Annual Business Plan 2023–24

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Introduction from our chief executive

The plan has been extended for a year following the Scottish Government's announcement to replace SQA with a new qualifications body in 2025 as part of wider education reform.

This business plan for 2023–24, sets out SQA's priorities and deliverables which contribute to continuing to achieve those strategic outcomes alongside our budget.

This year will see the transition and transformation of many aspects of education and training in Scotland as the Scottish Government's wide-ranging reform programme progresses.

We share the ambition to build on the successes of Scottish education and training, with learners and those who support them at the heart of change.

As the creation of the new qualifications body moves forward, we will continue to engage with all those who need, deliver, use and are interested in our products and services across our academic, vocational and commercial activities. The outcomes of the review of the future of qualifications and assessment, the national discussion on the future of education, the review of post-school education and training, and of the wider skills landscape, will also inform the design of the new qualifications body.

Along with this work, it will be important that we find the right balance between continuity and change, to ensure coherence for learners while maintaining the credibility of our qualifications. As we emerge from the global pandemic and continue to learn from the experiences of the last few years, our dedicated staff will deliver qualifications, services and contracts, in partnership with those who need, use and deliver them. We will also continue to fulfil our duties as a responsible public body and employer.

There is much to do and much to look forward to, but we must be clear about where we need to focus our resources and expertise. This business plan will help us prioritise resources and expertise to guide us through this time of opportunity and change — and help to reaffirm our commitment to Scotland's learners.

Fiona Robertson
Chief Executive

Corporate plan 2020–23 summary
Our purpose, mission, vision, outcomes and values

SQA's Purpose

We are proud of our unique role in the education and skills systems. Our work supports learners at all levels, in many different types of centre, and impacts universities, employers and the wider Economy.

In delivering the strategic priorities outlined in this plan, SQA will work in partnership with our customers and stakeholders, in Scotland and elsewhere.

In doing so, we will demonstrate that we truly understand and live up to our purpose to **help people fulfil their full potential.**

SQA's Mission

SQA provides credible recognition of skills and knowledge through qualifications to support choice and progression in life and work.

SQA's Vision
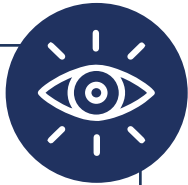
Quality-assured qualifications provide opportunities to people, supporting progression in the labour market and a sustainable and successful economy

SQA's Values

We will continue to live up to our purpose, mission and vision by putting our values into practice

Trusted

We are open and transparent in our communication and decision making

Progressive

We challenge the status quo and embrace new ideas and ways of working

Enabling

We set and uphold high standards of behaviour in line with our values

Our Outcomes

To help us deliver on our purpose and mission, we have identified the following outcomes. The strategic priorities identified for the period 2020-23 shall continue to be our focus in in 2023-24. A one-year extension to our Corporate Plan has been granted by Scottish Government.

- We provide a credible qualifications system
- We are flexible in meeting customer needs
- We have a sustainable business operating model that is appropriately resourced in order to deliver our remit now and in the future
- We are a thriving organisation, with quality jobs and a fair work environment for all our people
- We are trusted, respected and valued by our customers, stakeholders and partners

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SQA's core purpose and activities

SQA is the national accreditation and awarding body in Scotland.

Our purpose is to help individuals fulfil their full potential whilst maintaining standards across Scottish education. We are an executive non-departmental public body that reports to Scottish Ministers and the Scottish Parliament established under the Education (Scotland) Act 1996. SQA is sponsored by the Scottish Government's Learning Directorate.

Our remit and function are outlined in the amended Scottish Qualifications Act 2002. With a current staff of approximately 1,000 based in Glasgow and Dalkeith, SQA engages with learners, schools, colleges and training providers across Scotland, the rest of the UK and internationally. We develop, maintain and improve a framework of qualifications, and set and maintain standards for many other awarding bodies and accredited qualifications.

Awarding

As an awarding body, SQA develops, maintains, and improves a framework of qualifications. These can be gained at Scotland's schools, colleges, employers, and training providers, and at SQA approved centres in the rest of the UK and overseas. They include:

- National Qualifications. These are studied for at schools and colleges, and include National 1 to 5, Highers, and Advanced Highers
- Higher National Qualifications. These are often studied for at colleges. They are made up of units, which are qualifications in their own right. They can serve as a bridge to further study at university and are currently being redesigned under the 'HN Next Gen' project
- SQA Advanced Qualifications. For use outside of Scotland, these provide learners and partners with a variety of course choices to meet the needs of employers and the requirements of education professionals
- A range of vocational qualifications, developed with industry partners, and responding to perceived skills needs. These include Scotland's Modern Apprenticeships, Professional Development Awards, National Progression Awards, National Certificates, Skills for Work, Awards, and internally assessed NQ Units

A more detailed overview of SQA's range of qualifications can be found in our [Guide to Scottish Qualifications.](#)

Accrediting

As an accrediting body, SQA sets and maintains standards for many other awarding bodies, and for accredited qualifications such as Scottish Vocational Qualifications, which provide evidence that learners can do their jobs well. These can be studied in colleges or in the workplace. This role is similar to the role carried out by Ofqual in other parts of the UK.

SQA Accreditation provides extensive support and quality assurance that offers a badge of quality for awarding bodies and their customers. This includes working with standards setting organisations and other stakeholders in the development of National Occupational Standards, the development of qualification structures and associated products, and credit rating of qualifications for the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework.

SQA also plays an important role in supporting Foundation Apprenticeships and the wider Developing the Young Workforce policy, and our qualifications form part of the majority of Scotland's Modern Apprenticeships. Our accreditation function also makes an important contribution in this area.

As the Scottish qualifications' regulator, the accreditation function is branded as SQA Accreditation to minimise any potential confusion with the awarding function of SQA.

