



Equality Impact Assessment (EqIA):

Arrangements for Assessing National Qualifications in 2023

Published: February 2023

Updated: May 2023

Published by the Scottish Qualifications Authority
The Optima Building, 58 Robertson Street, Glasgow G2 8DQ
Lowden, 24 Wester Shawfair, Dalkeith, EH22 1FD

www.sqa.org.uk

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Summary of equalities impact assessment

2022 EqIA themes	Potential impacts considered	Learners	Mitigating actions	PSED ¹	2022 NQ evaluation feedback from learners with a disability or additional support need	Considerations for 2023–24
<p>Ongoing disruption to learning due to COVID-19 is evident within the education system.</p>	<p>Fewer learners will have undertaken exams in 2022.</p>	<p>Potential impact on all learners including those with protected characteristics.</p>	<p>Course modifications continued from 2021 with the aim being to help all learners during their learning and teaching.</p>	<p>I and II</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ The majority of learners felt they had a good understanding of course modifications. ◆ The majority of learners agreed or strongly agreed that modifications made to courses were helpful. ◆ Removing elements of coursework/exam content relieved some exam pressure and helped focus revision. ◆ Some learners felt that removing course assessments (eg practical elements) had a negative impact on progression to higher levels. ◆ Some learners believed modification to courses did not account for the variation in learning styles — courses with exams only disadvantaged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Course modifications to remain in 2023, announced in November 2022. ◆ Feedback to be considered in review of 2023–24 arrangements and whether course modifications should remain. ◆ Difficulty with balancing exam and coursework elements while supporting learners and teaching practitioner workload.

¹ Key: I. Advance equality of opportunity; II. Eliminate discrimination; III. Foster good relations.

					learners who perform better in coursework.	
	Disruption to learning is difficult to mitigate in a consistent way while maintaining the validity of the qualification.	Potential impact on all learners including those with disabilities; those who require additional support for learning or those with mental health conditions.	SQA offered additional support to centres around the provision of assessment arrangements in 2021.	I, II and III	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Continued increase in number of assessment arrangements requested. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Continued support to centres around provision of assessment arrangements in 2022–23. ◆ It is important to ensure EECCS 2023 and Appeals 2023 continues to meet the needs of learners with the protected characteristics of disability and pregnancy and maternity.
EECCS	Individual learners have been impacted in different ways.	Potential impact on all learners including those with protected characteristics.	EECCS in place for 2022 to support individual learners who are impacted on the day of the exam.	II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Learners were not eligible for EC if they completed the exam. This potentially disadvantaged some learners in 2022. ◆ Service should be empathetic and consider how long-term extenuating circumstances (eg chronic conditions, young carers) may have impacted learners' performance in internal assessments used as academic evidence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Eligibility criteria for EECCS to be reviewed and clarified. ◆ Centres make decisions on learners' eligibility as they know their learners (and their individual circumstances) best. ◆ EECCS likely to continue to benefit learners, particularly, those with the protected characteristic of disability.

		EECCS provides opportunity to review alternative academic evidence to arrive at a grade.	II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Some learners feel that the alternative evidence submitted did not reflect their true ability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Difficult to define impacts of extenuating circumstances on individual learners. ◆ Centres should ensure they keep learners informed as to what grade the evidence they produce throughout the year is assessed at, and this should match the centre estimate provided for that learner.
Appeals		Appeals 2022 service — fair to all learners, not just those who use it. Learners appeal directly to SQA.		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ No provision for learners who wished to have their exam scripts reviewed by a marker — potential for marking issues to be missed. ◆ Need for earlier release of outcome and for these to be shared directly with the learner, not just the centre. ◆ Learners with a disability/ASN either agreed or strongly agreed the appeals process was fair. ◆ More visibility and clearer/easier to understand communication from SQA — some learners felt the service was misleading (ie that appealing would result in their estimate grade being awarded). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Learner direct service with support from school, college or training provider. If they are not supportive of the learner's intent to do so, there will be a facility made available for the learner to submit a request directly to SQA. ◆ Free to access — removes financial barrier, more accessible to all learners, including those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. ◆ Review of SQA's assessments of course components — not alternative evidence. More standardised assessment, reduces unfairness in volume and quality of evidence reviewed. ◆ According to 2022 appeals data, learners did not always benefit from appealing based on alternative evidence.

					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Preference for appeal process, based on continuous internal assessment — suggestion that this would be fairer for learners, with guidance from SQA to centres regarding managing the number of assessments. ◆ Request for better and detailed guidance being issued earlier to teaching practitioners to ensure evidence meets national standards. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Significant issues in ensuring consistency of outcomes. It was not possible to incorporate a robust quality assurance process under the appeals approach in 2022 due to timescales and types of evidence submitted by centres. ◆ A large number of entries were not eligible for an appeal in 2022 based on published appeals criteria. Only learners who had an estimate higher than their SQA certified grade could apply.
		Learners with the protected characteristics of disability; pregnancy and maternity.	Assessment arrangements (including reasonable adjustments) continue to support individual learners who require them.	I and II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Continued increase in number of assessment arrangements requested. ◆ Important to continue to monitor what services are made available to support disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs to access assessments. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◆ Support continues to be made available in 2023.

