



Scottish Qualifications Authority
Ùghdarras Theisteanas Na H-Alba

17 December 2024

Paul O'Kane MSP

By email to: paul.o'kane.msp@parliament.scot

Contact: Jean Blair

jean.blair@sqa.org.uk

Our reference: ENQ 33028

Dear Mr O'Kane,

I am writing to you on behalf of Fiona Robertson, SQA's Chief Executive, following your email to her on 9 December 2024. This was in relation to your constituent and SQA's policy on enabling examinations to be sat away from home, known as our Alternative Venues policy. I hope the following information is useful to you.

The eligibility criteria for the application of the Alternative Venue policy are longstanding and did not change this year. We did, however, tighten the requirements for applying the criteria in relation to being away and representing one's country. We did so by introducing the requirement for this to be evidenced by a letter from the sport's governing body, saying that the learner in question has indeed been selected to represent their country.

The criteria now read:

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

We consider that these requirements, including the requirement for a confirmatory letter, are reasonable and in the interests of qualification integrity and legitimate and fair use of the service, ensuring parity of access. We also anticipate that schools and colleges will be able to satisfy the evidence requirement of a supporting letter from the relevant sporting body.

SQA amended the criteria for Alternative Venues following consultation with centres via a focus group and a survey. Whilst it is not possible or practical for SQA to consult with learners directly on all operational matters, we did consult with our stakeholders who represent learners and their interests. Our findings demonstrated that the improved specificity of the requirement was welcomed.

In terms of how SQA communicated the above, SQA works with centres, such as schools, to share information relevant to our exams for wider circulation with their learners, where appropriate. We also engage with other stakeholders to inform any significant changes we intend to make.

We had also previously advised schools and colleges of the planned key changes in May 2024 and August 2024. In these communications we advised that travel and accommodation should not be booked prior to a request being approved.

Additionally, there was information contained in our regular update meetings with SQA Co-ordinators – the member of staff in each school and college who provides the key link between SQA and its procedures and their centre - in August/September 2024. I can also advise that we have engaged with SportCheer Scotland on this matter.

SQA strives to uphold relevant Articles of the UNCRC while balancing our responsibility to ensure the integrity of qualifications. Amending this guidance does not conflict with the rights of the child to develop their talents and abilities. Rather, we are asking centres to provide confirmation - via a letter from the relevant institution or organisation - that the request is legitimate.

I acknowledge your proposal for further engagement, however, SQA has made a final decision on this matter to safeguard the integrity of our qualifications following proportionate consultation.

Whilst we welcome feedback on implementation and will monitor this, we will not be conducting further engagement or revisiting our policy at this time.

Looking ahead to supporting learners to access the service, we are happy to engage with any national governing body or relevant sports authority who is approached by a registered SQA centre requesting a letter. Should any national governing body or relevant sports authority be unclear if the approach taken for selection for participation in an event satisfies our requirement, we are happy to discuss this with them.

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If a learner has been selected to represent their country, then the Alternative Venue policy remains open. The deadline for submissions is 12 March 2025. If it transpires that they do not meet this criterion then I'm afraid they will not be eligible for an alternative venue this year and would not have been eligible in any previous year.

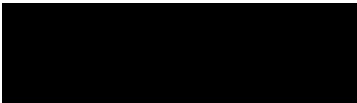
As well as requiring our eligibility requirements to be met, centres will have to ensure that a suitable location for the examinations has been identified and that SQA's requirements for the secure handling of exam materials will be met in full.

The centre will also have to arrange for an SQA-contracted Invigilator to travel to Florida with the question paper(s) and oversee the secure management of exam(s) themselves. The costs of alternative venue invigilation are met by the centre. Exams can only take place if invigilated in line with SQA's requirements, including the timing of exams.

I very much hope that they meet the eligibility criteria and that SportCheer Scotland can provide their centre with the appropriate letter.

I wish you and your constituent all the best for her future endeavours.

Yours sincerely

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Jean Blair.

Jean Blair
SQA Director of Operations