SQA Equality Mainstreaming Report 2023–25

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Foreword

I am pleased to be introducing our SQA Mainstreaming Report 2023–25.

This report provides a snapshot of our progress since [our SQA Mainstreaming Report 2021–23](#) and details our priorities for the future.

This has been a fundamental point in time in which to be producing this report and developing our new SQA Equality Outcomes 2025–29.

Our transition to Qualifications Scotland in 2025 and wider educational reform brings opportunities for change and for continuing to ensure that equality, diversity and inclusion are at the heart of the education system.

Our [Prospectus for Change: Corporate Plan 2024–27](#) provides a blueprint for Scotland's new Qualifications Body and mainstreaming equality is an integral part of this journey.

I am proud of the case studies in this report, which demonstrate the dedication and enthusiasm of SQA employees to recognise, respect and embed equality through everything we do.

We could not have done this alone, and I want to express my thanks to our people and stakeholders who took the time to engage with this process, helping us reflect on the last two years and shape our new outcomes and the priorities they lay out.

This won't be the end of the conversation; over the next four-year cycle we will need to work with and involve different equality groups and partners to make our new outcomes a reality.

We look forward to working with you.

John Booth

Interim Chief Executive Officer

Introduction

SQA is the national accreditation and awarding body in Scotland. We develop, maintain, and continually improve a framework of qualifications gained at Scotland's schools, colleges, employers and training providers. As an accrediting body, SQA sets and maintains standards for many other awarding bodies, and for accredited qualifications such as Scottish Vocational Qualifications.

We have a unique role in the Scottish education and skills system. Our work supports learners at all levels, helping them to realise their full potential, in many different types of centres, and impacts universities, employers and the wider economy.

Our 'Prospectus for Change SQA Corporate Plan' demonstrates our commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) at a strategic level, and directly links to the Scottish Government national outcome, 'We respect, protect and fulfil human rights and live free from discrimination'.

Why we mainstream equality

Mainstreaming equality is the responsibility of everyone within SQA. Having a diverse workforce and an inclusive environment means that we are better placed to meet the needs of our people, learners and stakeholders, and that we can attract and retain a wide range of skilled people.

The Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012 requires SQA to publish a report that demonstrates the steps it has taken to mainstream equality across the organisation and what steps it has taken to mainstream the three elements of the general equality duty (GED). The GED requires us to have due regard to the need to:

♦ Eliminate discrimination, harassment and victimisation.
♦ Advance equality of opportunity between different groups.
♦ Foster good relations between different groups.

The Public Sector Equality Duty covers the protected characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. It also covers marriage and civil partnerships, with regard to eliminating unlawful discrimination in employment.

SQA also considers Care Experience as a protected characteristic.

Mainstreaming equality has the benefit of ensuring that people's needs are identified and incorporated into the way we work. Because mainstreaming equality is every member of staff's responsibility, this improves the capacity of SQA to meet a range of learner and stakeholders' needs.

How we mainstream equality

Leadership

Although the mainstreaming of equality is a responsibility that lies with everyone, SQA recognises that it requires visible leadership and commitment over time to make change happen. The Executive Management Team (EMT) champions equality in a variety of ways, demonstrating the importance of embedding it into everything we do.

We have designated EMT Sponsors who are responsible for actively promoting a diverse, supportive, and inclusive culture at a strategic level. They input into executive level strategy and planning so that a meaningful difference can be made. We have EMT Sponsors for Children's Rights, Accessibility, Anti-Racism and Carers and executive sponsors for our Employee Staff Networks.

Prospectus for Change

We published SQA 'Prospectus for Change, Corporate Plan in October 2024. Our new Corporate Plan arrives at a pivotal moment and provides a roadmap to the organisation's transition to Qualifications Scotland in 2025. The Prospectus was developed through extensive consultation and engagement with learners, teachers, lecturers, employers, training providers and many stakeholder organisations, as well as with SQA staff. This

consultation informed the [equality impact assessment](#) and ultimately the new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Deliverable within the plan:

Deliver SQA's Equality Outcomes and mainstream equality throughout SQA ensuring SQA is a place where diversity is embraced.

This demonstrates our commitment to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) at a strategic level, and directly links to the Scottish Government national outcome, 'We respect, protect and fulfil human rights and live free from discrimination'.

Senior leaders have been actively considering EDI when developing their operational plans, and our Human Resources and Organisational Development teams are reviewing our performance review process to specifically include an EDI objective.

This approach allows us to ensure an equality perspective is integrated into our day-to-day work across all functions.

Policy development and review

SQA policies are crucial in translating our strategic objectives into action and fundamental to creating the conditions for an inclusive culture.

We have developed a new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy which sets out our commitment as an organisation to an inclusive culture. This is reinforced through our Dignity at Work policy, which ensures all employees are treated with dignity and respect, and outlines the support and action employees will expect to see if they experience or show bullying, discrimination or harassment behaviours.

Dignity at Work and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion training is mandatory for all employees as part of the implementation of these policies.

To further support our inclusive culture, SQA developed a new Gender Identity and Transitioning at Work policy in collaboration with our employee networks, recognising that trans people and those with nonbinary identities should be able to bring their authentic selves to work and to work in an environment free from prejudice and discrimination.

We also reviewed our Recruitment and Selection policy to ensure that the process was fair. All recruiting managers or employees involved in the recruitment and selection process complete Inclusive Recruitment training to recognise and address any bias in the recruitment and selection process.

Our exit interview process was reviewed to better determine whether employees were leaving the organisation due to reasons related to equality or a particular protected characteristic.

Our policy review and development process include consulting with our recognised trade unions, Unison and Unite, using equality impact assessment processes and gaining feedback through our employee networks.

In externally publishing our Equality of Access to SQA Qualifications policy, we are also demonstrating our commitment to embedding equality in our decision-making relating to our qualifications and in the steps we take to consider impacts on learners from equality groups.

Decision-making

The Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA) process continues to be one of the most important tools that the SQA uses to mainstream equality. It allows us to embed equality considerations into our policies, strategies, projects and services.

By ensuring that all policies, strategies and services have their potential equality impacts identified, we will ensure SQA's policies and procedures are equitable and that we are considering impacts, both positive and negative, on our people, learners and stakeholders. By training policy owners and encouraging them to engage with the EqIA process, we are building expertise throughout the organisation. By monitoring actions from EqIAs, we are ensuring that there are tangible benefits and positive impacts, and that these are owned by employees across the organisation.

We are taking steps to extend the impact assessment approach to include our obligations for Island Impact Assessments, and in 2025 we will work towards incorporating a broader assessment of children's rights.

The Corporate Equality Team (CET) works with colleagues across the organisation to promote and embed equality, diversity and inclusion, and support SQA to meet its responsibilities relating to the Equality Act 2010 (Public Sector Equality Duty), Children and Young People Scotland Act 2014 (Part 9 Corporate Parenting), Island (Scotland) Act 2018 and UNCRC (Implementation) (Scotland) Act 2024 (UNCRC Act 2024).

They support work to develop SQA's equality and Corporate Parenting action plans and monitor progress and performance to be able to report against these commitments. They also support SQA's Equality Steering Group, Corporate Parenting Steering Group, Children's Rights Steering Group and the Equality Management Review Group.

Case Study: Equality Impact Assessment for Use of Information Communication Technology (ICT) policy

GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination,** foster good relations.

What change did we want to see?

ICT forms an integral part of learning, teaching and assessment in our digital age, and SQA had stringent restrictions on internet connectivity of any device used in assessment. These security requirements had been designed as a set of standards for Windows devices.

However, ITC can be used for a number of reasons, including using assistive technology, such as a screen reader, or being able to personalise the background or text colour on a digital question paper. Since the COVID pandemic, increasingly centres were purchasing iPads and Chromebooks, which are more affordable and suitable for the learning and teaching environment than Windows devices. However, these devices require internet connectivity to operate, or for core functions like Cloud storage. This created a landscape in which learners were learning on Apple or Chromebook devices, distributed by the local authority, but were being assessed using less familiar Windows devices.

What did we do?

Research was carried out with learners and specialist groups on digital accessibility, and desk-based research, including analysis of the number of requests for the use of ICT as an assessment arrangement, and as a preference for those with no additional support needs.

