



Fiona Robertson and Cat Campbell meeting with Mr Alex Cole-Hamilton

1 Purpose

A meeting with Mr Alex Cole Hamilton to discuss Alternative Venue Requests within Cheerleading.

2 Summary and response to date

In September 2023, following approval at NQAMG and subsequent engagement with centre representatives, we revised the evidence criteria for requests for alternative venues outside Scotland. The updated criteria for sporting events was agreed for implementation for the 2025 diet as follows:

- The competition must be officially recognised by the national governing body or relevant sports authority.
- Learners must be officially selected by their country's national governing body or relevant sports authority to compete in international sporting events, ensuring the event's legitimacy and significance
- Learners selected to qualify by clubs or individual choice to attend and event are not eligible for the service.
- A letter must be provided from the same authority to confirm:
 - o *recognition of the event as a major international sporting competition.*
 - o *selection was made by the governing body.*

The guidance was also updated in relation to participation in events that are an essential requirement for entry to an academic course or for professional advancement. The criteria now read that we require a letter from the institution or organisation concerned to help confirm the legitimacy of the request.

Mr Cole Hamilton's constituent, [REDACTED], has contacted SQA on four occasions detailing her concerns in relation to cheerleading. This includes a complaint received on 13th January which is still live.

The concerns and our responses are as follows:

Concern	SQA response
Coaches have been misrepresented by their governing body, SportCheer Scotland (SCS) and SQA have dictated what events would be accepted.	As an awarding body, we cannot comment on wider points about the cheerleading community in Scotland, membership arrangements, the level of prestige events attract or the bodies involved. We have engaged with SCS over the last year about the proposed change as part of our communication and engagement package, but we do not have any view on what events are recognised by sporting bodies.
Every sport should be considered on a case-by-case basis.	We are happy to engage with any national body who is approached by a registered SQA centre requesting a letter. We recognise that international sporting competitions will work differently in terms of selection and national representation. Our requirements are designed to be applied to different approaches. Should any national body be unclear if the particular approach taken for selection for participation in an event satisfies our requirement, we are happy to discuss this.
SQA's position represents a backwards step and will limit the primary path to progression for Scottish cheerleaders fundamental to the development of the sport. The negative impact on girls is significant in terms of the sport and mental health and SQA's position could impact future career opportunities.	We understand these points regarding the potential for teenage girls to disengage from sport as a result of the guidance and the personal impact this may have on them. As part of our duties under the Equality Act 2010, we have carried out an Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) to assess any impact on learners who are eligible for the service based on protected characteristics. Our EqIA considers all protected characteristics, including sex. The EqIA is undergoing checks before publication and will be available in due course.

Concern	SQA response
Athletes and families are financially invested.	Any travel or other arrangements booked before the final exam timetable is published and/or before an alternative venue request has been approved is made at the booker's own risk. We cannot approve requests that do not meet our eligibility criteria, regardless of choices that individuals have made before alternative venue requests are submitted to SQA.
There was unfair notice of the change because SQA's communication about the about it was not done effectively. Had the guidance had been released earlier, this could have influenced the subject decisions to avoid a conflict.	We consider carefully when to communicate with centres considering the range of information we need to share. Our first communication highlighting the requirement for a letter from a national sporting body or relevant sporting authority was in May 2024 significantly before the 2025 exams were due to take place. We understand that [REDACTED] considers it is not realistic for families of competing learners to wait until the request window opens in October to make arrangements, however, we cannot agree that the timing of our communications about the enhanced evidence requirement or publication of guidance was done unreasonably or without adequate notice.
The centres they have engaged with support her position and consider SQA to be the blocker.	The guidance is provided for schools and colleges to support them in their management of requests and to ensure they have considered all factors relevant to the legitimacy of the requests, and the secure operation of the exam.

Requested resolution:

[REDACTED] asks that for the 2025 diet, SQA accommodate learners who would have qualified for the service under the previous guidance. Our response to date has advised that we understand that Ms Smith considers a short grace or extension period to be necessary but that is not an option we can accommodate

as we cannot further delay initiating the revised guidance in the interests of qualification integrity.

3 Background/Context

The integrity and security of exams is paramount, and the requirements of the process are, therefore, significant. The outside Scotland element of the alternative venue service operates at risk.

While centres must complete exam environment suitability assessments, we continue to have concerns that exams are conducted in locations out-with Scotland that are not suitable and that assessment conditions are therefore not met. SQA have received feedback from centres to this effect through our engagement to inform changes to the alternative venue guidance.

As a result of these concerns, we revised the evidence criteria to make requests for alternative venues outside Scotland following approval at NQAMG in September 2023 and subsequent engagement with centre representatives and the Scottish cheerleading governing body, SportCheer Scotland. SQA have not received any negative feedback from centres about the guidance in the period since it has been implemented.

With the tightening of evidence requirements, we expect the uptake of the overseas option to be significantly lower in 2024/25. In 2024, we had 103 requests for 71 learners. 88 of these (62 learners) were with an international Dance competition in Florida.

Due to the security risks highlighted – which introduce risk to the integrity and security of SQA’s entire exam model - and the low projected uptake, in November 2024 NQAMG have also agreed that we should explore removing the outside Scotland element of the service. Pending completion of another EqIA and further work to explore practicalities, it is envisioned this change will be implemented in 2025/26.

4 Discussion

- Acknowledge dissatisfaction and focus on the rationale for the change being to ensure the integrity of the qualification system through effective quality assurance which is a legal obligation.
- Reiterate as necessary our responses to previously addressed points.
- Explain that this is not a decision that we will be revisiting at this time and note any feedback for consideration as part of future changes to this guidance.

5 Advice & Next Steps

- TBC on the day.

For Internal Papers	For External Papers
N/A	N/A
Role Head of Service	Date