Section 1: Background and context

April 2022

On 28 April 2022, SQA announced that modifications to assessment in National 4, National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher courses, as well as some National 3 courses and freestanding units, would remain in place for session 2022–23. The decision was taken in view of the ongoing disruption to learning and teaching caused by COVID-19.

All [modifications to course assessments for 2022–23](#) are already in place and there are no plans to provide any further advanced notice of question paper content or contexts. Ongoing support for teachers, lecturers and training practitioners will help them to maximise their learners' performance in exams and other assessments.

Modification summary documents are available for every subject that has modified assessments. These documents are for teachers, lecturers and training practitioners and they explain how courses will be assessed. For some subjects, they also include information on modifications to freestanding units.

As with last year, the types of modifications depend on the subject and may include removing or reducing elements of an exam or coursework, providing more choice or time during an assessment or removing a topic from the exam.

Decisions around whether to continue using the modifications in session 2023–24 will be discussed with partners and communicated later in this session.

SQA continues to discuss the potential impacts of any approach taken for the Exam Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service (EECCS) 2023 and Appeals 2023 with the National Qualifications Strategic Group 2023².

²The National Qualifications Strategic Group 2023 consists of representatives of the following organisations:

- ◆ Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES)
- ◆ Colleges Scotland
- ◆ Education Scotland
- ◆ Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS)
- ◆ National Parent Forum of Scotland (NPFS)
- ◆ School Leaders Scotland (SLS)
- ◆ Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS)
- ◆ Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)
- ◆ Scottish Government
- ◆ Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP)

November 2022

On 16 November 2022, [SQA explained](#) that it was planning for exams to take place from 24 April to 30 May 2023, with results day on 8 August 2023. SQA recognises that we continue to live with COVID-19 and that this can be unpredictable. SQA knows this is a concern for schools, colleges and training providers, particularly if it may involve cancelling the 2023 exams. While the clear expectation is that exams will go ahead, SQA recognises that contingency planning is important and sensible. As with the contingency for 2021–22, if exams were to be cancelled due to public health advice, teaching practitioners would be asked to determine learners' provisional results by using their professional judgement of the evidence available which accurately represents each learner's skills, knowledge and understanding. Provisional results would be based on in-year assessments that normally take place during the session, such as prelims, practical activities, performances and class tests.

SQA recognises that the impact of COVID-19 is still being felt by learners and practitioners and the approach to setting standards and grading in 2023 will continue to be sensitive to the extent of this ongoing impact. The approach will be grounded in evidence and take into consideration the significant modifications made to National Course assessments.

SQA explained in its statement:

'We have made modifications to assessment only — it is important to be aware that we have not removed any content from National Courses. You should continue to deliver the full course content with your learners and allow them opportunities to develop the full range of skills, knowledge and understanding.

For example, if a coursework assessment has been removed, learners should still complete activities during class time to develop their knowledge and skills that would normally be assessed through the coursework.

This can support learners when completing their assessments this year, as there may be instances where they can draw on their knowledge and experience of other parts of the course. For example, exposure to practical work in science can help learners tackle certain questions in the exam.

It will also equip learners with the essential knowledge, skills and understanding they will need when progressing to further learning, training or employment. In addition, it may provide you with evidence of how well these skills have developed, which may be useful in supporting a learner's estimate.'

The [National Courses: guidance on gathering evidence and producing estimates](#) is still relevant for the 2022–23 academic year and is an essential document for practitioners to refer to when using assessment evidence to support an estimate, and when estimating the appropriate grade and band for a learner.

In addition, an SQA Academy course ([Quality assurance of estimates for National Courses 2021–22](#)) has been developed for practitioners that focuses on what makes good evidence and gives examples of how to apply the national standard to that evidence.

SQA continued to provide [Understanding Standards support in 2022–23](#) to help strengthen practitioners' understanding of how to apply the national standards required for assessing courses. A range of subject-specific webinars and in-person events were hosted where attendees went through the standards for assessment, looking at how the assessments are marked, and discussing examples of assessment evidence. A vast range of Understanding Standards materials have also been made available online, including webinar recordings, audio presentations, learner evidence and commentaries, and practical skills videos.

[Course reports](#) for each National Qualification also highlight areas of the 2022 assessments where learners performed well and any areas that proved demanding. They contain key messages as well as helpful and constructive advice on preparing learners for assessment this session, making them a vital support for teachers, lecturers and training practitioners.

These resources play an important part in helping practitioners prepare learners and gather high quality evidence to support estimates.

The main focus for schools, colleges and training providers will continue to be learning and teaching, with assessment to support that process. With this in mind, and in preparation for the possibility that exams cannot go ahead, teachers and lecturers should use the type, quality and volume of evidence that would be needed to support quality assured estimates in a 'normal' year. This will also serve as the basis of the evidence needed to support the submission of provisional results if it is not possible to run exams.