This demonstrated that, in a number of cases, the digital assistive technology that the learners were familiar with was either only available on Chromebook or Apple systems that could not operate without an internet connection, and that learners found it difficult to switch to a different kind of device, for example Windows for external assessments.

What difference did it make?

Based on this research and consultation activity, SQA revised its stance on the ICT security requirements. Centres were informed of these changes through SQA News, and the ICT security checklist was updated for the 2025 exam diet. The updated checklist is more expansive in the types of devices for which provisions are made. Devices will now be able to connect to the internet for basic functionalities, as well as for the use of assistive technology, while maintaining the integrity of SQA external assessments, including exams for National Courses.

In addition, the working group proposed a move away from paper-based question papers, and towards our online, digital assessment platform, SOLAR, for all National Course external assessments. This would reduce the differential impacts on learners who currently request a digital paper. Colleagues are currently investigating the possibility of moving the future of National Course external exams to SOLAR.

The EqIA has now been updated to reflect these changes and will continue to be monitored on a regular basis.

Case Study: Care Experience as a protected characteristic
GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, foster good relations.**

What change did we want to see?

As a named Corporate Parent under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, SQA has specific legal duties and responsibilities to care-experienced people. This means we must uphold their rights and safeguard their wellbeing. Existing statutory guidance makes it clear these duties include taking action to tackle discrimination faced by people with Care Experience.

Who Cares? Scotland, care-experienced people, their supporters, and many others would welcome a change in law to make Care Experience a protected characteristic. This change in law would mean that:

♦ care-experienced people, like other equality groups, would have the same protection from discrimination and harassment because of their care identity.
♦ Awareness about the discrimination faced by care-experienced people is raised.
♦ Public bodies would be required to pay due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity for people with experience of care and foster good relations.
♦ The protection and support for care-experienced people would be lifelong.

We know there are different ways to consider Care Experience a protected characteristic, and SQA wanted to act. We wanted to acknowledge this was possible without a change to the Equality Act 2010, and that it would help us meet our existing statutory Corporate Parenting responsibilities.

In January 2024, we were pleased to publish our new Corporate Parenting Plan 2023-26 and the commitment to ensuring the voice of care-experienced people is at the heart of SQA

decision-making. An important way for us to achieve this is to use our equality impact assessment (EqIA) process to monitor and evaluate the impact of our policies and practices for care-experienced people.

We made a commitment to ensuring SQA policies consider Care Experience as a protected characteristic.

What did we do?

We updated our equality impact assessment (EqIA) process and guidance to ensure consideration of the needs of care-experienced people as part of EqIAs. SQA's Corporate Parenting work and equality and diversity work overlap, and we ensure these workstreams and responsibilities under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024 are closely aligned.

SQA's new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion module, launched in 2024, includes a section to raise awareness of our Corporate Parenting responsibilities and to ensure employees are reminded that SQA considers Care Experience a protected characteristic. We also launched a new Corporate Parenting and Care Experience module, developed by Who Cares? Scotland, in 2024 and continue to promote the course to all staff and monitor completion rates.

What difference did we make?

As a public body, we must ensure that our policies, and services deliver in the best interests of children and young people. SQA's equality impact assessment process and staff training ensures employees are alert to matters which might adversely affect the wellbeing of children and young people in care. By training and supporting policy owners and encouraging them to engage with the EqIA process and consider the needs of care-experienced people, we are building expertise and raising awareness of SQA's Corporate Parenting responsibilities towards care-experienced people.

Following work to complete EqIAs of SQA's employment policies, we identified opportunities to enhance the employment support we offer people with experience of care, and SQA line managers. We want to better understand the barriers that care-experienced people face in relation to recruitment and employment, and have made a commitment to take measures to develop the support they need to gain, stay and progress in employment.

♦ We are currently exploring a range of methods to ensure we better understand the employee lifecycle and barriers for care-experienced people.

Dedicated teams

Different aspects of equality, diversity, and inclusion rests with SQA employees at all levels of decision-making and in separate teams and directorates. There are three EDI Teams with distinct responsibilities that allow us to consider and mainstream equality in our employment, service provision, governance and decision-making practices. These teams are:

♦ the HR Reward and Equalities team, whose focus is on the inclusive practices of SQA's staff-facing operations
♦ Policy, Analysis and Standards – Equalities Team, focusing on the inclusivity and equity of SQA's products and services
♦ Corporate Equality Team, with a remit of tying equality governance together and embedding our legislative obligations throughout the organisation

Learning and development

Learning and development is essential to creating an inclusive workforce who understand the needs of our colleagues, learners and wider stakeholders.

To ensure an understanding of EDI legislation and responsibilities, a number of information sessions have been delivered by advisory law firm Brodies. This has included:

♦ The Public Sector Equality Duty and how it applies to SQA.
♦ UNCRC Act 2024.
♦ SQA's role as a Corporate Parent under the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014.
♦ Conducting impact assessments, including equality impact assessments and children's rights impact assessments.
♦ Digital Accessibility.
♦ Further training for all HR colleagues on understanding neurodivergence in the workplace was also delivered by external providers.

The sessions allow participants to ask questions around the legislation and how they can embed this into their day-to-day work. The sessions are recorded and available to all employees to watch back in our EDI learning resource area.

In-person workshops were delivered to senior leaders on unconscious bias, with a particular focus on the potential impact of unconscious bias in the context of the Public Sector Equality Duty and decision-making.

We developed a range of online training in equality, diversity and inclusion to support our inclusive culture. This was complemented by staff information sessions and workshops in equality-related areas organised both by SQA and by our employee networks. This included, for example, dementia, anti-racism, unpaid carers, Corporate Parenting, disability, trans awareness and allies training.

We launched a new equality, diversity and inclusion online training for all staff. This module provides a base level of knowledge for all staff, at all levels of SQA. This included the development of a reporting tool to enable managers to monitor completion levels.

In addition, we developed Dignity at Work training to support the implementation of our Dignity at Work policy. All staff are required to complete this training. This training outlines expected behaviours for all staff, and the support and action that employees can expect to see if they experience or show bullying, discriminatory or harassing behaviours.

We launched our 'Dignity at Work' campaign in January 2025 in collaboration with our employee networks. This six-month campaign has been designed to highlight the organisation's commitment to creating an inclusive culture that is free from bullying, harassment, sexual harassment and victimisation. We want everyone to feel that they can bring their whole self to work and thrive.

Our Designing Inclusive Assessment e-learning module provides guidance, with exemplars, on how to design and write assessment materials that are as inclusive and accessible as possible.

The course was recently reviewed, to ensure it remains up to date and meets the needs of SQA employees and appointees. The review of the course has allowed us to include

important emerging practice aligned with anti-racism, gender equality and LGBTQ+ inclusiveness.

Additionally, as a Corporate Parent we have taken Care Experience perspectives into account in the new design to ensure we are able to take a holistic approach.

Case Study: Anti-racist education

GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, foster good relations.**

What change did we want to see?

From the beginning of our anti-racist journey, training was identified as a key element of creating anti-racist qualifications. Understanding how discriminatory practices show up every day is key to ensuring that SQA becomes an ever-evolving inclusive organisation. Further internal research revealed that staff were keen on additional development so they could support more inclusive practice in their roles.

What did we do?

We implemented five types of learning opportunities that can be co-ordinated and built upon:

- An intranet resource page that includes videos, reading, creative pieces and background information on race and racism.
- Short online talks from a range of academics and experts in education.
- Stage one in-person racial literacy workshops which set up foundational concepts integral to anti-racist education.
- Stage two anti-racist education training, which consists of three sessions over a six-week period.
- Alternate substantial anti-racist training as provided by Education Scotland's Building Racial Literacy Programme.

What difference did we make?

Colleagues across various directorates have taken part in anti-racist training to different levels, dependent on their role. Leaders in Policy Analysis and Standards, Qualifications Development and Communications Directorates were targeted as crucial influencers and took advantage of the stage two cohorts of anti-racist training. Feedback from participants has been widely positive with many indicating that the learning is valuable to the sector.