SQA response in 2023–24

At the beginning of 2020–21, we published our [Corporate Plan for 2020–23](#) setting out the strategic direction for our accreditation and awarding functions over that period. At the heart of the plan are five outcomes which help us to maintain, develop, and continually improve our qualifications, accreditation, and other activities. We seek to do this through continued engagement with those who need, deliver and use our products and services.

In June 2021, the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills announced that as part of a programme of education reform, SQA is to be replaced by a new qualifications body. SQA is working to support the reform programme, and our 2020–23 Corporate Plan has been extended by a year to cover this period. This Annual Business Plan for 2023–24 outlines our deliverables for the year and how we aim to achieve them.

SQA's strategic objectives are embodied in our outcomes, outlining our aims and aspirations in making a vital contribution to the wellbeing, progress and development of individuals, society and the economy. In 2023–24, we will continue to work towards the five outcomes:

♦ We provide a credible qualifications system
♦ We are flexible in meeting customer needs
♦ We have a sustainable business operating model that is appropriately resourced in order to deliver our remit now and in the future
♦ We are a thriving organisation with quality jobs and a fair work environment for all our people
♦ We are trusted, respected and valued by our customers, stakeholders and partners

As we emerge from the global pandemic, education and training in Scotland, as elsewhere in the UK and around the world, continues to adapt and innovate in the face of changing circumstances to deliver for learners.

For its part, SQA will continue to deliver qualifications, services and contracts, in partnership with those who need, use and deliver them. We will also continue to fulfil our duties as a responsible public body and employer.

We provide a credible qualifications system

What this means

SQA's mission is to provide qualifications which give credible recognition of individuals' skills and knowledge, and so support their choices and progress in life and work. This means that SQA must develop a range of qualifications to support individuals at different stages in their education, training and work. These qualifications must also meet the present and future needs of the Scottish economy. Maintaining clear standards of assessment is vital to the credibility of SQA's qualifications and to public confidence in the system. SQA will work with Scottish Government and its education and skills agencies to ensure we can respond to future demand for different types of qualifications and at different levels.

SQA takes the same approach when we operate outside of Scotland. Wherever SQA is active, we ensure we play our part in delivering credible qualifications — taking what we already know to new markets and bringing back to Scotland any good practice we discover there.

Priorities for 2023–24

National Qualifications delivery to plan

SQA exams will take place from 24 April to 1 June 2023 with results day on 8 August 2023.

In response to extensive stakeholder engagement, SQA has put in place a wide package of support for 2022–23 as Scotland eases out of the pandemic. This package of support includes:

♦ Retention of the modified National Course assessments in 2022–23.

♦ An Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) in 2023, using alternative learner evidence, which is empathetic to learners who truly have exceptional circumstances. This is a pre-certification service. The EECCS will involve SQA appointees — practising teachers and lecturers — who will review alternative assessment evidence that learners have completed through the year. Learners who are unable to attend the exam, or who have not performed as well as they expected on the day of the exam due to exceptional circumstances, can apply for an EECC request. This is a free of charge service. Heads of centre will use their professional judgement to determine whether an EECC request should be made, on behalf of a learner.

♦ An approach to grading that is similar to 2022, is sensitive and a fair reflection of learners' knowledge, understanding and skills, while also maintaining the credibility and standard of the qualifications. In recognition of the disruption that learners have faced over the last three years, and the different approaches to assessment, this year we are prepared to be more sensitive in our approach to grading than in a normal exam year to factor in the impact of the pandemic on learners.

♦ Appeals 2023 will be a post-results service that provides a review of marking (including a clerical check) which is free of charge and recognises learners' rights, in terms of access. The post-results service will include a priority service for learners who require their results for access to further or higher education, employment and/or training. This service will not use alternative learner evidence.

♦ If the Scottish Government cancels the examinations due to public health restrictions at the time of exams a Contingency Model will be enacted that uses assessment evidence that teachers and lecturers have gathered through normal in-year assessment for determining learners' estimates as the basis of learners' provisional results. A Contingency Appeals model will be retained to support learners who wish to challenge their provisional results. This will include a priority service for learners who require their results for access to further or higher education, employment and/or training.

Despite the uncertainty caused by the education reform, the SQA's responsibility for delivering National Qualifications will remain largely unchanged in the immediate future in order to stabilise the disruption that learners have experienced over the past three years.

When considering the arrangements around National Qualifications, equality and children's rights will be central in decision making and relevant impact assessments will be published.

While the focus right now is on delivering the 2023 NQ diet, work is already underway to deliver for learners for the 2023–24 academic year. The key activity for 2023–24 is outlined in the table:

NQ high-level process for delivery during 2023–24 financial year

2023/24 Process	Quarter 1			Quarter 2			Quarter 3			Quarter 4		
	Apr 23	May 23	Jun 23	Jul 23	Aug 23	Sep 23	Oct 23	Nov 23	Dec 23	Jan 24	Feb 24	Mar 24
Verification of internal assessment delivered Apr–Jun 23	░	░	░									
External assessment delivered Apr–Jun 23	░	░	░									
Examination timetable Apr–Jun 23	░	░	░									
Appointee management delivered Apr–Jun 23	░	░	░									
Candidate advice line delivered Apr–Aug 23	░	░	░	░	░							
Exceptional circumstances managed Apr– Sep 23	░	░	░	░	░	░						
Data processing delivered Apr–Sep 23	░	░	░	░	░	░						
Certification delivered* Jul–Aug 23				░	░							
Malpractice cases investigated Jul–Sep 23				░	░	░						
Post-results service (appeals) delivered Jul–Dec 23				░	░	░	░	░	░			
NQ 2024 Timetable prepared Apr–Sep 23	█	█	█	█	█	█						
Readiness 2024 (systems readiness, procurement, guidance preparation, Understanding Standards) Oct 23 –Mar 24							█	█	█	█	█	█
Appointee management delivered (requirements established Q1) Oct 23 –Mar 24							█	█	█	█	█	█
Assessment materials produced Oct 23 –Mar 24							█	█	█	█	█	█