Under this approach there is **no requirement** for schools, colleges and training providers to run additional assessments. Doing so would place excess workload on teachers, lecturers and learners. Estimates for learners should be based on in-year assessments that normally take place during the school year such as prelims, practical activities, performances and class tests.

Consideration also needs to be given for those learners with additional support needs (ASN) and who would normally use specific assessment arrangements during their exams. Schools, colleges and training providers should ensure that appropriate assessment arrangements are put in place for normal in-year assessments to ensure equity.

The SQA [website](#) has further information and guidance on assessment arrangements.

1.1 Public sector equality duty

The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) requires SQA to have due regard to the need to:

- ◆ eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act (2010)
- ◆ advance equality of opportunity between people who share a [protected characteristic](#) and those who do not
- ◆ foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

SQA has a responsibility to assess the impact of new or modified policies and practices against these needs. Accordingly, this is an EqIA of the arrangements for assessing National Qualifications (NQs) (National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher) in 2023.

The Summary section (page i) brings together the key themes, potential impacts on learners and mitigating actions discussed in this impact assessment. The Summary suggests how these themes and mitigations — considered as the arrangements for assessing NQs in 2023 — have been developed and addresses the three requirements of the PSED outlined above.

This EqIA is underpinned by other work SQA takes to meet its PSED. As an awarding body, SQA works with schools, colleges, universities, industry and government, to ensure that qualifications, including National Courses, are inclusive and accessible to all, recognising the achievements of learners, and providing clear pathways to further learning or employment.

[SQA Awarding Body Code of Practice](#) outlines how SQA ensures that its qualifications are of a high quality and fit for purpose, and that the assessment of these qualifications is monitored and maintained to a consistently high standard. By doing so, it sets out the framework by which SQA safeguards the integrity of SQA's qualifications and assessment standards and ensures public confidence. The Code of Practice is based on a set of 13 governing principles, which govern how SQA meets its statutory duties and self-regulates its activities. Similar principles apply to SQA qualifications that are regulated by other organisations.

Governing Principle 7 is specifically related to equalities issues and states that:

'SQA will ensure that all qualifications and assessments are as fair and accessible as possible and that the needs of learners are met in the administration of its assessments.'

The SQA Equality of Access to SQA Qualifications policy outlines the organisation's commitment to promoting and facilitating access to our qualifications. In practice, this means that every reasonable step will be taken to ensure that we:

- ◆ Produce qualifications based on national standards, which are as accessible as possible. We will equality review our qualifications to identify any aspects that might adversely impact learners who share particular characteristics. We will aim to remove such adverse impacts, wherever possible, and minimise them where it is not possible to remove them altogether.
- ◆ Develop methods of assessment and quality assurance which are sensitive to the needs of all learners, but which do not compromise our overarching aims of fairness and consistency.
- ◆ Provide assessment arrangements to allow disabled learners and/or those with ASN to access the assessment without compromising its integrity. For disabled learners, we will make reasonable adjustments in accordance with the requirements of the Equality Act (2010).

1.2 Scope and development of the EqIA

This EqIA assesses the potential impacts — positive or negative — of arrangements for assessing NQs in 2023 on learners who share protected characteristics. How any potential negative impacts could be mitigated has been considered as part of the iterative process of designing arrangements for 2023 and development of this impact assessment. In addition, other groups of learners, such as those who are socio-economically disadvantaged³, or who experience other circumstances that present barriers to accessing qualifications, have been considered where possible. Such groups are not covered specifically by the Equality Act (2010), but SQA recognises that a wide range of factors can have an impact on a learner's ability to achieve qualifications.

Many of the issues highlighted in the 2022 SQA EqIA of arrangements for assessing NQs continue to be relevant. There have been significant impacts on those from minority and marginalised groups, and children and young people in these groups are more likely to be in low-income families and at greater risk of poorer educational outcomes.

Minority ethnic people remain more likely to be in poverty than the majority white Scottish population, and asylum-seekers and refugees are vulnerable to destitution. Poverty and deprivation, lack of access to technology or connectivity, lack of understanding of the education system, previously disrupted learning, and having English as a second language, all present significant challenges to participating in or supporting education at home. Those who have recently arrived in the country or who have moved around a number of different locations will be further disadvantaged, particularly where they are not yet fully registered or immersed in education provision.

Support for learners with ASN, including those who are disabled and/or who use assistive technology, may continue to be impacted by insufficient staffing, insufficient digital resources, or altered working practices. There has been a steady increase in the number of assessment arrangements requested for SQA external assessments⁴. This puts pressure on schools, colleges and training providers to provide accessible learning and assessment materials for learners with ASN. Digital devices provided to assist learners are not always compatible with available resources, assessment platforms or assessment security requirements.

For ASN learners who continue to access teaching and learning from home, this can be hugely problematic, especially for those who access teaching and learning through British Sign Language or braille, assistive technology, or other forms of support such as readers, scribes or practical helpers, and specialised software. Additionally, parents and carers may not be able to provide the support these learners normally receive in school or college, particularly if they themselves are not literate or digitally literate.