Having EDI interwoven throughout training, rather than just as a standalone item, increases awareness of equality as it directly relates to our people, their roles, our work and our stakeholders. An example of this is our refreshed Inclusive Recruitment training. All recruiting managers are required to complete the training so that they can recognise and address any bias in the recruitment and selection process.

Case Study: SQA Young Talent Strategy 2024–25

GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, foster good relations.**

Learning and development also includes ensuring we have development pathways to support a diverse workforce.

What change did we want to see?

We needed more routes for young people to join the organisation and more development for colleagues under the age of 28 so they feel valued, invested in and can build their careers at SQA. This will provide the organisation with the skills, knowledge and experience it needs for the future.

What did we do?

We reviewed and realigned the Young Talent Strategy for 2024–25. This included:

♦ Revised recruitment training to provide valuable feedback that young colleagues can apply in their development plan.
♦ Secured a commitment from hiring managers to recruit on experience of work activity not number of years in a position.
♦ Developed a Skills Matrix for the young talent population to better identify development opportunities and use of existing skills.
♦ Agreed further corporate sponsorship for Modern Apprenticeship, Foundation Apprenticeship and Career Ready Internship programme delivery in 2024 and 2025.
♦ Created a Young Talent Career Development Mentoring Programme to pair young talent colleagues with more experienced colleagues to help them identify and work towards their career goals and ambitions.

What difference did we make?

♦ Five new Modern Apprentices hired in August 2024 and six vacancies advertised in March 2025.
♦ Six new Foundation Apprentices and five new Career Ready Interns in 2024.
♦ Eight new Young Talent Career Development Mentoring partnerships.
♦ 18 new members of the Young Talent Network.

In addition to this, we achieved Investors in Young People Gold accreditation. The Investors in Young People Report 2024 highlighted the Young Talent Strategy, describing it as 'a particularly impressive piece of work, and all policies and procedures are well-thought out and focused on the success of young people. The Young Talent Strategy champions, encourages and supports the employment of young people and leaders are positive about young people and recognise that they are vital to SQA.'

Employee Networks

SQA's Employee Network groups provide colleagues with an opportunity to come together to share their experiences and ideas, offer peer support and guidance, and build on allyship awareness and understanding of the experiences of these marginalised groups of people. Networks also provide a forum for SQA to engage with employees to help inform policy development. Since our last report, our networks have grown, and we are pleased to now have seven Employee Networks in SQA:

♦ ACE (Appreciate Culture and Ethnicity) Network
♦ Disability Network
♦ Rainbow Network (LGBT+ Network)
♦ Women's Network
♦ Young Talent Forum
♦ Carers Network
♦ Men's Shed

ACE Network

Our ACE Network continue to meet regularly. The network has been very active during 2023–25, raising awareness and promoting key events and important issues. Its campaigns have included:

2023

♦ A film screening of *Arise Firebird* and a discussion of what SQA is doing around race equality.
♦ ACE and the Disability Network came together to host a speaker session 'Changing the Narratives: The Meaning of Mongol,' with Uuganaa Ramsay, the founder and director of Mongol Identity, to share her story.
♦ Share your favourite cultural recipes — a celebration of the diversity of cultures within SQA, with colleagues encouraged to share recipes of their favourite cultural dishes.
♦ Celebrating Black History Month.

2024

♦ Race Equality week #ListenActChange.
♦ Transnational politics of British anti-racism movements SIP with Romain Muhammad took place on 23 April.
♦ Humanising Neurodiversity at Work SIP with Samantha Hiew, on 17 April, with the Women's and Disability Networks.
♦ Celebrating Chinese New Year and Eid al-Adha.
♦ South Asian and East & Southeast Asian Heritage Months.
♦ Virtual documentary screening of 'My Family, Partition and Me: India 1947'.
♦ Walking Group to include landmark sites relating to South Asian history.
♦ Joint lunch and discussion screening of 1745: An Untold Story of Slavery with PAS Equalities on 30 October.

2025

♦ Race Equality week #EveryActionCounts.
♦ Celebrating Chinese New Year.
♦ A virtual or hybrid book club is being started by the network to discuss books about or written by Black, Asian, Indigenous or Minority Ethnic individuals.

Disability Network

SQA's Disability Network continues to provide a welcoming, confidential, and safe environment for colleagues to share their experiences, ideas and information on disability equality in the workplace. Each year members support UK Disability History Month — an annual event that provides a platform to promote awareness of disability. SQA's Disability Network's campaigns during 2023–25 have included:

♦ Disability History Month 2023 focusing on disability in childhood and youth. The Disability Network produced their first podcast exploring the challenges of going through life undiagnosed.
♦ Paul Nisbet from CALL Scotland joined us to demonstrate some of the accessibility tools and functions and assistive technology that can be used with our digital question papers in SQA exams by disabled learners and those with additional support needs.
♦ Neurodiversity Celebration Week — Disability Network, Women's Network and ACE Network invited guest speaker, Dr Samantha Hiew, to deliver a talk on neurodiversity and intersecting identities on 17 April.
♦ Mast Cell Disease Awareness Month.

- Living with ADHD.
- SQA supports the Sunflower Scheme.
- Disability History Month 2024.
- Articles were also published internally to highlight the varying experiences of neurodivergent colleagues, as well as the positive impact that gaming has had for disabled and neurodivergent colleagues.

Rainbow Network

SQA's Rainbow Network offers a safe and welcoming space for LGBTQ+ colleagues and allies. The Rainbow Network encourages SQA to be a workplace that promotes, embraces, and welcomes LGBTQ+ diversity, dignity, inclusion, and talents. During 2023–25, our Rainbow Network organised several events and awareness-raising campaigns.

We were especially proud to have our efforts recognised by being finalists for two Herald Awards. We were shortlisted for 'Diversity Campaign of the Year' for our Rainbow Query project, an anonymous question-answering service designed to address barriers in discussing LGBT+ topics and to promote LGBT+ inclusive practice.

Our Rainbow Network Chair was also shortlisted for the Herald Diversity Hero of the Year Award. As well as having a full-time role within SQA, our Rainbow Chair devotes much of their time to chairing our Rainbow (LGBT+) Network, and alongside colleagues has been instrumental in raising awareness and understanding of LGBT+ issues and advancing equality throughout SQA and beyond.

Other highlights include:

- Pride Month June 2023
- SQA Drag Brunch 2023
- Ally Training covering a variety of important LGBT+ topics such as the history and difficulties the community face.
- Rainbow Network Podcast
- Attendance at Pride South Lanarkshire 2023
- Rainbow Network Honesty Library

Women's Network

Our Women's Network continues to provide a welcoming space for women across the organisation. The Network offers women in SQA the opportunity to get to know one another, offer peer support and share information. Campaigns and events during 2023–25 include;

- Global Day of Parents
- Breast Cancer Awareness Public Health Talk
- Cervical Screening Awareness week
- 2024 Woman of the Year Award
- Networking Session
- Holocaust Memorial Day — women in history
- International Day of Women and Girls in Science
- International Women's Day
- Documentary screening highlighting period poverty in India
- Mum's cafe - opportunity for Mums to come together and discuss challenges etc in workplace.
- Women in Black History (Black History Month)

- Menopause Cafe
- Baby Loss Awareness

Men's Shed

The Men's Shed is a safe and inclusive space where men can come together to share their thoughts, experiences, and challenges in a supportive environment. We understand that men's health is a crucial aspect of overall wellbeing, and we aim to create a space where men can openly discuss all aspects of their overall health, receive support, and learn from one another's experiences.

In March 2024 the Men's Shed held a workshop with guest presenter Christian Chalfont. A diverse group of colleagues came together, spanning business areas and generations, to engage in a frank and open dialogue that left a lasting impact.

The Mens Shed campaigns during 2023–25 include

- Movember International Men's Day

Carers Network

The Carers' Network was launched in June 2023 to provide support and resources for employees of SQA who have caring responsibilities.

The aim of the network is to support carers' health and wellbeing by creating a safe space for employees with caring responsibilities to connect, share experiences, and offer support. It also aims to:

- Foster a sense of community and belonging for employee carers.
- Improve the identification and visibility of employee carers through increased awareness of the challenges and needs of employee carers within SQA.
- Share information to support carers to balance work and caring responsibilities such as policies, benefits, and external support services available to employee carers.
- Identify gaps in support: Gather feedback and suggestions to identify areas where SQA can improve its support for employee carers.