░ **NQ 2023**   █ **NQ 2024**   ***Results day - 8 August**   **Post results services - November**

Conduct an evaluation of the 2023 awarding programme

As we continue to emerge from the pandemic, 2022–23 has had its own challenges. Whilst modifications to course assessments for graded National Courses were retained, there was stronger messaging around teaching the whole course as an entitlement for all learners. Evidence from the evaluation of Awarding 2022 informed decisions about the pre- and post- certification services available to learners: Examination Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) and Appeals 2023 (marking review). Whilst EECCS will use all available assessment evidence including alternative assessment evidence gathered by the centre, marking review will not. Rather, senior appointees will review SQA-assessed material to ensure marking instructions have been consistently and accurately applied. We need to know how well these provisions met learners' needs in 2022–23 and the extent to which they are suitable for use in subsequent years.

Evidence from the evaluation of Awarding 2022 is feeding into the decision about whether or not modifications to course assessment are retained in 2023–24. Evidence from Awarding 2022 meetings suggests that for many courses learners were less well prepared for progression and had been disadvantaged by the removal of coursework. Many stakeholders wish to see the modifications retained as they believe the pandemic disruption to learning is still having an impact. In the rest of the UK there has been a return to full course specifications with some additional support for candidates in both Wales and Northern Ireland. Whatever the decision, SQA will need to understand the impact of course modifications on outcomes in 2023.

The impact of the pandemic on learner preparation and resilience are emerging as themes in the evaluation of Appeals 2022, and it would be worth exploring this further in the evaluation of Awarding 2023.

There has been industrial action by teachers that is likely to disrupt learning and teaching. Whilst this is unlikely to be as extensive as the disruption due to the pandemic, accounted for by the modifications to course assessment. It may make it very difficult to complete all activities associated with the diet.

Should exams be cancelled, and the Contingency Model be invoked, arrangements will be similar to those planned for in 2022. There has been much stronger emphasis on collecting naturally occurring assessment in schools to inform centre estimates, and that evidence would form the basis for provisional results. Depending on the timing of the decision, a national quality assurance exercise could be undertaken. However, we are aware that invoking the Contingency Model is likely to incur additional teacher workload, so is not a viable option for managing disruption due to strike action. This year all the necessary systems for the Contingency Model are being designed in such a way that they would be available for any future diet.

Higher National, vocational, and international delivery to plan

Assessing Higher National and Vocational Qualifications 2022–23

Alternative approaches to assessment have been developed to provide further flexibility for centres and learners, for session 2022–23, whilst maintaining the integrity of certification and public confidence.

These arrangements cover: Higher National Certificates and Diplomas, SQA Advanced Certificates and Diplomas, Professional Development Awards, National Progression Awards, National Certificates, Skills for Work, Awards, and internally assessed NQ Units.

To inform recommendations for consideration for 2023–24, we intend to engage with delivering centres, learners and qualification teams about alternative assessment approaches utilised over the last couple of years to support the impact of COVID-19. The engagement activity conducted to date has helped shape the decision about what support should be made available to delivering centres. There will be a work strand to support the scoping, engagement activity that will inform arrangements for 2023–24. This work is being taking forward by the Policy, Research and Standards team from November 2022. The work will also consider implications for Operations colleagues and their input will be invaluable to any final decisions. We plan to have a proposal on the 2023–24 approach by March 2023, following consultation. A paper will go to Qualification Committee on 8 March, thereafter there will be papers to HNVQ Steering Group and SQA Board for final approval on assessment approaches for 2023–24 onwards. We expect to communicate to delivering centres in line with National Qualifications communications.

NextGen: HN

We are now adapting our Higher National qualifications to give learners the skills they need to thrive in the 21st century workplace.

Our Next Generation Higher National (NextGen: HN) qualifications will:

♦ Be adaptable and flexible to respond to the needs of a constantly changing employment environment
♦ Support lifelong learning and multiple career options
♦ Integrate essential 21st century skills or meta-skills
♦ Develop critical industry and subject-specific technical skills

SQA is currently committed to the prototype development and pilot delivery of HNC/D qualifications in 13 subject areas. Evaluation is embedded throughout the development and delivery process. 2022–23 saw the pilot delivery of all HNC developments and two HNDs: Television and Radio. We have been piloting this with 13 centres, 12 colleges and one employer/training provider — each programme being delivered in approximately two centres.

The following HNDs are being developed in 2022–23 for delivery in 2023–24:

1   HND Computing Science
2   HND Data Science
3   HND Networking and Infrastructure
4   HND Software Development
5   HND Engineering
6   HND Accounting
7   HND Physical Activity and Health
8   HND Social Sciences
9   HND Agriculture
10   HND Agricultural Technology
11   HND Horticulture

Maintain, develop, and improve our portfolio of qualifications

The impact of various disruptions across Scotland is still being felt in many ways. However, we have returned to a traditional model of qualification development and accreditation for 2023–24 and we are currently consulting with key stakeholders in the sector on whether we maintain the modifications implemented for 2022–23 or revert to the courses in full as they were pre-pandemic in 2019.

The Education Reform Programme is now underway and SQA will make a full and positive contribution to the actions flowing from this programme to ensure a smooth transition to the new arrangements. The outcomes of Professor Louise Hayward's review into the reformation of exams and National Qualifications will be carefully considered and appropriate actions taken. Drawing on our experience and expertise as Scotland's qualifications and accreditation body, we will provide the necessary information and considered opinion and advice timeously and robustly, to ensure all SQA's work is fully considered.