³Being 'socio-economically disadvantaged' includes living in less favourable social and economic circumstances than many others in the same society. Socio-economic disadvantage may apply to particular groups such as care experienced young people; disabled people; learners from the most deprived Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) areas or people from minority ethnic communities.

⁴See Appendix 1.

The ongoing disruption to teaching and learning continues to impact the mental health of young people. Other adverse effects that contribute to the impact on their mental health include concerns about progressing into further or higher education or employment, uncertainty about the future, or a breakdown in formal and informal support structures. Some young people have challenging home environments, and many are concerned about their ability to study effectively from home. There is also increased pressure on young carers, who often spend significant amounts of time caring for a relative in addition to the time they need to spend on their education. The mental health of young people already facing social inequalities may be particularly at risk, and those who already receive or now need support for social, emotional, behavioural or mental health will likely have had this disrupted, delayed or cancelled.

Care-experienced young people are at more risk of having their mental health and educational attainment impacted. Care-experienced young people are less likely to have adequate access to digital resources, broadband, support and skills for online learning. SQA continues to monitor existing and emerging issues, and will provide support to centres and learners through advice on reasonable adjustments, assessment arrangements, and other means where possible. Equality evidence also contributed to the development of a Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment.

1.3 Equalities monitoring, consultation and engagement

SQA works in close partnership with our centres (schools and colleges), stakeholder groups and education partners to inform an ongoing programme of equality work. This addresses our responsibilities under Section 96 of the Equality Act (2010), supporting the development of SQA's qualifications and assessments. Intelligence gained from this engagement means that we continue to build knowledge about equalities and learners with protected characteristics, which in turn is used to inform policy on access and inclusion in qualifications.

Specific monitoring, consultation and engagement which informed the development of the EqIA included:

- ◆ desk-based review of research, evidence and information published by equality, equity and education stakeholders
- ◆ field research conducted as part of SQA's 2022 National Qualifications Evaluation research project and consultation with SQA's Learner Panel
- ◆ information and reportage provided through SQA's media and parliamentary monitoring service and Liaison Team
- ◆ inbound communication and queries
- ◆ engagement and consultation with equalities stakeholders, learners and education professionals, including teachers, lecturers and senior management within schools and colleges

Section 2: Engagement with learners and parents/carers

It is important that we listen to what learners tell us and that SQA communicates in a way that suits them, so they can easily access and understand the information.

2.1 School-aged learners

SQA currently works with the Scottish Youth Parliament (SYP) to run a monthly Learner Panel which consists of members of the Scottish Youth Parliament, school learners from S3–S6, college learners, and care-experienced learners. There is also a sub-group of the panel who work with SQA on their communications to provide feedback to help shape SQA's messages and campaigns for a learner audience.

As well as continuing to seek learners' views on issues directly related to the arrangements for assessing NQs, SQA has sought the views of learners on assessment, qualifications, communications and services as part of SQA's research project. This included interviews with learners, and focus groups for learners with a disability or ASN. The full 2022 National Qualifications Evaluation research project, with findings from SQA's research project, will be published in due course. SQA will continue to seek the views of children and young people on any proposed changes to the future of assessment, qualifications, communications and services.

2.2 College learners

SQA works closely with sparqs (student partnerships in quality Scotland) to ensure the college learner perspective is captured. SQA has sparqs representation on the NQ Steering Group, the Learner Panel, and dedicated representatives to provide college learner input on our communications. College learners were also invited to participate in the interviews and focus groups held to gather in-depth, qualitative information as part of SQA's 2022 National Qualifications Evaluation research project. The full report, with findings from this research project, will be published in due course.

2.3 Parents and carers

SQA has engaged with parents/carers and their representative organisations for many years. There are two principal organisations that SQA engages with on a regular basis — Connect and the National Parent Forum Scotland. Parents/carers were also invited to participate in the survey as part of SQA's 2022 National Qualifications Evaluation research project. The full report, with findings from this research project, will be published in due course.

2.4 Key consideration

The 2023 arrangements provide support to **all learners** (communications and course modifications) and **individual learners** EECCS 2023, assessment arrangements and Appeals 2023. This EqlA first considers the impacts of:

- ◆ communications (all learners)
- ◆ course modifications (all learners)
- ◆ assessment arrangements (individual learners)
- ◆ EECCS 2023 (individual learners)
- ◆ Appeals 2023 (individual learners)

It is important to note that, in developing arrangements for assessing NQs in 2023, the arrangements for EECCS 2023, modifications to course assessment implemented in subject-specific ways and Appeals 2023 have been tailored to ensure all learners are adequately supported in the completion of their courses in 2023. Underpinning the decisions made for these services, SQA and the National Qualifications Strategic Group 2023 agreed the following core principles:

- ◆ Fairness to all learners, including those with protected characteristics.
- ◆ Safe and secure certification of qualifications, while following the latest public health advice.
- ◆ Maintaining the integrity and credibility of the qualifications system, ensuring that standards are maintained over time, in the interests of learners.