Campaigns and events include:

- Securing an executive team sponsor to advocate on behalf of the network and to ensure our voices are heard at the highest levels of our organisation.
- Support to develop a Carer Support Hub to provide our employee carers with the support and resources they need to balance their caring role with their working life.
- Support to develop a draft Carer's Policy which will go through our policy review process in early 2025. This provides information for staff to understand their rights and the support that is available, as well as providing information for managers.
- A programme of educational and awareness-raising events and workshops to identify and support carers such as provision of information on accessibility and adult carer support plans.
- Celebration of Carers' Right Day in June and Carers' Week in November.

Staff Networks Day

In May 2023 Staff Networks Day was celebrated with our staff networks getting together to make a podcast around the theme of 'staying strong'. The discussion focused on the importance of networks within SQA, as well as an opportunity to get together and strengthen our relationships across networks.

Staff Networks Day took place again on 8 May 2024, with #**RaisingTheBar** as the theme of the event. To celebrate, the Internal Communications team hosted a Conversation Cafe with SQA's networks in Optima.

Community Networks survey

The networks play a vital role in building a sense of belonging and offering constructive challenges as we strive to achieve our equality responsibilities as an employer and public body. We value the insight, feedback and lived experience they bring to help shape our equality outcomes and associated action plans.

In addition, we reviewed the organisational structure for our employee networks to see how we could better support them. We are now taking action as a result of this review — for example we have developed a new Carer's Network.

Young Talent Forum

We have our Young Talent Forum to give colleagues aged 16–28 a platform where they will be heard, recognised, and supported to influence change and ensure that SQA fulfils its commitment to developing the young workforce. The forum's remit and structure were updated in 2024 to allow for more discussion and networking amongst its membership and to support talent management in the population.

SQA has held Investors in Young People (IIYP) accreditation since 2015 and currently has a gold award for good practice. We also hold a Carer Positive Accreditation at 'Engaged' level. 'The Young Talent Network really does give a voice for young people and allows them to work collectively to improve young talent employment' said the IIYP 2024 commendation.

This accreditation recognises organisations as an employer of choice, highlighting practices and pathways that have positive outcomes for young people while creating a talent pool for the future.

Members of the Executive Management Team and Heads of Service held a panel event on 6 March. This gave the forum an opportunity to chat with our senior leaders and ask questions to help with their own career development goals.

Responsible Business

SQA makes a difference to our communities through a shared understanding and a sense of being a responsible business that delivers and sustains a positive impact on our people and wider communities. As a responsible business, our objectives are to create positive changes and make valuable contributions that support our local communities, environment, customers, and employees. SQA's Responsible Business Strategy and associated Giving Something Back initiatives get SQA staff involved throughout the year across a variety of activities to 'give something back' to our local communities.

Our launch of the wellbeing strategy and accreditation for the wellbeing award has demonstrated the great work around wellbeing. This ranges from colleague flu vaccinations, onsite therapists, mental health first aider resources and our staff network groups, all of which gives our colleagues support and encourages an environment where people feel valued.

Case Study – Responsible Business and Volunteering Hours

GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, foster good relations.**

What change did we want to see?

As a responsible business, SQA wants to be sure that all employees have an opportunity to give back to our communities. Through our volunteering scheme, employees can use up to 21 hours per year to take part in volunteering initiatives. We offer a broad range of volunteering initiatives, including community gardening, beach clean-ups and helping out on a local farm. Doing this gives back to our communities, and our people at SQA feel a great deal of pride in this work. But we know that our range of volunteering opportunities has room to be more inclusive. A lot of our activities can be physically demanding, so we wanted to expand our offering.

What did we do?

When designing volunteering days, we work closely with teams to understand the needs of everybody taking part. We reviewed this information gathered over the last few years, and considered that, for our staff with physical disabilities, not all of our opportunities were accessible.

We worked with corporate partners, such as MCR Pathways, to develop other ways in which our staff can give back. SQA now offers a number of mentoring opportunities and online paired reading, which staff can choose to use their 21 volunteering hours to do.

What difference did we make?

The feedback from the organisations we have paired with in these schemes is positive, and our employees who use these schemes report a great sense of fulfilment for giving something back.

The mentees from MCR Pathways have also reported a great benefit from the programme.

Communications and Engagement

The Communications Directorate consists of two business areas — Communications, and Engagement and Marketing. The teams provide insight and expertise in content creation, digital, stakeholder engagement, marketing, PR and media relations, direct communications, measurement and strategy. We listen, create and connect in everything we do:

We listen — to what our customers need and what SQA needs, and find the sweet spot in the middle.

We create — we 'make the complicated simple' via messaging and content that is clear, concise and relevant.

We connect — internally and externally to add value to SQA's qualifications, services and reputation.

Case Study: Learner Campaign 'How SQA helped learners Get Exam Ready.'
GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, foster good relations.**

What change did we want to see?

We wanted to make our National Qualifications pages more user-friendly to ensure that learners could find what they were looking for on our pages. We wanted to hear from users about whether they were happy with the content of these pages and whether they could find everything they needed during the exams.

What did we do?

We connected with our learners to create tailored content to support them through their exams. With this feedback we:

♦ Simplified the webpage layout, merging six smaller pages into one scrollable page.
♦ Reviewed language to ensure it was clear and jargon free.
♦ Created responsive images, which are accessible across devices.

What difference did we make?

We launched our annual Get Exam Ready campaign in February 2024. This campaign aims to drive traffic to our learner hub, which is packed with tailored support for learners, parents and carers, including past papers, study tips, helpful resources and wellbeing advice.

We also published the Your Exams booklet — it contains important information, rules and advice for learners so they can do their very best on the day of exams.

Colleagues from Communications took home gold at the Marketing Society Star in the Digital Strategy Category for our Learner Campaign How SQA helped learners Get Exam Ready.

Island community impact assessments

SQA has adopted the Scottish Government's approach to island community impact assessments (ICIAs), using their template and guidance. This is available internally alongside other equality-related impact assessments. When policy owners are required to carry out an EqIA, they are also presented with the guidance, templates and support surrounding island community impact assessments and children's rights and wellbeing impact assessments.

In 2023 and 2024, SQA provided training sessions on impact assessments through an external training provider. These included an hour devoted to our duty to carry out impact assessments, including EqIAs, and a further hour specifically on assessing impacts on island communities.

We recognise that our qualifications serve centres across Scotland, including centres on islands, and that learners in island communities could be differently affected by some policy and customer-facing service decisions. We have long known that different centres, and different communities, have a variety of different needs. For this reason, SQA gives centres a level of autonomy in decision-making in relation to delivering assessments, submitting

requests for assessment arrangements and reasonable adjustments, and to access our services including Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) and appeals, and certification.

In several pieces of work, a number of potential impacts to island communities were considered, though none represented challenges unique to island communities. Connectivity, digital connectivity and access to specific teaching staff stand out as impacts, but they are not island-specific, as these challenges are also faced in remote rural mainland communities. To date, no pieces of policy screened were found to identify any significant impacts specific to island communities only.

In all cases where a policy was screened in this period, policy owners identified actions to monitor any potential island impacts, including those received in our engagement with centres, appointees, educators and learners.

Progress on our Equality Outcomes

Equality Outcome 1: Have an increasingly diverse workforce that fully embraces equality, diversity and inclusion in all that we do

SQA wants to be an employer of choice, a thriving organisation, with quality jobs and a fair work environment for all our people. We are making progress, and the diversity of our workforce is changing.

We identified six steps to achieve this Equality Outcome:

1. Foster an inclusive culture and environment where all colleagues feel valued, respected and supported.
2. Promote and support effective voice to ensure our employee views are listened to and considered to inform SQA's equality, diversity and inclusion commitments and action plans.
3. Embed the principles of an inclusive culture as part our employee education and training on equality to advance diversity and inclusion practices.
4. Develop and implement a race equality action plan with published milestones to support and increase the diversity of our workforce and to meet SQA's commitments to the Business in the Community (BITC) Race at Work Charter.
5. Improve the collection and analysis of equality data including pay data to aid the development of action plans and identify trends to support the progression of equality, diversity and inclusion.
6. Ensure equality, diversity and inclusion principles are embedded in our governance, strategy and planning.

