

Verification Section at SQA on 0845 213 5368. Staff there will be able to put you in touch with your Verifier. We cannot divulge home telephone numbers for our part-time Verifiers, but our office staff can call them and ask them to contact you.

# The approval process

Approval ensures that centres are fully able to offer our awards by having met all of our criteria for staffing, equipment, accommodation, assessment materials, teaching and learning materials, and other resources.

There are two types of approval:

- ◆ initial approval as a SQA centre
- ◆ approval to offer specific qualifications (when you want to offer a qualification for the first time)

A Customer Support Manager will carry out the first steps on the road to centre approval by ensuring that your organisation has a suitable management structure and quality assurance system to support the delivery, assessment and internal verification of SQA awards successfully. This will normally involve a visit to your centre to gather evidence and confirm that your systems are suitable.

Approval to offer specific qualifications is carried out by an External Verifier who has specialist subject knowledge. This process ensures that your centre has the staff, reference materials, learning materials, assessment instruments, equipment and accommodation it needs, and that an internal verification system is in operation for the qualification. This may (or may not) require the External Verifier to visit the centre — much will depend on the centre's history and success in delivering similar qualifications. If we decide not to visit you, we will ask the External Verifier to scrutinise your application and make a recommendation on your application for approval.

Both the CSM and the External Verifier will submit written reports to our Approval Officer Group. This group meets weekly, or more frequently if necessary. Its function is to scrutinise approval reports and note the CSM's and the Verifier's recommendations. The reports will either recommend that your centre be approved to offer a qualification, or that approval be delayed until certain conditions have been met. We use this committee process as a means of ensuring that decisions are made fairly and consistently. We will tell you of the decision in writing.

Once approval is given, your centre is free to enter candidates for that Unit or qualification. Your centre number will be issued to you after you have been approved as an SQA centre and have also been approved to offer your first qualification.

When approval is withheld until conditions are met, there is a procedure for enabling conditions to be lifted. Sometimes it may be necessary for a CSM or External Verifier to make another visit — this would happen, for example, if the conditions related to equipment or physical resources, which can only be inspected in the centre. Conditions can sometimes be lifted without a visit if you can send us the relevant evidence.

## **Our responsibility**

Our prime responsibility in approval is to check that any centre wishing to enter candidates for an SQA qualification can (or has the potential to) meet our published criteria, and can demonstrate its ability to continue to satisfy our approval criteria. The CSM's and the Verifier's task is to measure centres seeking approval against the published criteria. There are more details about the approval process in our [\*Guide to Approval for Training Providers and Employers\*](#).

## **Quality assurance after approval**

We offer a free post-approval visit, usually within the first six months of delivery of the newly-approved qualification. Your EV or CSM will contact you to arrange these visits.

We encourage centres to take full advantage of this early support. Please note, though, that we will not offer a free visit if the newly-approved qualification is simply a transfer of approval to offer new standards for a qualification which you have previously been approved to deliver.

# The verification process

Verification is the process we use to confirm that SQA centres are assessing their candidates in line with national standards.

Verification focuses on:

- ◆ ensuring the validity of assessment instruments
- ◆ verifying the reliability of assessment decisions
- ◆ verifying that the assessment instruments being used are being used correctly and in line with any assessment specification
- ◆ ensuring that the appropriate resources are in place to support delivery of the qualification

There are two parts to verification: internal verification and external verification.

## Internal verification

Internal verification is designed to ensure that staff in centres are making consistent assessment decisions in accordance with the assessment criteria defined in our qualifications. Our quality assurance criteria — see [SOA's Quality Framework: a guide for centres](#) — clearly outline the partnership arrangements between SQA and its centres, and set out the standard to which internal verification must conform.

You can find more information on internal verification policy and practice in our [Guide to Internal Moderation for SQA Centres](#)

## External verification

External verification is our responsibility. We deploy External Verifiers to check that centres are assessing candidates' work/performance in line with the national standards.

## Verification visits — overview

While visiting your centre, the External Verifier will ask to see evidence in the form of a sample of your candidates' assessed work. The Verifier will scrutinise the candidates' work to verify that your assessors' assessment decisions are correct. The Verifier will ask to see evidence of assessment across as wide a range as possible, and will sample the work of all assessors and internal verifiers.