We will ensure that qualifications are as accessible as possible to learners with disabilities or additional support needs through our responsibility to support reasonable adjustments and assessment arrangements. We will continue to play a part in the key Scottish Government aim of developing Scotland's education system to be anti-racist, LGBTQ+ inclusive and children's rights centred. We will take an intersectional approach to ensure assessments leading to qualification are as inclusive as possible.

Deliver against agreed commissions in support of the Scottish Government's Education Reform Programme regarding the establishment of a new qualifications body and the review of qualifications and assessment

SQA remains focused in delivering its core services, supporting learners at all levels to help individuals fulfil their potential. While we do so, we recognise the opportunity to contribute to positive change contributing towards the establishment of a new qualifications body for Scotland and input to wider strands of reform.

In 2022, the Scottish Government created a set of design principles based on Professor Ken Muir's report 'Putting Learners at the Centre', which will ensure the new national bodies are set up with the necessary foundations to operate effectively. The new qualifications body will be:

♦ a learning organisation
♦ flexible to change coming from the operating environment
♦ data-focused
♦ user-centred
♦ collaborative
♦ digital by default
♦ sustainable

SQA will positively engage with and consider the outcomes of Professor Louise Hayward's review of the reform of qualifications and assessment (which is due to be completed by May 2023) and consider the Scottish Government's subsequent recommendations. SQA will also engage with the independent review of the skills delivery landscape that is being carried out by James Withers — in particular, in relation to the areas of the Terms of Reference that identify the development and management of National Occupational Standards (NOS) and the commissioning of Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs).

SQA has established an Education Reform Programme Board to oversee the work associated with the various strands of the Education Reform Programme.

The seven deliverables of the Education Reform Programme remain at the very heart of all work carried out by SQA in support of the commission from Scottish Government to the New Qualifications Body Delivery Board:

Deliverables 1 to 4 to be completed by 2022–23:

1 **Creation of a delivery board** — membership, governance, and timeline for deliverables.

2 **Assessment of current functions** — what is working well and opportunities for improvement.

3 **Stakeholder analysis** — assessment of existing research to inform the delivery board's work and its approach to stakeholder engagement.

4 **Engagement approach** — how users, stakeholders and colleagues will be engaged.

Deliverables 5, 6 and 7 to be completed in 2023–24:

5 **Future functions** — proposed future functions of new qualifications body which map to user and stakeholder wants and needs.

6 **Future state** — user benefits, structures, systems, and finances relating to future functions.

7 **Roadmap** — timeline and details of transition to new qualifications body.

Note that the decision by Scottish Government on 1 December 2022 that the accreditation function is to be located within the new qualifications body will require an amendment to the commission from Scottish Government to the Delivery Board and will thus require a separate workstream to be established in relation to the scope and role of the accreditation function, respecting the independence of the awarding and accreditation functions.

The work undertaken by SQA in relation to the other strands of the Education Reform Programme (Hayward, Withers etc.) will be overseen by an Education Reform Programme Board. At this stage the work on other strands of reform will focus on feeding in advice as these reviews are still live. Once the outcomes of these reviews are known, we will consider any follow-up actions and activity required to implement accepted recommendations.

Detailed timelines are being developed for the remaining deliverables, respecting the interdependencies on the development of the target operating model (TOM) with other strands of reform that have differing reporting timelines.

Secure and deliver contracts in line with service level agreements
Our Contract Operations teams deliver a range of services on behalf of UK Government and commercial clients, principally focusing on the creation, administration and marking of assessments. Services include:

♦ Implementation and oversight of all contract requirements and key performance indicators
♦ Management and oversight of the technologies used to deliver the contracts
♦ Recruitment, training and management of appointees
♦ Creation, management and oversight of syllabuses, manuals of practice, training materials, assessments and question banks
♦ Marking assessments, publishing results and printing cards/certificates
♦ Creation, management, and application of quality assurance models for delivery centres

The teams also oversee all financial transactions relating to the contracts and deal with stakeholder enquiries from learners, training providers, consortium partners, markers and employers, amongst others.

In addition to delivering on our obligations under contract service level agreements, we will:

♦ Develop and embed technology that offers a richer user experience and the flexibility for us to adapt our delivery models to changes in our operating environments
♦ Use our data to continuously review and improve our operating processes to deliver these as efficiently, effectively and sustainably as possible, in accordance with our Best Value obligations
♦ Strengthen client and partner relationships with the aim of successfully reprocuring contracts that are due for renewal
♦ Develop client and partner relationships to harness further commercial opportunities that capitalise on our current strengths.

Deliver and refine the Work Based Learning Strategy
We are developing a Work Based Learning Strategy that defines how our current portfolio supports the Scottish Government's policy objective of increasing the availability of work-based learning opportunities and how we can do more to support this objective. The strategy will be used to guide future development of our portfolio and to inform how we work with our centres and partners from across the education system to ensure its full potential is realised. The first iteration of the strategy, that includes priority actions for the short term, is being shared with key partners to help ensure its fitness for purpose.

What Accreditation will deliver

Under Scottish Government legislation, SQA Accreditation quality-assures qualifications by approving awarding bodies and accrediting their qualifications. Our work is underpinned by regulatory principles and regulatory directives, which define the standards awarding bodies must comply with.

SQA Accreditation will, over the course of 2023–24, work towards the agreement of a TOM (target operating model) and will begin the transformation towards this.

Our deliverables for 2023–24 will be to:

♦ Ensure that SQA Accreditation delivers its activities in accordance with its documented key performance indicators
♦ Continue to implement the Fast-track Approval Process for Awarding Bodies
♦ Following the consultation into possible improvements to the SVQ brand, implement any agreed changes
♦ Continue to organise and host awarding body forums and consider the introduction of standard settings organisation forums
♦ Conduct provider monitoring activity in relation to the implementation and support provided by awarding bodies for the new qualifications developed by the Technical Expert Group (TEG) Process
♦ Promote alternative accreditation activity, for example, unit accreditation
♦ Conduct a review of regulation activity and strategy

We are flexible in meeting customer needs

What this means

SQA needs to ensure it can deliver its products, services and support in a way that works for the individuals who need them.