HR Equality, Diversity and Inclusion leads on the development, review and implementation of effective equality, diversity and inclusion policies, processes and engagement activities. These ensure that SQA is an organisation where all colleagues can bring their authentic selves to work, where they are valued for their uniqueness and where they have a voice that is heard. We adhere to the Fair Work Framework that offers all individuals an effective voice, opportunity, security, fulfilment and respect in work.

This includes supporting our requirements under the public sector equality duty, progressing work on mainstreaming equality and meeting our equality outcomes. This includes workforce equality monitoring and equal pay audits including ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation pay gaps. We progress equality using a variety of equality frameworks, such as the Carer Positive Accreditation, Disability Confident Leader Accreditation, and BITC Race at Work Charter. We also support the work of wider accreditations, memberships and charter marks with our Corporate Equality colleagues.

We pledged to put in place the recommendations of the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee's Race Equality, Employment and Skills: Making Progress? Report. This included undertaking an assessment of our organisation's understanding of racism and the structural barriers that may exist within our organisation, and a commitment to review our recruitment procedures and practice against the Scottish Government's toolkit and make the necessary changes. The actions associated with this will be incorporated into the existing race equality action plan.

This work included benchmarking across a range of organisations and mapping our BITC commitments with internally identified actions from our Appreciate Culture and Ethnicity Network (ACE) and also considering actions outlined in the Scottish Government toolkit.

Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion (ENEI)

We undertook an evaluation of our equality activities using the Employers Network for Equality and Inclusion (ENEI) equality evaluation tool, Talent, Inclusion and Diversity Evaluation (TIDE). The results supported our work on our refreshed Equality Outcomes and our EDI Strategy. We were measured against eight categories, each with around 30 questions.

The categories were:

1 Your workforce
2 Strategy & plan
3 Leadership & accountability
4 Recruitment & attraction
5 Training & development
6 Other employment practices
7 Communication & engagement
8 Procurement

We were awarded a Bronze Award for our efforts.

Our results indicated that we are working at 'Embed' level, with an overall score of 65%. The graphic below shows our areas of strength and areas that require further focus. This work supported the development of our refreshed equality outcomes and the development of our organisational equality, diversity and inclusion strategy.

	Prepare	Mobilise	Realise	Embed	Sustain
Your workforce	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Strategy & plan	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Leadership & accountability	✔	✔			
Recruitment & attraction	✔	✔	✔	✔	
Training & development	✔	✔	✔		
Other employment practices	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Communication & engagement	✔	✔	✔		
Procurement	✔	✔	✔		
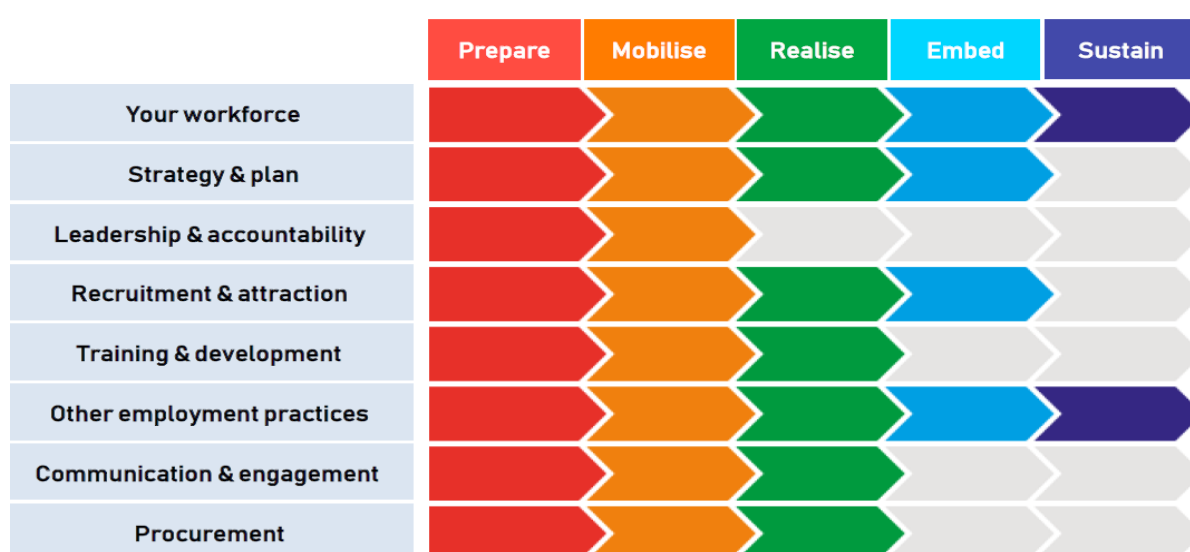
Partnership Working

We are working with the Council for Ethnic Minority Voluntary Organisations (CEMVO) to further refine our race equality action plan, focusing on data collection and inclusive recruitment.

CEMVO is also supporting our ACE Network to grow its membership and opportunities for improvement to create more safe spaces and engagement opportunities for Black, Asian, Indigenous and Minority Ethnic colleagues.

We are working in partnership with Show Racism the Red Card (SRtRC) for its national competition with secondary schools and colleges. This is held annually, and thousands of young people participate. The competition is free to enter and open to young people of all ages and abilities. Entrants can produce work in a wide range of media, including artwork, creative writing, film and music. The entries are consistently inspirational, and SRtRC makes sure that many have a resonance beyond the competition by using them in educational resources and magazines, on the campaign's website, social media channels, YouTube, and in a special calendar. All competition winners are invited to an awards ceremony with prizes presented by special guests.

Employee Voice

There are a number of ways that employees' views are listened to and considered to inform our equality, diversity and inclusion commitments and action plans, including our Employee Staff Networks (highlighted earlier in this report).

We previously had an annual survey. Feedback from staff indicated that a new approach was required due to the length of the survey, and the time needed to analyse results and to see the impact of any actions that resulted. A new colleague engagement survey is currently being piloted to provide more opportunities for all employees to share their views and to have actions implemented more quickly. This new approach uses a smaller, more focused, themed question set, and is expected to run regularly throughout the annual planning cycle.

Our Human Resources Equality Outcome One Group (a subgroup of our Equality Steering Group) provides one of the formal routes that our employees can feedback on our equality work. The purpose of these meetings is to review our progress against the Equality Outcome One Action Plan and the steps we have specified that we will take to meet this outcome. These meetings are held quarterly and include members across the organisation including our employee network chairs, and our recognised trade unions (Unison and Unite).

Our exit interview process was reviewed to better determine whether employees were leaving the organisation due to reasons related to equality or a particular protected characteristic.

Collaboration with Trade Unions

Previously, our Joint Engagement Forum (JEF) met on a monthly basis. JEF was the formal process through which SQA, and its recognised trade unions (Unison and Unite) negotiated, consulted and informed one another of high-level issues of mutual interest and concern.

A new approach to negotiating, consulting and informing is currently being developed in conjunction with trade unions, which may include a new name for the forum. A review of

other regular meetings with trade union colleagues is underway to ensure the most relevant and timely methods of discussing matters of joint interest.

In addition, trade union representatives are members of our monthly transition board meetings as we move from SQA to Qualifications Scotland.

Case Study: Reasonable Adjustments Passport
GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, foster good relations.**

What change did we want to see?
Reasonable adjustments are available for all staff to remove barriers related to their disability. However, members of our Disability Network had reported that they often felt re-traumatised when they had to 'retell their story' and explain their reasonable adjustments to new line managers.

What did we do?
We wanted to address this by introducing a Reasonable Adjustments 'Passport.' A Reasonable Adjustments Passport is a personalised document that outlines the specific formal and informal accommodations or adjustments a disabled employee needs to perform their job effectively. It is a tool designed to help employers understand and meet the individual needs of their disabled employees.

A short-life working group, with a wide representation of staff including colleagues with lived experience of disability, initially started work on the passport just before COVID-19 struck. After this initial hiatus, the work was restarted. This work included completion of a Data Protection Impact Assessment and an Equality Impact Assessment.