## Initiating an external verification visit

The number of external verification visits your centre receives in one year will depend on several factors, including:

- ◆ the number and variety of qualifications you are delivering
- ◆ specific rules for SVQs, stipulated by the accreditation body
- ◆ (for SVQs only) whether the NTO/Sector Skills Council has laid down any special requirements in the assessment strategy
- ◆ whether you offer any HNC/D programmes which include Graded Units
- ◆ the sampling strategy we use for particular verification groups
- ◆ issues arising from previous external verification visits your centre's history
- ◆ our risk assessment procedures
- ◆ information from SQA data management section relating to entry/results profile

### **Planning an external verification visit**

The visits will always be arranged in advance, so you should never find that an External Verifier arrives unannounced. The External Verifier is instructed to make the initial contact with your SQA Co-ordinator. We do this to be sure that your centre is fully informed of all external verification activity.

The External Verifier will normally contact your SQA Co-ordinator by phone to arrange a suitable date and time for the visit. During this call the External Verifier will start to compile a visit plan for your centre. To help with this plan, you will be asked for information and the Verifier will advise you on the documentation that you will be expected to have available on the day of the visit.

The Verifier will ask you for:

- ◆ the location of all the assessment sites used by your centre
- ◆ the names of the assessors and internal verifiers (and in the case of SVQs, the names of participating candidates) for particular Units or Group Awards

The Verifier will also advise you on:

- ◆ the records and documents pertaining to assessment and internal verification of candidates' work that should be made available at the visit
- ◆ whether documentary evidence of your CPD arrangements for assessors and internal verifiers should be made available at the visit
- ◆ any other documentation that the Verifier may require for this specific visit

When the proposed date and time for the visit has been agreed, we will send you a confirmation letter and a copy of the agreed visit plan. If an External Verifier receives no reply to a request for contact and information, he/she will pass the matter back to our Verification Section. If this happens, a member of SQA staff will contact you to assist in progressing the planned verification visit, as it is a condition of approval that you give access to our External Verifiers.

If, when an External Verifier contacts your centre, you indicate that you do not intend to offer Units or Group Awards in that verification group during that year, the Verifier will pass this information to our Verification Section, who will monitor your centre entries. If entries are submitted at a later date, we will re-schedule an external verification event and expect you to retain all candidates' evidence until the External Verifier has visited.

## **Arrangements for visits**

We ask our External Verifiers, when they are discussing the dates of their visits with you, to bear in mind:

- ◆ the stage in delivery when optimum value can be gained from the visit
- ◆ the point where sufficient assessment evidence is available
- ◆ your particularly busy times
- ◆ the logistics of asking you to retain materials which may be large or bulky

You should keep all evidence, records and assessment specifications either for scrutiny by the External Verifier or until three weeks after the officially notified completion dates (note that this date will not necessarily be three weeks after you have finished delivering the Unit or Group Award). You should check with your SQA Co-ordinator if you are unsure of notified completion dates.

The External Verifier will always agree a time for the start of the visit with you, and will try to keep to that time. But because the evidence the External Verifier sees on the day will dictate the form and length of the visit, it will be difficult to predict times for meetings with centre staff during the visit.

Since the Verifier cannot predict the issues that will arise from verification before the visit, we advise you not to devise a programme for the visit. Your staff should keep arrangements for the visit as fluid as possible until the External Verifier has had a chance to review the work available and optimise the time available. In some cases, especially where there are multiple sites, or very many candidates spread over different sites, the Verifier may decide to return on the following day. You will be notified of this in advance.

## **What happens during a verification visit**

When the External Verifier arrives in the centre, he or she will meet your SQA Co-ordinator.

One of the External Verifier's main tasks is to check that all assessors of a Unit are assessing to the same standard.

This means that he or she will want to:

- ◆ sample the assessed evidence of different candidates

- ◆ sample the assessment decisions of different assessors
- ◆ consider the effectiveness of the system for internal verification in the centre

The External Verifier will ask to see:

- ◆ standards (for SVQs), assessment instruments, and evidence of assessment for the Units to be verified
- ◆ checklists used by assessors
- ◆ records of meetings of assessors
- ◆ internal verifiers' reports
- ◆ records of achievement for all groups of candidates to be verified

It would also be helpful if the assessors for the relevant Units could be available to speak to the External Verifier at some stage during the visit. While we appreciate that arranging for this is not always possible, it does make things easier for all concerned if the assessor is on hand to clarify areas of concern. The External Verifier will carry out a sampling exercise and in doing this will check that the evidence supplied by the centre for each candidate sampled meets the performance criteria of the Units and/or Group Awards and, in the case of SVQs, that the evidence claimed by the candidates matches the evidence requirements.