Section 3: Equality impacts

3.1 Communications (all learners)

SQA continue to make regular communications about the plan for assessing NQs in 2022–23. These include:

- ◆ updates for learners, parents, centres, stakeholders including:
 - weekly e-newsletter: ‘SQA News’ for SQA Co-ordinators, practitioners and subscribers
 - monthly SQA Co-ordinator Update e-newsletter
 - direct email covering key statements for all educational stakeholders, parents/carers and learners
- ◆ dedicated web page: <http://www.sqa.org.uk/nq2023>
- ◆ dedicated learner web page: <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/84153.html>
- ◆ NQ Awarding news page: <https://www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/98805.html>
- ◆ NQ Awarding FAQ web page: <https://www.sqa.org.uk/faq>
- ◆ blog posts for practitioners, parents/carers and learners on key topics: <https://blogs.sqa.org.uk/qualifications/>
- ◆ social media video clips, static images and Q&A gifs
- ◆ hard copy and digital booklets for learners: [Your National Qualifications](#); *Your Exams*

SQA communications for learners, parents and carers are tailored specifically for this audience, taking into consideration plain English and appropriate tone of voice, as well as incorporating feedback from representatives of SQA’s Learner Panel, the SYP and National Parent Forum for Scotland.

SQA aims to make communications as accessible as possible, in a variety of ways:

- ◆ for anyone who has problems accessing pages or documents published on the SQA website, SQA will provide the relevant information in an accessible format
- ◆ many publications can be produced in alternative formats, including large type, braille and community languages

This demonstrates that SQA has explained what is happening or could happen (when it is possible, taking into account any potential changes to public health advice) using a range of methods, to key groups including learners, parents and carers, and stakeholders.

Tailoring communications for learners, parents and carers, including the use of clear language and availability in a variety of languages such as community languages, is likely to be of benefit to people with the protected characteristics of disability, age and race.

3.2 Course modifications (all learners)

SQA announced in November 2022 that modifications to course assessment that were made in 2020–21 would remain in place for the 2022–23 academic year. These modifications were not trivial, and aimed to help **all learners** (including those with protected characteristics) during their learning and teaching. The assessment changes were implemented in subject-specific ways to ensure the continued integrity of courses and maintain public confidence in the qualifications.

For most National 5 to Advanced Higher courses, these are the same modifications that were put in place for 2020–21. The modifications are intended to give learners more opportunities to show their knowledge and skills and to help reduce the volume of assessment and ease teachers', lecturers' and learners' workloads. Modifications were made in around 70 courses in response to feedback from teachers and lecturers in 2021–22 to give learners more opportunities to demonstrate their knowledge and skills.

Full details of the modifications were published on [SQA's website](#). Modification summary documents, providing more detail and explain the assessment requirements to help teachers and lecturers prepare learners for coursework and/or exams, were made available.

Modifications were designed to mitigate against the impact of disruption and support and help learners to succeed. The course modifications in place for session 2022–23 have the potential to impact positively on all learners, including those with protected characteristics. Feedback from SQA's 2022 National Qualifications Evaluation research project suggested that a majority of learners who identified as having a disability or ASN were aware of modifications made to course assessments. Of these, a large proportion responded that they agreed or strongly agreed that they understood the modifications made, and more than half of learners who answered this question found course modifications helpful in session 2021–22.

When asked about arrangements for the 2023–24 academic year, most learners felt that modifications to course assessment should remain in place. Some learners provided feedback as part of this research project that removing elements of coursework or exams relieved pressure and allowed them to focus their revision for the exam. However, a small number of learners felt that full course assessment should be reinstated. Some learners provided feedback that this was due to feeling less knowledgeable across the breadth of content taught in the course (for example, vectors in National 5 Mathematics), that removal of projects and dissertations from certain Higher courses removed the opportunity for learners to gain crucial skills, and that they felt less prepared to progress to Higher and Advanced Higher courses.

Coursework has been reinstated in some, but not all, courses, and will operate in the same way it always has — informed by equalities considerations in design, delivery and assessment. Going forward into the 2023–24 academic year, the feedback provided by learners will be used to inform evidence-based decision making to ensure that any arrangements made will benefit all learners, including those with protected characteristics, and mitigations will be put in place for any negative impacts identified.

3.3 Assessment arrangements (for individual learners)

SQA encourages dialogue with centres regarding the individual needs of their learners when requesting assessment arrangements or reasonable adjustments. This is a longstanding process that allows SQA to understand the many and varied issues that some learners have, particularly those with the protected characteristic of disability. This helps to identify and deliver appropriate assessment arrangements for the learners who need them, and includes:

- ◆ SQA Liaison team providing support to Support for Learning teachers across local authorities, including inductions for new teachers and sessions on preparing for audit of assessment arrangements.
- ◆ Providing guidance and advice on specific queries and reasonable adjustments regarding learners and their needs.