What difference did we make?
Staff have told us that this has been instrumental in supporting their conversations with their new line managers about their reasonable adjustments giving them confidence and taking away the need to repeatedly 'retell their story.'

Case Study: Data Matters
GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, foster good relations.**

What change did we want to see?
We wanted to ensure that we had robust data to effectively understand our workforce equality demographics, enabling us to make informed decisions that advance equality, diversity, and inclusion. We wanted to better understand the effect of current and proposed policies, practices, and decisions on different groups of employees and to identify our key priority areas.

What did we do?
We reviewed and amended the equality data questions and categories in our business system to better align with Scotland's Census 2022 to ensure that we could benchmark our progress more accurately. We also collaborated with our employee networks and internal groups to reflect their preferred language and terminology.

We had a combined category for parent and carer responsibilities, so we separated these out into distinct categories to better understand the different types of caring roles in our workforce.

We then developed and ran a 'Data Matters' campaign with our employee networks to both highlight the changes made to the business system and to increase awareness and understanding of how data is used within our organisation. The employee networks were able to give concrete examples of how data had been used — for example, as evidence of the success of the Disability Confident scheme, where we recorded an increase in the number of interviews offered to disabled applicants who met the minimum requirements for the vacancy.

What difference did we make?

This campaign led to an increase in colleagues completing their equality data on our internal systems, as well as an increase in staff who had previously entered 'prefer not to say' changing their response and completing their equality data. All equality data declaration rates are over 80%.

In our new 'Carer' category, over one hundred staff have now told us they are unpaid carers. This has led to a range of activity including the development of a Carers Network to provide better support for our employee carers, the development of a Carer Support Hub, carers policy and a range of internal awareness raising workshops to understand better the needs of our employee carers.

Case Study: Support for Carers

GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, foster good relations.**

What change did we want to see?

Being an unpaid carer, although rewarding, can place significant demands on time, energy and emotional resources, and can cause disruption to both family and work life. Many of our employees have significant caring responsibilities and we wanted our employee carers to be better supported and their needs to be better understood within our organisation.

What did we do?

We initially improved our data gathering and monitoring approaches within our business system to include a category for unpaid carers. We then had a 'Data Matters' campaign to encourage staff to complete their equality data categories within our business system. In February 2024, this showed 87 unpaid carers, with 60 carers specifying their caring hours, with a 61.1% declaration rate in February 2024.

This led to the development of our Carers Network in June 2024. The network has an executive team sponsor to advocate on their behalf and to ensure their voices are heard at the highest levels of our organisation. The network provides a safe space, peer support and advice.

Following conversation with our employee carers then led to the development of a Carer Support Hub to provide our employee carers with the support and resources they need to balance their caring role with their working life.

We then developed a draft Carer's Policy, which will go through our policy review process in early 2025. This provides information for staff to understand their rights and the support that is available, as well as providing information for managers.

As part of our programme of educational and awareness raising events and workshops, we have provided information to identify and support carers, and information on accessibility and adult carer support plans.

Our training for line managers has also been updated to include information about the needs of employee carers.

What difference did we make?

We have seen an increase from the initial data that was reported in February 2024 in our business systems to November 2024. This has led to over 100 employees (this increased from 87 employee carers) now telling us that they are an unpaid carer. We have also witnessed an increase in the number of carers who have told us their caring hours — this has increased from 60 to 80 carers. The declaration rate has also increased by just over 10% to 72%.

One employee carer told us, 'Having caring responsibilities for my son I have always felt very supported by SQA. I know I will be supported in the event of any unexpected interruption to his care, just knowing that there is paid compassionate leave available for emergencies and unpaid leave for planned appointments gives reassurance to me and limits any additional stress should I need to make use of it. The introduction of the carers network, hub and policy also provides me with reassurance that SQA is committed to supporting unpaid carers in the workplace.'

Case Study: Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing Calendar

GED — Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, **foster good relations.**

What change did we want to see?

We wanted a way to demonstrate a visible and supportive role which is committed to respecting and celebrating diverse communities, cultures, and faiths.

What did we do?

We developed an Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing calendar in collaboration with our employee networks.

We launched our Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing calendar in August 2023 with the aim of fostering an inclusive environment to promote equality, diversity, and inclusion in a planned and visible way, to encouraging positive mental health, wellbeing, and a sense of belonging and to engaging and encouraging staff in self-reflection and personal development.

What difference did we make?

The calendar provides a framework for equality, diversity, inclusion and wellbeing activity and events across the year. This not only meets the original aims but also provides the employee networks with a basis for their communication plans and activities, which has led to greater collaboration between the networks.

Equality Outcome 2: Advance equality of opportunity and eliminate unlawful discrimination for all candidates by ensuring SQA's qualifications are as fair and accessible as possible

SQA is committed to equality of opportunity for all learners to access our range of qualifications. Our Equality of Access to SQA Qualifications policy seeks to ensure that this commitment is fully realised, and that equality is placed at the heart of SQA's work in relation to qualification design, development, assessment and quality assurance. SQA monitors National Courses for any aspect that could disadvantage any learner because of their protected characteristics through the Equality Review of Qualifications process.

Policy, Analysis and Standards — Equalities Team (PAS Equalities)

PAS Equalities provides support, resources and guidance for our colleagues on equality, diversity and inclusion, while also supporting and providing guidance to centres and SQA teams on matters relating to assessment arrangements, reasonable adjustments and accessibility.

To ensure that policy and guidance comply with legislation and the requirements of SQA functions as an awarding body, and to meet the needs of key stakeholders, we liaise with key internal and external stakeholders to gather feedback on SQA's products and services and how these impact on equality groups. This allows us to understand their needs and expectations.

PAS Equalities is part of the Equality Steering Group (ESG), which enables cross-organisational collaboration. This is to ensure compliance with equalities legislation and to advance equality of opportunity across SQA for our employees, learners and wider stakeholders. The PAS Equalities team's work is reported in several ways and monitored by the Standards and Policy Group (S&PG) and Qualifications Committee of the Board of Management.

2024 Equalities Monitoring Report

As part of SQA's strategic objective and statutory duty to consider the equality impacts of our activities, the PAS Equalities Team works closely with PAS Data and Analytics colleagues to produce the annual Equalities Monitoring Report. This report sets out the outcomes of learners certificated for National Courses at National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher by protected characteristic and SIMD. The full report for 2024 was published on Results Day, 6 August.

Promoting the use of inclusive language

SQA recognises the importance of having our published information and assessment materials reflect the preferred pronouns of learners from the LGBTQ+ community. Guidance was updated for teaching practitioners delivering National Courses and Life and Work award in Modern Languages and Gàidhlig to recognise and support learners' preferred pronouns and use of gender-neutral language. Specimen papers and specimen marking instructions for the Writing assessment of Modern Language and Gàidhlig National Courses were updated to reflect this change in August 2023. These are available on our website.

PAS Equalities, Corporate Equality and HR EDI colleagues also worked closely with our Marketing and Communications colleagues to develop an internal guide on using inclusive

language across all of our publications and internal documentation. This is also complemented by the Designing Inclusive Assessment Academy course that PAS Equalities Team refreshed to support Qualifications Development colleagues and SQA appointees who are involved in designing and reviewing assessment materials for all SQA qualifications.

Assessment Arrangements Data 2024

Assessment arrangement request data — based on requests submitted by centres on behalf of learners entered for external SQA assessments — is analysed annually.

Analysis of the data helps us consider whether further investigation (including research) is required into specific aspects of assessment arrangements — for example support for specific difficulties — and whether there are other equality-related considerations we should take in our approach to assessment arrangements.

A summary of the assessment arrangement requests submitted by centres to SQA in 2024 has been published on our website. The data shows that between 2022 and 2024, there has been a steady increase — approximately 12% annually — in the number of assessment arrangements requested.

Decolonising the Curriculum: Changes Adopted 2023–25

The course notes for English have been updated to emphasise the importance of:

♦ diverse perspectives
♦ representation of text to reflect learners
♦ links to anti-racist curriculum principles (as created by the Anti-Racist Education Programme)
♦ critical analysis

The guidance offers key themes needed to decolonise the curriculum and stresses the importance of creating belonging through classroom texts. This is the first published guidance that demonstrates SQA's commitment to anti-racist curriculum principles within National Courses.