SQA wants to ensure it satisfies its customers. To do this we need a good understanding of what their needs are, and good two-way engagement with customers to ensure that we meet our commitments. If we do not, we need to take responsibility for this and put things right.

SQA understands that to do this we need to be open to new ways of working, both in terms of technology and how we operate. We need the capability to consider new markets and opportunities, and to alter our products and services to meet new or emerging customer needs, basing our decisions on research and insight.

Priorities for 2023–24

Continue to develop and implement SQA's Research and Analysis Strategy

SQA is working to ensure that our decisions are clearly evidence-based and that we play a greater role in making research-based contributions to the debate on education and skills. We have refreshed the strategy following implementation and will continue to develop and implement it.

We support Scottish Government's commitment in that equality, inclusion, sustainability, and human rights should underpin decision making and delivery across the work of the public sector in Scotland. We will play our part in that by laying the groundwork to augment our equalities analysis and research.

In 2023–24, the focus will be to further develop and implement our research and analysis strategy. A crucial element to this will be to support the work of the Hayward Review by building an evidence base for the review of qualifications and assessments that started in 2022. In addition to this work, we will:

♦ Publish and disseminate research and evaluation based around our qualifications and assessments.
♦ Augment research and analysis capacity and capability through developing a code of research practice, recruitment and equipping the directorate with a wider range of analytical, literature and research tools.
♦ Develop and share case studies of the impact of evidence on policy decision taking.

We have a sustainable business operating model that is appropriately resourced in order to deliver our remit now and in the future

What this means

As a public body, SQA has a duty to the people of Scotland to use its resources sensibly and carefully, in ways that deliver Best Value. SQA must therefore deploy its resources as effectively as possible and must always be alert to opportunities for improving efficiency and reducing costs.

Our Environmental Strategy aims to maximise opportunities to reduce environmental impact across all our activities by always considering sustainability when making decisions.

SQA must organise itself to maximise the impact of its resources to ensure that we both deliver today and improve our delivery for tomorrow. We must invest wisely in our people, technology, and processes to build resilience and ensure we have a sustainable future.

SQA knows that dialogue with the Scottish Government is a vital part of this. We must continue to make the case for the resources we need both for ongoing operations and in order to facilitate change, including in relation to the transition to new organisations as announced by the Scottish Government on 10 March 2022.

SQA also looks for appropriate opportunities to use what it does best to generate income from commercial activity. SQA must therefore also be competitive, alert for opportunities, and willing to take proportionate risks.

Priorities for 2023–24

Ensure SQA is compliant with all legislative, statutory, and regulatory requirements (including qualifications regulators)

As an organisation, SQA is subject to a wide range of legal, statutory and compliance obligations. We must meet these legal and regulatory standards, and those set by third parties, to do our work in a way that meets expectations, reduces risk, and maximises impact.

SQA's Framework Document was drawn up by the Scottish Government in consultation with SQA and sets out the broad framework within which SQA operates. It also defines key roles and the responsibilities and accountabilities which underpin the relationship between SQA and the Scottish Government.

SQA will continue to support the Scottish Government Programme for Government for a fairer, greener Scotland. We support Scottish Government's commitment to ensuring that equality, inclusion, and human rights underpin decision making and delivery across the work of government and the wider public sector in Scotland. We use the expertise available within SQA's existing equality governance structure (which oversees our compliance with the equality duties) to ensure there is accountability and action taken across the organisation. Our Equality Outcomes relate to three functions: SQA as an employer, SQA (awarding body) and SQA Accreditation.

As part of our work to revise SQA's Equality Outcomes and action plans, we identified areas for improvement relating to equality impact assessments (EqIAs). This work aims to further emphasise the importance of embedding equality in policy development, planning and decision-making processes in SQA. We are committed to making progress with EqIAs to maximise positive impacts and reduce negative impacts on individuals who share one or more of the protected characteristics. This work will continue to be a priority in 2023–24. SQA is also cognisant of the refresh of the Fair Work Action Plan that draws together the Scottish Government's Fair Work, Gender Pay Gap, and Disabled People's Employment action plans, and actions from the Scottish Government's new Anti-Racist Employment Strategy. SQA's work on EqIAs and the associated governance structures surrounding the review and approval process will play a key role in terms of building on good practice and aims to address barriers in the workplace linked to protected characteristics.

One key set of regulators are qualifications regulators. Our work in delivering qualifications means we are subject to regulation by SQA Accreditation, Ofqual, and Qualifications Wales. We must meet their expectations to be able to continue delivering our vocational qualifications portfolio.

Other legal and regulatory requirements include those relating to employment, freedom of information, complaints, data protection, records management, information security, equality duties and corporate parenting — plus a growing number of compliance commitments we are asked to make, including in areas such as cybersecurity.

Equality Mainstreaming Report

In April 2023, we will publish our Equality Mainstreaming Report 2021–23 to report SQA's progress in meeting its public sector equality duty to mainstream equality and report progress against SQA's Equality Outcomes 2021–25. This report will also include SQA's workforce equality monitoring data report, pay gap information and statement of equal pay.

Corporate parenting

Our Corporate Parenting Steering Group meets quarterly to review our progress in making real, positive differences to care experienced young people. SQA's steering group has responsibility for the review, implementation, monitoring and reporting of SQA's corporate parenting action plans. During 2022–23 we reviewed and updated our corporate parenting commitments, and it is a priority for us to publish our updated Corporate Parenting Plan in 2023–24.