For each Unit and Group Award sampled, the External Verifier will also check that the assessment instruments, assessment specifications and assessment materials are valid and reliable.

## **How verification decisions are made — sampling of assessment**

The purpose of verification is to confirm that you are interpreting standards correctly, and that you have in place an internal verification system that is used consistently and is both robust and rigorous.

As verification is based on sampling your assessment and verification decisions, the Verifier will rarely scrutinise all of your candidates' work. Instead, they will select a sample of candidates' evidence from the assessed work that you present for verification. Please remember that it will be the Verifier, and not centre staff, who will decide which candidates' evidence will be scrutinised at the visit.

The Verifier will ensure that the sample includes evidence from all assessors and all internal verifiers for the qualification being verified. If the External Verifier has concerns about the quality of decisions made in the evidence sampled, the sample can be extended to include all candidates.

Normally (except for where an SVQ Assessment Strategy specifies otherwise) an External Verifier will want to sample evidence across all assessors and all internal verifiers.

In the course of planning for the visit, the Verifier will advise you on how much candidates' material you should have available for the visit. On the day of the visit, the Verifier will make a selection from the materials available. For Higher National Qualifications, verifiers will sample (where possible) a minimum of three single-credit Units (or equivalent), ensuring that a sample of the work of all assessors and all internal verifiers is scrutinised.

For SVQs, the Verifier has to adhere strictly to any sampling requirements detailed in the Assessment Strategy. If the qualification being verified does not have an assessment strategy, verifiers will sample a minimum of three single credit Units (or equivalent), ensuring that a sample of the work of all assessors and all internal verifiers is scrutinised.

If the External Verifier has concerns about your centre, and if there are large numbers of candidates undertaking many units and awards, the visit may need to be extended, or another External Verifier may need to be brought in. This happens only rarely.

## **What the Verifier will look for**

Please note that it is your responsibility to show where and how your candidates' evidence covers the standards. The Evidence Requirements for SVQs usually stipulate that evidence should be indexed and cross-referenced for verification. For HNCs and HNDs this should be demonstrated by the use of an instrument of assessment.

When verifying SVQs, or where assessment of any other qualification is integrated, the External Verifier will look at your cross-referencing system for assessment. You need to show which elements and Performance Criteria are covered by each assessment activity. Some form of matrix or chart showing how activities relate to Units, Elements and Performance Criteria is essential, though we don't prescribe the form it takes.

Checklists are also important. They provide evidence of individual candidates' achievement and performance. There needs to be evidence that the relevant Performance Criteria are being interpreted consistently, and that judgements are consistent between candidates.

As part of the standardisation check, External Verifiers will want to see notes of meetings between assessors. They are looking for evidence that all assessors meet to discuss their assessment activities and to compare the judgements they make. They will also look at other records of internal verification activity to ensure that this is happening regularly, consistently and effectively.

External Verifiers may ask to see the records you have kept on each candidate's progress. They will sample a few of the records to confirm that you have a system for ensuring that the correct result is entered against each candidate's name. If candidates are in the centre during the visit, External Verifiers may ask to meet them. Indeed, if assessment is going on, they may wish to observe the assessment.

External Verifiers will check the authentication arrangements that have been made for candidates using alternative routes to certification, such as accreditation of prior learning, e-assessment and credit transfer.

Instruments of assessment which have not been previously approved by SQA will be scrutinised to ensure that they are valid, reliable and practicable.

When assessment has been carried out at more than one site, it is essential that all the relevant material is brought together in one place so that the External Verifier has access to it all. The External Verifier will have advised you of this in advance of the visit.

In summary, the SQA carries out external verification to ensure that national standards are being applied by all centres offering SQA awards. On a broader scale, External Verifiers ensure that consistent and reliable assessment decisions are being made nationally in accordance with standards and confirm that internal verification is working effectively to ensure that consistent and reliable assessment decisions are being applied within each centre.

## **The outcome of the visit**

There are two recommendations that an External Verifier can make to SQA officers:

- ◆ certification can proceed for the Units or Group Awards verified
- ◆ certification cannot proceed for Units or Group Awards verified

Verifiers will always give you feedback at the end of the visit, and will clearly tell you what their recommendation will be.