There is a pressing need to reconfigure the school curriculum in a manner which addresses contemporary concerns, increases student engagement and reflects current approaches to teaching literature. Teachers and learners were consulted to determine which Scottish set texts should be studied as part of the National 5, and Higher English courses. As a result of the feedback from these participant groups, the list of Scottish texts has been updated in November 2024 to be used from the academic year 2025–26 onwards. The full report of the consultation and a summary of the changes to the list is available on our website.

Changes have also been made to the language used in History, Geography and Classical Studies course specifications in May 2024 to reflect modern understanding of enslavement, colonialism, race and culture. The new language recognises power dynamics and encourages the study of various perspectives. Meanwhile, a new working group, jointly chaired by SQA and the Scottish Government, has brought together anti-racism experts, teachers and leaders to explore additional ways of decolonising social subject qualifications in line with the anti-racist curriculum principles.

Short Life Working Groups with Qualified Teachers of the Deaf (QToD) and Qualified Teachers for Children and Young People with Visual Impairments (QTVI)

Qualified Teachers of the Deaf (QToD) and Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with a Visual Impairment (QTVI) have been invited to participate in short-life working groups chaired by the PAS Equalities Team to ensure our assessment arrangements for deaf learners and those with visual impairments reflect best practice.

We continue to engage with our equality key partners and to listen to their feedback, queries and concerns to ensure our published information meet the needs of centre staff, equality key partners (including QToDs and QTVIs), learners, and their parents and carers.

Case Study: National 5 Chemistry data booklet for Learners with a Visual Impairment

GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, foster good relations.**

What change did we want to see?

Feedback from Qualified Teachers of Children and Young People with Visual Impairments (QTVIs) indicated that learners with a visual impairment (VI learners) using screen reader software had trouble in accessing the Chemistry data booklet independently. VI learners previously relied on having a human reader to read out extracts of text at their request as the digital version of the document was only available in PDF and this was not compatible with screen reader software and some devices, such as BrailleNote Touch.

What did we do?

SQA colleagues worked with the VI Science Maths Teachers Group, which comprised a number of QTVIs across Scotland, to produce a Microsoft Word version of the National 5 Chemistry data booklet that can be used with screen reader software. The document was approved for use in October 2024 from the 2025 National Chemistry exam onwards. Based on feedback from QTVIs, we were also able to confirm that the braille periodic table produced by the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) is also approved for use in SQA Chemistry exams.

What difference did we make?

As this document is unrestricted for accessibility purposes, it is only provided by SQA on request. It is anticipated that as these learners progress to higher levels of Chemistry, Word versions for Higher and Advanced Higher Chemistry will also be produced in the future. We hope that introducing these resources that are approved for use in SQA exams will enable VI learners to access these resources independently in external assessments.

Case Study: Assessment Arrangements Research

GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, foster good relations.**

What change did we want to see?

A better understanding of how assessment arrangements work in practice.

What did we do?

We undertook extensive research into the process for providing assessment arrangements. We engaged with staff from schools, colleges, training providers and local authorities along with learners and their parents and carers, to give us their views.

What difference did we make?

This was the first research exclusively looking at assessment arrangements in Scotland for SQA National Courses.

The outcomes from the research support the continuous improvement of our assessment arrangements process and the quality assurance of the policies and procedures used in schools, colleges and training providers meet our requirements. The outcomes have also helped us to identify opportunities for improvement to our own processes and information for centres. For example, a review of our quality assurance of assessment arrangements took place between 2024 and 2025 following this research. Schools, colleges and training providers were further consulted to inform any changes we make to our published documentation and the visits SQA carries out to selected centres each year. This work is currently ongoing, and we are committed to keeping centres informed of any changes to our quality assurance of assessment arrangements process as they develop.

Our assessment arrangements research is published on our website — the full report and Easy Read versions are available.

Case Study: Specifications on Reasonable Adjustments in National Qualifications in Scotland

GED - **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination, foster good relations.**

What change did we want to see?

Reasonable adjustments are steps taken to avoid disadvantage to a disabled person. Section 96(7) of the Equality Act 2010 gives SQA, as the appropriate regulator of general qualifications in Scotland, a power to specify and publish where 'reasonable adjustments' to National Qualifications should not be made. Following public consultation in 2013, we published a list of specifications on our website that clarified what requests would not be considered a reasonable adjustment. We recognised however that some of these specifications needed to be reviewed.

What did we do?

Specification 3 detailed restrictions to the use of readers and scribes in the English Literacy Unit at all levels where reading and writing skills were being explicitly assessed. Specification 3 also stipulated that exemption of a learner from demonstrating any of the four assessed skills (Reading, Writing, Listening or Talking) would not be a reasonable adjustment. Following consultation with SQA's Qualification Development colleagues and appointees responsible for English, as well as equality key partners, we decided to remove Specification 3 in 2024.

What difference did we make?

Consultation with our stakeholders raised concerns that Specification 3:

- Was inequitable and there was an unfair barrier posed to learners who required support from human readers and scribes in the reading and writing assessments of the English Literacy Unit, and in exceptional cases could not complete the Talking assessment.
- Disadvantaged vulnerable and weak learners, and this has been frustrating for some time.
- Was unfair in that Higher learners could benefit from a reader or scribe but not those at National 4.

Stakeholders have fed back to us that the removal of Specification 3 ensures there is a consistent approach to the types of assessment arrangements permitted across all levels of English — specifically between the Literacy Unit at all levels with National 5 and Higher English exams and the Core Skills Communication Units. Removal of the specification also means that exemption can be considered as a reasonable adjustment of last resort. This brings consistency and alignment in the support allowed at different levels of English National Courses, and facilitates transition between levels.

With the transition to Qualifications Scotland, the remaining Specifications will also be reviewed following Scottish Government's decision in relation to Louise Hayward's review and in line with any changes to be made to National Courses.

Case Study: Making National Physical Education courses more accessible for disabled learners.

GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination,** foster good relations.

What change did we want to see?

SQA wanted to ensure that disabled learners could continue their PE journey in activities they may already be involved in, and to receive qualifications that recognise their abilities and achievements.

What did we do?

Following recommendations from our colleagues at Scottish Disability Sport, we have updated the acceptable activities across our Physical Education courses.

In 2024–25, learners can have their performance assessed in Paralympic sports such as boccia and goalball — as well as other wheelchair, powerchair and parasports activities — which contribute towards their final grade.

What difference did we make?

This will help make our Physical Education courses more accessible to all learners, and we hope it will encourage more disabled learners to study National Qualifications in Physical Education.

The aim is now to encourage more disabled learners to undertake National Courses for Physical Education at all levels.

Case Study: Equality Review of Qualifications Process

GED —- **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination,** foster good relations.

What change did we want to see?

Colleagues feel more confident in identifying barriers and meeting the objectives of:

♦ Creating more inclusive assessment and qualifications
♦ Maintaining the integrity of our qualifications

What did we do?

We updated the Equality Review Process, with support from QD colleagues, as part of continuous improvement. We piloted the refreshed process, with Qualification Development teams, and held support sessions to ensure the process worked for all involved.

What difference did we make?

Using the Equality Review of Qualifications process, SQA monitors changes in National Courses for aspects that could disadvantage any learner because of their protected characteristics. The original Equality Reviews were conducted when Revised National Qualifications came into place. The current process uses the initial review as a basis, but updates equality implications as qualifications evolve. This ensures there is robust and transparent treatment of equality considerations during the development and ongoing maintenance of National Courses. Several changes in the last two years have been initiated by feedback from key stakeholders and work to advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations. The previous case study expanding accessibility of Physical Education came through the Equality Review Process.

SQA is committed to equality of opportunity for all learners to access our range of qualifications. Our Equality of Access to SQA Qualifications policy seeks to ensure that this commitment is fully realised, and that equality is placed at the heart of SQA's work in relation to qualification design, development, assessment and quality assurance. SQA monitors National Courses for any aspect that could disadvantage any learner because of their protected characteristics through the Equality Review of Qualifications process.