Children's rights

SQA's ambition is to become an exemplary public body in ensuring that children's rights are recognised, as set out in the UNCRC. This reflects our purpose of helping people to fulfil their potential and achieve their ambitions. In March 2022, we published SQA's first Children's Rights Report 2017–20. While reporting periods should ordinarily be three years, the timescale for completing the first Children's Rights Report was extended due to the COVID-19 pandemic. An interim Children's Rights Report 2020–22 was also published to accompany our first report. These reports highlight the actions we have taken to support children and young people in Scotland to realise their rights. We will report again in 2023–24.

Scotland's languages

Through our Languages Steering Group, SQA is proud to support the Scottish Government's objectives for all of Scotland's languages including Scots, Gaelic and BSL. SQA's Gaelic Language Plan has been a legislative requirement since 2010 and our revised plan for 2022–25 has been approved by Bòrd na Gàidhlig. We will develop our Internal Action Plan with the newly established SQA Gaelic Language Plan Implementation and Monitoring Group to monitor the actions throughout the duration of this plan.

Enhance SQA's cyber maturity and resilience to ensure we are well equipped to withstand, defend against, manage, recover quickly, and learn from cyber incidents

Cyber-attacks continue to present a significant and growing risk to most organisations. The ongoing move towards home-based and hybrid working is regarded generally as having increased the level of risk.

Cybersecurity covers a range of technical, policy and behavioural control areas. Organisations must have risk management and governance arrangements in place to allow cybersecurity activities, including an effective 'three lines of defence' model, to be appropriately prioritised and resourced.

We continue to deliver and evolve a continuous schedule of work to enhance our cyber resilience and information security. We draw on the latest expertise, supported by a global cyber and software resilience partner, to shape and prioritise our schedule of defence activities.

In the past year, the IT Security Team has grown with additional security analyst resource. The security programme has completed a significant number of security activities including: security process improvements, security testing, the introduction of some enhanced security tools, and the upgrade to some existing security tools.

The security programme is a dynamic, ongoing, evolving programme recognising and preventing current threats with an eye to identifying and planning for emerging or future cyber-attacks. Our goal remains to ensure SQA is agile and resilient to the threat of cyber-attacks and that all staff are aware of the ongoing threats and have been suitably informed and trained in how they can help prevent incidents.

Review and update all policies to ensure they are (i) up to date, (ii) consistently applied

Policies are formal statements that define what we aim to achieve, and they set out in broad terms how we are going to do it. They provide a consistent set of parameters that support delivery of our organisation's overarching strategies, plans and values.

In 2023–24, we will continue to review and update our policies and ensure equality is embedded into our products and services. We aim to improve our reporting and monitoring of the development of new policies and EqIAs and the review of existing policies and EqIAs. To ensure our policies and EqIAs are robust and fit for purpose, they are reviewed as part of our internal audit programme of work.

Deliver financial balance in line with available resources

As a public body, SQA has a duty to manage its financial position well and to effectively use its financial resources. It is fundamental for all organisations to ensure they are on a sound financial footing and SQA has a clear responsibility to assure our Board and the Scottish Government that this is the case.

Through effective use of our organisation's resources, implement the duty of Best Value in line with the Scottish Public Finance Manual

Work continues to develop our Best Value framework. To support this, we will continue to implement our financial improvement programme across the organisation which focuses on both the effective use of resources and seeking improved efficiency and effectiveness in the use of those resources.

Our approach to fulfilling Best Value duty will include the promotion of operational excellence and the expansion of our ISO 9001 coverage and certification to drive and improve quality and demonstrate best practice.

Implement an operational excellence methodology for SQA

Last year, we progressed a common approach to examining our processes and analysing the steps they involve so we have an effective and efficient way of asking how we can improve them. We have used the 'lean' improvement methodology with success so far and have developed resources for the Operational Excellence toolkit, including guidance on:

♦ Developing interactive learning content around the DMAIC (define, measure, analyse, improve, control) model

♦ Establishing a bank of case studies to support people engagement and education

♦ Launching the OpEx website

♦ Establishing OpEx learning resources on SQA Academy

We will be responsive to the outcomes from the Education Reform Delivery Board through the transition period.

Complete the implementation of phase two of the ISO 9001 expansion programme

The business areas within the scope of SQA's existing ISO certification will become the focus of phase two for the ISO 9001 expansion programme during 2023–24; these areas will be brought up to date with the principles and tools introduced during phase one.

The business areas include:

♦ Accreditation
♦ Contract Operations
♦ Test Operation Services
♦ Other areas of Business Development that provide an input to Contract Operations
♦ AD&D: Assessment Materials

As the programme progresses in 2023–24, we will be responsive to the outcomes of the transition work that SQA is undertaking as part of the Scottish Government's Education Reform Programme. This may mean that the scope of the programme may be adapted to align to emerging priorities from the reform programme.

We are a thriving organisation, with quality jobs and a fair work environment for all our people

What this means

SQA's purpose is to help people achieve their full potential, and this applies to our workforce as much as it does to our customers, stakeholders and partners.

Our staff are in a unique position to influence education in Scotland, so SQA will thrive through successfully attracting and retaining talented people. We will take the wellbeing and skills of our workforce seriously by providing a positive working environment through good quality, fair work, training and support for all our people. This requires a commitment to the dimensions of the Fair Work Framework, robust workforce planning, and mainstreaming equalities. As set out in our Equality Outcomes 2021–25, we aim to have an increasingly diverse workforce that fully embraces equality, diversity and inclusion in all that we do. We will provide responsive leadership, fostering the right workplace culture and giving our workforce an effective voice through our recognised trade unions and local directorate communication channels.

A thriving organisation has people doing the right things the right way. It must therefore be our shared priority to recognise, understand and reinforce the behaviour and attitudes that create the right culture for success.