### **Successful verification**

If verification is successful, the Verifier will recommend to SQA that certification can proceed for all Units or awards verified. In these cases, when we receive candidates' results, we will issue certificates to candidates according to our published certification programme.

### **Unsuccessful verification**

If verification reveals flaws in your centre's assessment activity, the recommendation will be that certification cannot proceed until the specified remedial action is taken. The Verifier will complete an EV8bn form before leaving your centre on the day of the visit. This form will summarise the reasons why a hold on certification is being recommended. It will be signed by the Verifier and should also be signed by the centre SQA Coordinator or their representative.

Our officers will consider the Verifier's recommendation and decide whether or not to place a hold on certification. If the Verifier's recommendation is supported, we will write to you to confirm the decision that a hold will be placed on certification until the problems are rectified and a subsequent, successful verification visit has taken place.

This letter will have the reference EV8(d) and it will detail the reasons for this decision and describe the action you will have to take to address the issues. Both the External Verifier and your Customer Support Manager will receive copies of this letter.

There are several different circumstances which may lead a Verifier to recommend a hold on certification:

- ◆ **Assessment instruments not available:** if neither the assessment instruments nor the assessment specification for a Unit were available for scrutiny, the External Verifier will recommend a hold on certification.
- ◆ **Inappropriate assessment instruments:** instruments of assessment (IAs) have to be valid — that is they must cover every Performance Criterion and take account of guidelines on range and scope. If the IAs do not meet the criteria, the External Verifier will recommend a hold on certification.
- ◆ **You are using incorrect or inappropriate assessment specifications:** if the assessment specification or the range and evidence requirements defined in the unit were not followed, the External Verifier will recommend a hold on certification.
- ◆ **There is no evidence or insufficient evidence of candidate performance:** there must be sufficient current evidence of summative assessment of all candidates. If the evidence is not available, the Verifier will be unable to make a proper judgement about your assessment decisions and will recommend a hold on certification until a subsequent successful visit. If you know that you will not have sufficient evidence to present at the time of the visit, you should alert the Verifier and rearrange the visit so it can take place at a time when the evidence will be available. Also, if you have awarded a pass to a candidate and the evidence for that pass is insufficient to meet the requirements of the Performance Criteria, the Verifier will recommend a hold on certification on the basis that, because there is insufficient evidence, you have inappropriately judged the candidate's performance.
- ◆ **The Performance Criteria are not met:** the Verifier will look at a sample of assessment decisions made by different assessors. If the candidates' performance has failed to reach the level of performance defined in the Performance Criteria but has been judged by the assessor to have met these criteria, this calls into question the reliability of assessors' assessment decisions. In these cases the Verifier will always recommend a hold on certification.
- ◆ **There is inappropriate judgement of candidates' performance:** if assessors have incorrectly interpreted the evidence supplied to them by candidates and have judged candidates competent when the standard specified in the criteria

has not been met then this will result in a recommendation for a hold on certification.

- ◆ **NTO/SSC requirements are not satisfied (SVQs only):** if the requirements of an Assessment Strategy have not been followed, the Verifier will recommend a hold on certification.

As well as considering evidence in relation to assessment, the Verifier will also make a judgement on the efficacy of your internal verification arrangements.

You must demonstrate that:

- ◆ all assessments, designed for a particular Unit, are comparable in terms of the demands made on the candidates
- ◆ results are consistent between assessors
- ◆ results are consistent across candidates

The Verifier will not recommend a hold purely on the absence of one or more of these three requirements. However, it is very likely that if there are flaws in your internal verification arrangements and practices, this will be reflected in flawed assessment decisions, in which case, the Verifier will recommend a hold on certification.

Sometimes, when an External Verifier recommends a hold for one of the reasons specified above, another will emerge. For example, if the Performance Criteria for one Unit have not been met, this may be because an inappropriate assessment instrument has been used. In this case both reasons for the recommendation for a hold on certification would be shown on the External Verification Report Form EV8(a).

You should remember that a hold on certification is only a temporary measure, and is not punitive. It is designed to safeguard the credibility of our awards by ensuring that candidates are not credited with success in a Unit or a qualification where the evidence cannot justify certification. The majority of these matters are resolved quickly — only a small percentage will result in non-certification of candidates. If the Verifier's judgement is that a hold on certification is recommended, before he or she leaves the centre you should discuss the steps you will need to take to address the conditions that have led to the hold being recommended. If possible, you should agree a date by which you will have taken the appropriate action. This is very important.