SQA continues to provide a programme of support for centre staff in applying and requesting assessment arrangements which included:

- ◆ More effective and direct communication regarding assessment arrangements including up-to-date guidance and reminders about deadline dates for adapted and digital papers and submission of assessment arrangements to SQA for external exams.
- ◆ A series of webinars to support centre staff in following SQA processes for ensuring that the right learners get the right arrangements for the right subjects at the right level.
- ◆ Working with external partners to ensure these messages reach as wide an audience as possible.

Reasonable adjustments

SQA continues to consider requests for reasonable adjustments to assessment for disabled learners as they are received. Reasonable adjustments are unique arrangements based on an individual learner's assessment needs. Under the Equality Act (2010), SQA has specific duties: it must make reasonable adjustments for disabled learners and, at the same time, maintain the integrity of the qualification. This means SQA must carefully balance allowing a learner to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding in a variety of ways, while maintaining the national standard of the qualification.

SQA has regular dialogue with centres regarding the individual needs of their learners when requesting assessment arrangements or reasonable adjustments. This is a longstanding and ongoing process that allows SQA to understand the many and varied issues that some learners have, and to identify and deliver appropriate assessment arrangements for the learners who need them. Through this process, SQA continues to gather equality-related knowledge and information about the impact of SQA courses and assessment.

3.4 EECCS (individual learners)

As outlined in this assessment, adjustments and accommodations have been made to help both **all learners** and **individual learners** taking exams in 2023. The EECCS for 2023 has

been developed to provide support to **individual learners** who experience disruption at the time of the exam.

Usually, an exceptional circumstances (EC) service responds to learners who are unable to sit an exam or who are affected by an EC that impacted their ability to perform on the day of the exam. This is a longstanding SQA service and is of benefit to learners who find themselves in these circumstances. The service meets the needs of a number of learners with the protected characteristic of disability — for example, learners with ASN or who have a long-term health condition, as their circumstances mean they are more likely to utilise such a service.

In a typical year, there are around 4000 requests for EC. There was no significant increase in the number of requests made in 2022 due to positive COVID-19 tests in addition to exam disruption compared to pre-COVID-19 levels. However, it is difficult to draw an accurate comparison because the 2022 service was not available to learners who completed the exam, but it was felt that their exam performance was not a true reflection of their demonstrated attainment as a result of their EC.

EECCS applies to issues that prevent the learner from attending, or completing, the exam, or that occur during the exam. A learner may be unable to attend an exam due to an unplanned incident on the day or a reason outwith their control (for example, a medical issue, a bereavement, which may occur before exam day or having to self-isolate following a positive COVID-19 test), or may be affected during the exam by a disruption, or other exam circumstance, reported by the centre's chief invigilator. A key point for eligibility to use this service is that learner must have intended to take the exam.

Eligibility for EECCS is determined by the centre based on guidance provided by SQA and authorised by the head of centre or their delegate. In other words, centres access the service to help support fairness of access — there is no direct access for learners. The EECCS guidance explains that the responsibility for determining eligibility to use the service lies with the head of centre or their delegate. SQA has trust in the head of centre role to ensure use of the service is as legitimate and consistent as possible as centres are closer to the circumstances and detail learners find themselves in.

When the EECCS process for 2022 was considered, SQA set up an external advisory group with a wide range of representatives, including school and parent groups drawn from the National Qualifications Working Group 2022. The group was unanimous in its support for all requests to come from the head of centre in the interests of fairness to learners. This approach was also supported by the National Qualifications Strategic Group 2023. In the interest of maintaining fairness to all learners, SQA has kept this criteria for EECCS 2023. SQA will produce supportive guidance for centres, with input from key stakeholders, which will give heads of centres a framework to operate EECCS. This will include greater clarity on the eligibility criteria to support heads of centres to decide whether to submit a request for this service. The guidance acknowledges that it does not, and cannot, reflect every possible scenario that may occur, but that it does include examples of likely scenarios to aid decision making.

This approach also mitigates the risk of the EECCS being perceived as an alternative to taking the exam. The policy makes it clear that EECCS is not intended as such and is a

service to support individual learners who have issues impacting on them on the day of the exam. Arrangements for assessing NQs in 2023 are based on the central planning assumption that exams will take place.

The process is outlined as follows:

1. Centres will send in the alternative academic evidence.
2. The evidence, to be admissible, must meet the following three criteria:
 - a. It must be deemed to be authentic (generated by the learner).
 - b. Include a selection of key tasks and/or questions, covering the required areas of the course and carried out under appropriate conditions, with an appropriate level of demand. This can provide a good indication of likely performance in the final course assessment. (It is not necessary to provide assessment evidence of every aspect of the course content.)
 - c. It must be generated using valid instrument(s) of assessment.
3. SQA will ensure that sufficient training is provided to SQA examiners to support these judgements in relation to these three criteria, and will support consistency within subjects and between subjects.
4. SQA appointees will judge the grade-worthiness of the alternative evidence in conjunction with the non-exam evidence (coursework), where this is part of the assessment. Where the learner has completed some or part of an exam script, this will also be considered in the evidence. SQA examiners will be mindful that, given the exam experience was disrupted in some way, the attempted script is likely to represent an underestimation of the learner's ability. However, it will be included in the evidence to work favourably on the grade judgement. In other words, including the exam script will not be detrimental to the overall grade, and will only serve to compliment and support alternative academic evidence submitted by the school, college or training provider.
5. As far as possible, the evidence will be judged in an objective manner without being primed and without any unconscious bias by way of knowledge of the reason for the EECCS request. However, it is likely that most cases for EECCS will be absentee consideration, ie where the learner did not attempt the exam.
6. SQA appointees will review the evidence submitted by the centre, as well as the learner's exam script and externally-assessed coursework where available, to arrive at a grade. Internally-assessed coursework will not be reviewed, but the marks submitted will be taken into account when determining a grade.
7. Standards set through the grade boundary process only apply to SQA assessments, so will only have an impact on EECCS if the learner attempted the exam. The standards applied in judgements will align with the performance standards set within the course specification and exemplified in Understanding Standards materials. Alternative evidence is judged holistically against existing grade descriptors and exemplifications. Standards set through the grade boundary process will apply to any attempted exam scripts if appropriate.

8. Estimates, as agreed, will remain visible on the system. Guidance for examiners will set the context that this information will support decision making, but the learner's evidence will determine the appropriate grade.
9. Where several learners from the same centre for the same subject/course access EECCS, the alternative academic evidence will, where possible, be sent to the same examiner. This will support judgements around the authenticity of learner generated evidence.

These are important points as they demonstrate that consideration of the risk of any bias or discrimination in the process is mitigated by the training and support provided to appointees, and by the element of judging the evidence with no prior knowledge of the estimated grade.

The approach to EECCS 2022 was taken, with agreement from representatives from school and parent groups drawn from the National Qualifications Working Group 2022 and the National Qualifications Strategic Group 2022, to limit the service to only those learners who were impacted by a disruption during the exam or an EC that prevented them from attending or completing the exam. As both exam scripts and alternative evidence were reviewed as part of the Appeals 2022 service and this was available to learners who had attempted or completed the exam and met the criteria for an appeal, the aim of EECCS was therefore focused on supporting learners who were affected by circumstances on the exam day.

It is acknowledged that learners, particularly those with protected characteristics, may have been disadvantaged by this decision if they completed the exam and were not able to access the Appeals 2022 service because the estimate submitted by their school, college or training provider was lower than the grade they achieved. A balance between the needs of SQA's EECCS system and the needs of learners must be struck.

In determining the approach for EECCS 2023, learner feedback was considered by SQA. The service for 2023 builds on the existing principles of the 2022 service to ensure this is a sympathetic service for learners — particularly those with a range of protected characteristics and learners with caring responsibilities, who, due to unforeseen and unexpected circumstances, do not achieve the grade that accurately reflects their demonstrated attainment, but who persevered to attempt the exam. Consideration will also need to be given to how the provision of EECCS and the Appeals 2023 will work to support learners to achieve the grade that is a true reflection of their demonstrated attainment.

SQA acknowledged feedback from learners that described the current guidance to schools, colleges and training providers defining the types of EC that would be considered under EECCS as vague. Learners raised concerns that the guidance may be open to bias from teachers and lecturers about whether to submit a request for a learner and how significant the circumstance has affected their performance. SQA will update the current guidance to centres with key stakeholders to ensure this is as clear and concise as possible to support heads of centre to decide whether to submit an EEC request. This has the potential to address any negative impacts of teacher bias in deciding whether to submit a request on behalf of learners with protected characteristics (such as disability, gender, race and pregnancy and maternity).

It is recognised that a potential negative impact on learners with protected characteristics is the reliance on centres to submit a request for EECCS on the learner's behalf. While appropriate and clear guidance and support can be published for schools, colleges and training providers to refer to, SQA does not have the ability to effectively mitigate any potential inequity in how this service is being used. However, SQA relies on the professional judgement of schools, colleges and training providers and their understanding of the learners' individual circumstances and supports their learners to make an appropriate and informed decision about whether to access EECCS. There is also the option for learners with protected characteristics, their parent/carer to contact SQA if they are not satisfied with the way in which their concerns have been handled by the school, college or training provider.

EECCS is a service unique to Scotland in which alternative evidence can be submitted by schools, colleges and training providers on behalf of their learners. This is not a service made available by other UK awarding bodies. In this respect, this has a positive impact for learners with a range of protected characteristics, in particular disability, pregnancy and maternity and young carers. Allowing alternative evidence to be submitted and reviewed alongside any attempted coursework and exam scripts allows SQA examiners to determine a fair and appropriate grade. This means that where a learner's exam performance may have been affected by a disruption or EC, EECCS ensures an appropriate grade is awarded and shown on the certificate they receive in August rather than having to wait until after certification for this to be reviewed.

Appeals for EECCS

An appeal for EECCS is based purely on a process or administrative error made by SQA. It will not include a review of the academic judgement made by SQA's examiner.