Remote working has posed various challenges for our organisation, but it has also provided us with an opportunity to rethink how we can work in the future. Our Smarter Working Programme will allow us to deliver our activities more efficiently while providing flexible working options for our people. As an organisation, we need to adapt to meet the changing needs both of our colleagues and of society, and this is critical to successful delivery in the future.

Priorities for 2023–24

Ensure SQA has an engaged and diverse workforce which meets the needs of the organisation

This outcome — being a thriving organisation with a fair work environment for all — demonstrates our commitment to being a good employer. Having a motivated, engaged and inclusive workforce is a key factor in supporting a high-performing workplace.

Despite another challenging and disruptive year for SQA colleagues, we continue to deliver for Scotland's learners into 2023–24, with colleagues continuing to 'go above and beyond'. While there may be uncertainty around transition, we will take appropriate action on the outcomes of the Hayward Review, as well as the Education Reform Delivery Board which will lead SQA in its transition to a new qualifications body.

Communication remains at the centre of many aspects of our work, and through continued, and robust, leadership from across the organisation we will provide colleagues with all necessary support and guidance derived from the Executive Management Team and the 2022 established People and Culture Group.

Our support mechanisms include activities such as:

♦ Continuing to promote and support colleagues to embrace our hybrid working arrangements
♦ Continuing to promote the newly refurbished collaborative working areas
♦ Promoting the implementation of the Wellbeing Strategy to help support our colleagues' health, safety and wellbeing
♦ Continuing to positively engage with our colleagues and trade unions

Our annual People Survey 2022 produced an engagement score of 73%. This result — which represents an increase of 4 percentage points — is a positive outcome given the extremely challenging year which we have all experienced: the continued uncertainty surrounding transition to a new qualifications body, the Hayward Review and the industrial strike action by SQA's trade unions.

Work is already underway to reflect on the strengths we can continue to build on, and the areas for improvement, so that colleagues are supported and guided through these challenging times. This will be taken forward through action plans which will be regularly reviewed and reported on during the year. We will follow up these actions and measure progress against the next survey which will take place in October 2023.

In the year ahead, we will continue to deliver our People Strategy for the organisation.

Deliver the People Strategy

Our People Strategy, launched in June 2020, is centred on being a values-led, learning organisation with people at its heart. Each aspect of the strategy is made up of activities that support three core drivers:

- Strengthening our foundations
- Building our capability
- Advancing our business

Our People Strategy will continue to serve SQA through its one-year extension to the Corporate Plan 2020–23, agreed by Scottish Government.

Our People Strategy aims to set out for colleagues and wider stakeholders how we plan to strengthen the above aims (core drivers), ensuring that our people are at the heart of everything that we do.

As we transition from SQA to a new qualifications body, this strategy will support our organisation across these four main interlinking themes:

- Develop our organisation design and culture
- Improve health, wellbeing, and environment
- Be a responsible business
- Improve our performance

Transition

Positively engage and act on relevant recommendations from the Hayward Review and the Education Reform Delivery Board.

Smarter Working Programme

SQA maintains a high level of engagement and support with colleagues across the organisation as they continue to operate on our hybrid working arrangements. Our carefully designed and newly refurbished collaborative working areas in both offices have given colleagues the opportunity to embrace an innovative approach to working. Mixing remote and office working to achieve both professional and personal success.

People Diversity and Inclusion Strategy

In 2023–24 we will develop and launch a People Diversity and Inclusion Strategy aligned to our 2021–25 Equality Outcomes. We will continue to work with relevant stakeholders to deliver actions outlined in the equality action plan in support of the delivery of Equality Outcome 1: 'Have an increasingly diverse workforce that fully embraces equality, diversity and inclusion in all that we do.' SQA Equality Outcomes 2021–25 details the key steps to achieve this outcome.

2023–24 Pay award

We will work with Scottish Government and our trade union colleagues on the 2023–24 pay remit with a view to implementation at the earliest opportunity.

Total reward

We will continue to develop methods to actively promote the current total employment package to colleagues to ensure a greater understanding of its value and to aid recruitment and retention.

Policy review

In 2023–24, we will work with relevant stakeholders to deliver actions outlined following the EqIA review of HR policies.

Young Talent Strategy

As a government agency we have a responsibility to help develop Scotland's young workforce and are committed to developing our own young workforce. We are about to embark on significant change, a change that will likely see movement in our population. The Young Talent Strategy will encourage our young talent to learn the skills, knowledge and behaviours required to prepare us for change. It will ensure we can attract, retain and invest for growth, digital capability, and the leaders of the future. As part of the Young Talent Strategy, we will increase the diversity of the organisation with the introduction of Young Talent Paid Internships. Up to seven interns will join us in 2023–24 to learn more about SQA and their own career ambitions.

Provide Remote Work Experience Programme to all secondary schools in Scotland

Last year the Remote Work Experience Programme was piloted with two schools. Following success of the pilot, the Virtual Work Experience Programme was launched to all schools in October 2022. This will allow all young people access to employability skills online. We will monitor uptake and feedback on the programme throughout the year.

Achieve Investors in People — Health and Wellbeing Good Practice Award

The Investors in People Wellbeing framework will help us deliver a high-performing wellbeing strategy. The subsequent action plan based on the Investors in People framework will also help us measure the success of the delivery of our Wellbeing Strategy, and ensure it is fit for purpose and able to grow as the organisation and its workforce evolves.

Develop a People Data Analytics Strategy

We will look to develop and implement our People Data Analytics Strategy aligned to the needs of the business.

We are trusted, respected and valued by our customers, stakeholders and partners

What this means

Central to our value proposition is the confidence that an SQA qualification can be trusted to mean the holder has the skills and abilities we say they do. In short, trust is the currency that gives SQA's qualifications value.

Without the trust of those we work with and for, we cannot fulfil our mission. Consequently, understanding, nurturing, and maintaining our reputation are of critical importance.