Equality Outcome 3: Advance equality of opportunity for all candidates undertaking qualifications regulated by SQA Accreditation

SQA Accreditation

SQA Accreditation has a statutory remit to accredit, and quality assure qualifications in Scotland, thereby safeguarding the interests of learners, employers, parents, funding bodies, providers, and the Scottish Government.

It does this by independently approving and regulating awarding bodies operating in Scotland and accrediting their qualifications, which include Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs), Regulatory and Licensing Qualifications, and other competence-based qualifications. SQA Accreditation has a statutory remit to accredit any type of qualification other than university degrees.

It is accountable to an Accreditation Committee, which is a statutory committee established by the Education (Scotland) Act 1996 and reports directly to Ministers.

SQA Accreditation:

- accredits qualifications other than degrees
- approves, and regulates awarding bodies that plan to enter people for accredited qualifications

SQA (the awarding body):

- devises and develops qualifications
- validates qualifications (makes sure they are well written and meet the needs of learners and tutors) reviews qualifications to ensure they are up to date
- arranges for, assists in, and carries out, the assessment of people taking SQA qualifications
- quality-assures education and training establishments that offer SQA qualifications
- issues certificates to candidates

Within these roles, we offer a range of services for businesses and training providers, ranging from course and centre approval through customised awards, to endorsement, credit rating and licensing services.

As it relates to mainstreaming equality, there are unique aspects within the roles of regulation and scrutiny bodies which other public bodies do not face, such as not providing a service to the public and working to audit / inspection requirements.

This does not mean we lose sight of the positive impact that we can make.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion are mainstreamed throughout our 18 regulatory principles. These have been designed to encompass the five key principles of better regulation to ensure that we are transparent, accountable, proportionate, consistent and targeted in carrying out our regulatory duties. This includes demonstrating action towards fair work criteria, tackling the gender pay gap, compliance with relevant equalities legislation, reasonable adjustments and safeguarding vulnerable groups. An example of this in practice is that we will identify awarding bodies and their approved providers who do not include all the protected characteristics in their Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policies. We provide this as feedback, with an expectation that it will be remediated for the next audit and / or next round of provider monitoring visits.

Analysis of our SQA Equality Outcomes 2021–25 shows that this equality outcome has been difficult to measure. It is too broad and needs to be more specific to measure success. This has been factored into the new accreditation outcome, which is more specific with clear actions and measures.

Case Study: Accreditation

GED — **Advance equality, eliminate discrimination,** foster good relations.

What change did we want to see?

Ensure that no processes or pracatices discriminate against candidates using British Sign Language.

What did we do?

In December 2023, SQA Accreditation received a complaint about an awarding body which refused to put in reasonable adjustments for hearing impaired learners. An initial review of

the qualification content identified that there was no reason why a reasonable adjustment could not be made.

This work highlighted that the awarding body intended to include an annotation on the certificate that the candidate was assessed using British Sign Language.

Legal advice was sought with regards to this, and the advice indicates that this could amount to 'direct and / or disability discrimination', and SQA Accreditation advised the awarding body that it should take its own legal advice on this matter.

What difference did we make?

The complaint is now closed, but the conversations around an annotation on certificates where a candidate was assessed using British Sign Language have continued.

Following the sharing of the output of our legal advice with the other three qualification regulators, they have sought independent legal advice and are seeking to amend this in their Conditions of Recognition.

The Accreditation Committee has agreed that it is not appropriate for awarding bodies to include the statement on their certificates.

Our new Equality Outcomes 2025–29

A key legal requirement relating to equality in Scotland is the publication and delivery of equality outcomes every four years. Equality outcomes are strategic, and express results we will achieve to improve people's life chances.

SQAs current equality outcomes cover the period 2021–25. The new equality outcomes will cover the period 2025–29, meaning they will cover our transition into Qualifications Scotland.

By preparing and publishing SQA Equality Outcomes 2025–29 we want to:

♦ increase transparency by establishing a clear link between our evidence and the action we are taking to advance equality
♦ ensure we are addressing the right issues
♦ make better, fairer decisions, which are understood by those affected by them
♦ become more accountable to our employees, learners and other stakeholders

The wealth of data and evidence that has been available through the wider education reform has allowed us to identify equality outcomes that are addressing the right issues and should bring tangible benefits to our employees, learners and stakeholders.

A roadmap was developed to allow us to create the new outcomes:

♦ March 2024, a short-life working group was established with representatives from across SQA.
♦ June 2024, internal engagement took place to gather feedback on the current equality outcomes and evidence around what our new outcomes should be.
♦ July 2024, evidence and data was analysed to determine any gaps in evidence and points of focus for our new outcomes.
♦ August 2024, discussions around these points of focus took place with the relevant teams and directorates to flesh out the draft outcomes and appropriate measures.
♦ October to December 2024, internal and external consultation took place. We received 224 responses in total: 129 internal and 95 external.
♦ November and December 2024, the results were analysed by the SQA Policy, Analysis and Standards Research and Evaluation Team. The feedback helped us shape and prioritise our equality outcomes.
♦ January and February 2025, amendments were made to the equality outcomes to reflect the consultation findings.
♦ March 2025, SQA Executive Management Team and Board of Management discussed and approved the SQA Equality Outcomes 2025–29.

The Outcomes

Equality Outcome 1: Diverse Workforce

We have increased diversity throughout our workforce, particularly in relation to under-represented groups such as disabled and minority ethnic employees to better reflect the communities we serve and to enhance our inclusive culture.

Equality Outcome 2: Knowledge and Understanding

Leaders and employees, at every level of our organisation, have increased knowledge and understanding so that they can promote equality, diversity and inclusion and challenge discrimination through their decisions, actions and behaviours.

Equality Outcome 3: Qualifications and Assessment

We will have improved qualification development and design processes, which are inclusive, anti-racist and accessible while balancing the principles of assessment. This will ensure that SQA qualifications are as equitable as possible for all learners including those with protected characteristics.

Equality Outcome 4: Inclusive Communications

Inclusive communication ensures that all learners, educators and stakeholders, regardless of their background or abilities, have equitable access to information and can participate fully in dialogue with the organisation.

Equality Outcome 5: Accreditation

Approved awarding bodies and their providers understand their role in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion so that learners with lived experience of inequality can access qualifications and assessment.

2025 and beyond

As we reflect on the progress we have made in mainstreaming equality to date, we also see areas where we can make further improvements and advancements, particularly as we transition to Qualifications Scotland.

We embed our new core values — open, connected, caring and brave — in all our work. SQA's values define who we are and the high standards that we expect. These values promote a culture where our employees and stakeholders feel that they belong and that they are valued, included, and respected. Embedding equality is imperative to delivering on these values.

This includes considering equality across all aspects of our policy, practice and decision-making. Ensuring that the voices of our people, learners and wider education stakeholders are heard as part of this process and to shape how Qualifications Scotland delivers its services, and the culture in which it does this.

We will develop a new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy for Qualifications Scotland.

We will continue to develop and decolonise qualifications as key members of the Anti-Racist Education Programme (AREP). This work will encourage and uphold a more inclusive curriculum that looks at the individual protected characteristics, as well as the intersections between them, to maximise social justice initiatives.

We will continue to work towards mainstreaming equality into our operational and team plans, including our new equality outcomes and the actions required to meet them.

We will work collaboratively to make our information inclusive and accessible to all.

We will invest in developing our leaders and employees so that they fully understand the vital role they play in embedding equality considerations into all processes and tasks.

We will try to make evidence-based decisions, engaging with our people, learners and stakeholders as part of this process, using tools such as equality impact assessments and children's rights and wellbeing assessments to help us do this.

We will monitor our assessment arrangements to assist disabled learners and those with additional support needs who may need support when accessing an exam.

We will ensure the needs of care-experienced people are considered so barriers are removed, and additional support provided where needed.

We will continue to deliver for learners, schools, colleges and other stakeholders to ensure a smooth transition to the new qualifications body.

Appendix: Links to other reports

♦ [2025 Workforce Equalities Monitoring Report](#)
♦ [2025 Equal Pay Audit Summary](#)