## **The External Verifier's reports — oral and written**

When External Verifiers have completed verification in your centre, they will give you a full oral report on the outcome of the visit. As this report could cover broader issues, such as staffing or resources, we recommend that a senior member of your centre staff be present. This would normally be your SQA Co-ordinator.

It is very important that feedback to centre staff is well managed, and that Verifiers are given every opportunity to present their findings and recommendations in a professional and businesslike atmosphere. We instruct our Verifiers to suspend feedback sessions and contact SQA immediately if they encounter any aggression or hostility from staff in centres.

You will know the outcome of the visit and any proposed recommendations before the External Verifier leaves your centre. If you are unsure about the External Verifier's findings, you should ask for clarification.

If the External Verifier recommends a hold on certification, he/she will complete a triplicate form (EV8bn) before leaving your centre. This form confirms that a hold is being recommended and summarises the reasons why. Your SQA Co-ordinator or their nominated representative will sign the form to confirm that they have received this feedback. One copy of the form will be left with your co-ordinator, one will be sent to SQA and one will be retained by the External Verifier.

The oral report is followed up by a detailed written report (EV8a) that will be sent to your SQA Co-ordinator. The purpose of the written report is twofold:

- ◆ It gives you clear feedback on the conduct and outcomes of the verification visit in relation to assessment, internal verification and any development points that the Verifier recommends.
- ◆ It will also highlight any good practice that the Verifier has observed.

The report helps us build up a profile of each of our centres and also supplies us with feedback on how well or poorly our awards are being delivered. We have changed our procedures for issuing the written report. It will now not be issued directly by the Verifier on the day of the visit. We now advise Verifiers to take some time to reflect on the visit and to prepare a report that is well-constructed, word-processed where possible, and closely checked for errors and omissions. We feel that this is a more professional approach. It also means that during the visit more time can be devoted to verification activity or giving helpful feedback to staff.

We undertake to get the completed written report to you within two weeks of the visit. If you do not receive the report within this time you should contact staff in the Verification Section at SQA in Glasgow. At the moment we are investigating ways in which the verification report can be made available to you electronically.

We hope that you will find the reports positive and helpful. They are designed to allow External Verifiers to report on the different aspects of assessment work carried out within centres. You should receive a written report that makes clear what was seen on the visit, what was deemed to be good practice, and what required further work.

## **Confidentiality of external verification reports**

External Verifiers' reports are held by SQA and they may be made available to various teams in SQA. For example, if an External Verifier makes a comment about a Unit or a set of standards, this will be passed on to our Qualifications Development Teams. Similarly, CSMs have access to the reports so that they can build up a picture of verification in the centres for which they are responsible. Quality Auditors also refer to the reports when seeking background information on centres which are to be audited.

In accordance with Freedom of Information legislation, anyone is entitled to request access to any documentation we hold that names or identifies them. The procedure to be followed to obtain this information is published on our website. There is a charge for this service.

## **The implications of a hold on certification**

If a hold on certification is placed on a Unit or Group Award, it will apply to **all** candidates undertaking that qualification at your centre. For National Qualifications, the hold on certification will apply to candidates across all levels of the subject being verified.

For Group Awards (mainly SVQs and Higher National Certificates and Diplomas), until you have taken action to address the issues raised in the Verifier's report and this has been confirmed by the Verification Officer, your candidates will not receive certification for any of the Units they are entered for, or for the Group Award. This is because we only issue certificates once all of the results are available from all the contributory Units. If the result for one Unit is still outstanding, for whatever reason, we will not process those candidates' results for certification.

## **Releasing a hold on certification**

If you have been asked to supply additional evidence for the External Verifier and if this evidence can be sent through the post, the External Verifier may suggest that you send it directly to him or her for scrutiny. In these instances the External Verifier must tell you exactly what he or she expects to see. For example, you will need to know whether you have to send the re-submitted assessment evidence for all candidates, or only for a sample of candidates.

Where it is neither possible nor desirable that materials are sent by post, the External Verifier may prefer to make a second visit, and will seek our approval for this. In that instance he or she will contact you at an agreed time to arrange the return visit.