Trust is built through the work of our people, so we will seek to become increasingly influential through our research, data reporting and other contributions to public debate. We will not shy away from a public presence and will use our expertise to tell our story and be a thought leader.

Being trusted to do what we say we will do underpins SQA's relationships. We must therefore be serious about driving customer satisfaction, engaging with stakeholders at a strategic level, and building partnerships of mutual respect.

All of this comes together to ensure SQA is truly valued. In all markets, sectors and relationships, SQA will demonstrate the value we uniquely bring. This will build confidence, encourage ambition, and make sure SQA's positive contribution to Scotland, and further afield, is acknowledged. This will further enhance trust and our ability to deliver on our purpose and mission.

Priorities for 2023–24

Build credibility and trust in SQA and continue the journey towards ensuring the new organisation is user-centred and based around strong communication, deep engagement and meaningful collaboration

We will continue our work to build trust and credibility, shift perceptions and restore reputation by:

- Telling a clear and compelling story, using a human and empathetic tone of voice, that shows both SQA and the new qualifications body are firmly on the side of learners, parents and teachers
- Being brave, bold, and pro-active in our communications, engagement and marketing — guided by data and audience insight — and promoting the full breadth of work that SQA does (and which the new qualifications body will do)
- Designing and delivering meaningful engagement for staff, users and stakeholders so that they have a genuine voice in the creation and identity of the new qualifications body, setting a high bar for the new body's approach to engagement

Effective and meaningful engagement with audiences is critical to the success of any organisation and we are committed to improving our relationships with those we serve and those we work with, now and in the future. We will listen, use feedback and work together to build consensus and to deliver, for example through the National Qualifications and HNVQ Groups and the work to build the new qualifications body.

Engaging with learners, and their parents or carers, is of particular importance to us. We run regular Learner Panels, with representation from schools and colleges across Scotland. We will ensure that the voices of young people are heard, listened to and used to shape our work.

We will continue to keep our communications and marketing channels under review, ensuring we are engaging with audiences where we know they are most likely to receive, absorb and act on information, and ensuring they continue to meet equality and accessibility requirements. Our digital channels, such as our website and social platforms, are essential channels and we will further improve content based on insight, feedback and best practice.

Performance measures

Perform

Priority area	Measure and target
National Qualifications delivery to plan	Progress towards critical success factors — Green status Certification — No errors
Higher National, Vocational and International delivery to plan	Progress towards critical success factors — Green status Certification — No errors
Maintain, develop, and improve our portfolio of qualifications	Portfolio development and maintenance: Completion % YTD — 100% Portfolio development and maintenance: Months from business case to end of project: % performance vs forecast variance — 100% Projects' progress updates — Project milestones achieved
Secure and Deliver contracts in line with service level agreements	Service level agreements completion rate — 100%
Ensure SQA has an engaged and diverse workforce which meets the needs of the organisation	SQA absence, turnover and proportion of flexible roles versus benchmark — In line with public sector benchmarks Engagement score at People Survey — 80%
Ensure SQA is compliant with all legislative, statutory and regulatory requirements (including qualifications regulators)	Compliance activity calendar — On track EQIAs publication — As per schedule
Deliver financial balance in line with available resources	Delivering outputs within agreed full year income and expenditure budgets — Delivering financial balance at year end against agreed budget
We will build credibility and trust in SQA and its qualifications, and in doing so continue the journey towards shifting perceptions and restoring reputation by ensuring strong communication, deep engagement and meaningful collaboration are at the heart of the new organisation	Stakeholder awareness — Up from 58% to 62% Stakeholder credibility score — Up from 56% to 61% Customer satisfaction score — Up from 7.25 to 8 (out of 10)
Enhance SQA's cyber maturity and resilience to ensure we are well equipped to withstand, defend against, manage, recover quickly, and learn from cyber incidents	Comparison between current security assurance assessment (2022–23, baseline) and future assessment (2023–24), in line with National Institute for Standards & Technology (NIST) — **2023–24** Develop and improve security weaknesses highlighted by the assessor

Progress

Priority area	Measure and target
Through effective use of our financial resource, implement the duty of Best Value in line with the Scottish Public Financial Manual	Progress update — Programme milestones achieved
Deliver the People Strategy	Progress towards achievement of operational plan objectives — Delivered to plan
Continue to develop and implement SQA's research and analysis strategy	Progress towards milestones — Milestones achieved
Review and update all policies to ensure they are (i) up to date; (ii) consistently applied	Number of policies reviewed compliant with legal and regulatory obligations — Completed as per agreed schedule
Deliver and refine the Work Based Learning Strategy	Progress towards milestones — Milestones achieved

Transition

Priority area	Measure and target
Deliver against agreed commissions in support the Scottish Government's Education Reform Programme regarding the establishment of a new qualifications body and the review of qualifications and assessment	Deliver required outputs in line with agreed programme timetable following methodology agreed by the Scottish Government — Deliver the plan

2023–24 income and expenditure budget

	£m
Qualifications entry income	−41.6
Other operating income	−8.7
Total operating income	**−50.3**
Staff	57.0
Appointees	21.0
Property costs	3.3
Other operating costs	26.1
Programme grant expenditure	1.2
Depreciation	4.3
Total resource expenditure	**112.9**
Net resource expenditure	62.9
Capital expenditure	2.5
Total net expenditure	**65.1**
Total net expenditure funded by:	
Resource grant in aid per Scottish budget	21.6
Additional resource grant funding*	32.3
Programme grant funding	1.0
Property related grant in aid	3.3
Non-cash resource grant (depreciation)	4.4
Capital grant in aid	2.5
TOTAL SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT FUNDING	6

*Total includes a budget for Education Reform of £3.6m which is subject to confirmation from the Scottish Government. This grant estimate is offset by equivalent expenditure relating to Education Reform.