If you are unable to take the required action to have the hold on certification released, you should withdraw all candidates from the relevant Units.

## **Notification of lifting a hold on certification**

Once the External Verifier is satisfied that the hold on certification should be lifted, he or she will notify our Verification Team. We will then write to you to tell you that the hold on certification has been lifted. The External Verifier and your CSM will also receive copies of this letter.

## **Appeals against an External Verifier's decision**

If you disagree with the External Verifier's decision, your SQA Co-ordinator or centre contact should, in the first instance, contact the manager of our Verification Section. This will allow you to discuss the content of the report, and in particular will enable you to indicate whether there is any relevant information which was not available at the time of the original decision. We will then investigate, and the Verification manager will notify you of the outcome.

If, after this, you still feel that the verification decision is wrong, you can make a formal appeal against the decision. Full details of how to lodge an appeal are in our publication [\*The Appeals Process: A Handbook for Centres.\*](#)

# Other services to support quality assurance of assessment

This section outlines the support available to centres from External Verifiers, through central verification, development visits, prior verification and quality networks.

## Central and postal verification

Central verification is currently mainly used for many National Qualifications and also, increasingly, for verification of the Graded Units of Higher National Qualifications. This model has many advantages for Verifiers as they have the opportunity to work as part of a team while carrying out verification.

If you are selected for central verification you will be asked to supply us with the evidence of around 12 candidates for the subject that is being verified. We supply you with stationery and we pay the costs of postage for you to send your candidates' materials to us.

We then convene a meeting of as many External Verifiers as we will need to carry out verification of all of the centres we have selected. The Verifiers make collective judgements on the evidence presented and provide a written report to each centre. The criteria for verification decisions are very much the same as those used for visiting verification activity and the verifier can recommend a hold on certification if your assessment decisions are inappropriate or your instrument of assessment is invalid.

Occasionally, if the uptake of a subject is low and we may only need one or two External Verifiers to verify candidates' evidence, we will not convene a meeting but will post your materials to the External Verifier. The Verifier will scrutinize the materials and send them back to us with a report. We will then forward the report to you.

## Development visits

Development visits to centres are carried out by Customer Support Managers or External Verifiers, or both, depending on the needs of the centre. We charge a fee for these visits.

The purpose of development visits is to provide support and guidance to assessors and internal verifiers. Post-approval development visits to newly approved SQA centres are made by External Verifiers, normally during the six months immediately following approval. In many cases these visits are free, but please note that we do not normally authorise free visits to centres whose recent approval is for new standards of qualifications that they have previously delivered.

You might be concerned about how your internal quality assurance system is working. In this case, we would ask a CSM to help you to identify the cause of any problems; these visits are also free of charge.

Other than at the post-approval stage, a centre can request a development visit at any time from an External Verifier from a specific verification group. This may be helpful when, for example, your centre is offering a new qualification and staff feel they would benefit from help and advice on assessment from a subject expert.

## **Prior verification of assessment instruments**

You can submit your centre's own internally-devised assessment materials for 'prior verification'. We strongly encourage you to seek prior verification of assessment instruments and marking schemes that have not previously been externally verified. This is particularly recommended for new qualifications, such as HN Graded Units. This service is offered free of charge, but please allow a turnaround time of at least six weeks to allow for the possibility of having to take some corrective action if prior verification identifies flaws in your assessment materials.

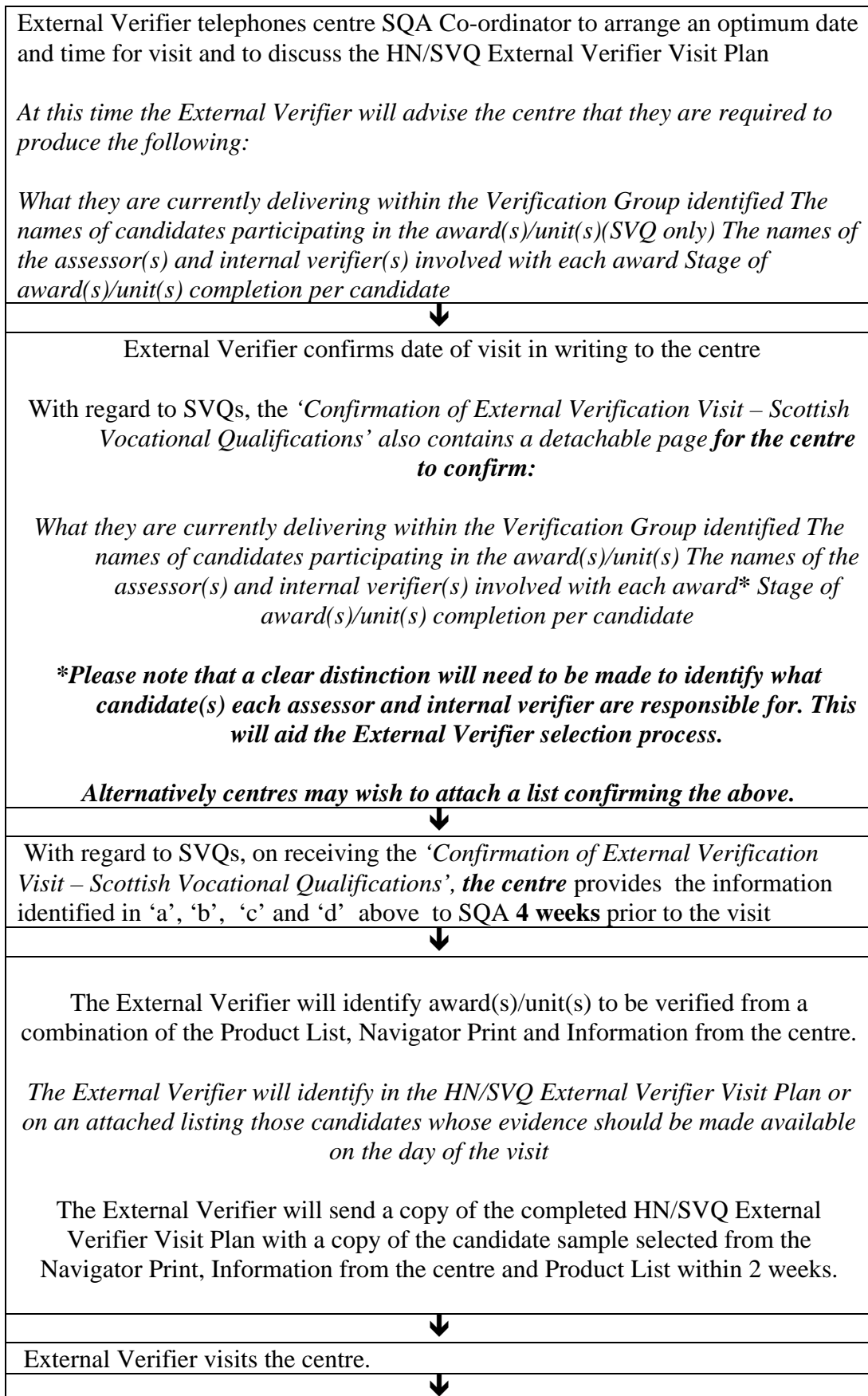
SQA-devised Instruments of Assessment, such as NAB and Assessment Exemplar materials, need not be submitted for prior verification as these are guaranteed to be valid instruments of assessment.

Our evidence from verification reports clearly shows that prior verification can prevent problems arising at a later date when a Verifier comes to look at your centre's instruments of assessment.

# Further Information

If you would like more information on any of the topics covered in this publication, please contact your SQA Co-ordinator or the Verification Section on 0845 279 1000

## Appendix 1: External verification flowchart



External Verifier completes SVQ External Verification Report (EV8a) and sends to SQA within 5 days of centre visit

**If a hold is recommended the External Verifier will issue a “Notice of Hold/Not Accepted Recommendation (EV8bn) to the SQA Co-ordinator.**



Officers in SQA’s verification section decide on whether or not to accept the verifier’s recommendation(s) and send the report to the centre.

## Appendix 2: Additional reading

All additional reading documents are available to download from SQA's website  
[www.sqa.org.uk](http://www.sqa.org.uk)

*[Guide to Approval for Training Providers and Employers](#)*

*[Guide to Assessment and Quality Assurance for Colleges of Further Education](#)*

*[Guide to Assessment and Quality Assurance for Employers and Training Providers](#)*

*[Guide to Internal Moderation for SQA Centres](#)*

*[The Appeals Process: A Handbook for Centres](#)*

*[SQA's Quality Framework: a guide for centres](#)*

SQA's Operational Help Centre is available using the following address:

<http://pubweb1.sqa.org.uk>