Heads of centre or their delegate can appeal on a learner's behalf if:

- ◆ They believe that SQA's decision to refuse an exam EC consideration request which was submitted within the published timescales is, based on all the evidence available to SQA at the time, wrong.

or

- ◆ They believe that there was procedural irregularity in SQA's handling of an exam EC consideration request, which contributed to a decision that is, based on all the evidence available to SQA at the time, wrong.

A procedural irregularity check would be considered by an appeals panel consisting of SQA heads of service. If the panel uphold the appeal, the evidence may be reviewed by an experienced SQA examiner not involved in the original review. It is possible, though unlikely, that the outcome of this second review may result in the grade going down.

EECCS relies on only one set of evidence to assess. In terms of mitigating the impacts of this, centres should ensure they are keeping learners informed as to what grade the evidence they produced throughout the year is assessed at, and this should match the centre estimate submitted for that learner.

It is important to clarify that this process is not the same as Appeals 2023. EECCS appeals are different because alternative academic evidence is reviewed alongside other information available to the appeals panel, whereas Appeals 2023 involves a review of the marking of the learner's exam script and/or coursework. For this reason an EECCS appeal:

- a. is a review of the original process. If the review of the original process identifies that procedures were not fully followed, the alternative evidence will be reviewed again by an experienced SQA examiner who was not involved in the original review
- b. A review of the alternative evidence can mean the grade will either stay the same, go up or go down. SQA recognises that a learner's result going down could potentially have a negative impact on learners who require EECCS. It is anticipated, however, that a decision for a learner's result to go down would only occur in very EC when a learner did not attempt the exam and the alternative evidence does not support the grade awarded.

3.5 Principles or aims of offering different services around EECCS 2023 and Appeals 2023

As part of the development of the approach to assessment in 2023, SQA formed a set of key principles that are important in the function of these services. They are included in this impact assessment because considerations of fairness and equity to learners undertaking exams in 2023 continue to be core to discussions and forming arrangements, and the impacts on all learners have been key to policy and process development. The key principles are:

- ◆ Fairness: any additional services or augmented services should seek to ensure fairness both to those learners who access the service as well as to those who do not. In other words, it should not confer an unfair advantage.
- ◆ Demonstrated attainment: a qualification grade should always be based on direct evidence of knowledge, understanding and skills, in other words, on demonstrated attainment.
- ◆ Externality: regardless of the route to the grade, an examiner, trained and monitored by SQA, should review the evidence submitted with requests to use these services according to SQA guidance and national standards.
- ◆ Upholding the primacy of taking exams: the central assumption of exams should not be undermined through offering enhanced services. These courses have been designed to be assessed by exam (a measure of validity), and these exams provide a standardised assessment and controlled environment to support fairness and reliability.
- ◆ Manageability and deliverability: any enhanced services should be deliverable by the system in the necessary timelines — including SQA processes, recruitment of examiners, and centres in transferring alternative academic evidence to SQA.
- ◆ Credibility of results: the services should deliver results that command the confidence of the system, both at individual as well as system level.
- ◆ The services support, and are supported by, the right attitudes and behaviours.

The intent was that all principles and aims were pursued and that none were demoted or ignored when considering arrangements in 2023 to support a gradual return to full course

assessment — unless there is strong evidence that the modifications to courses have had a positive effect on the performance of course assessments.

Any grade or grade change awarded via the examiner's (or senior examiner's) review of alternative evidence submitted by the centre will be at the lower band. The only exception to this will be where the learner has a place at university, college or in employment conditional on a specific band (for example grade A, band 1). If a grade, or grade change, is awarded based upon a review or clerical check of an SQA exam script or coursework, then all bands can be used.

By returning to a Post Results Service (PRS) style that SQA offered between 2014 and 2019, learners' coursework and exam scripts will be reviewed. It is intended that the provision of both the EECCS 2023 and Appeals 2023 would be of benefit to learners with a range of protected characteristics both pre-certification and post-certification.

As the external SQA assessments are set according to national standards. The service can be seen to be fairer to all learners, particularly those in lower socio-economic areas and learners with protected characteristics. As all learners across Scotland will be completing the same assessments for the same courses, there will be no variability in the validity, robustness and quality of alternative evidence submitted by schools, colleges and training providers. This means that SQA's Appeals 2023 will rely on established procedures, that includes a robust quality assurance process, to ensure all learners receive an appropriate grade. There is a potential negative impact on learners when results are based on alternative evidence that does not meet national standards. Further information about the Appeals 2023 and its potential impacts, and any mitigations, are explained further in the section below.

The acknowledgement of the impacts of disruption on **all** and **individual** learners, creates a set of arrangements with the potential to impact positively on all learners, including those with a range of protected characteristics. EECCS provides additional support for **individual learners** with additional challenges in undertaking exams in 2023. This is likely to offer support to learners with protected characteristics of disability and pregnancy and maternity.

3.6 Standard and Awarding 2023 (for all learners)

Awarding is a key component of SQA's statutory duties and responsibilities, as outlined in [SQA Awarding Code of Practice](#). SQA holds awarding meetings after each exam diet. The purpose of the meetings is to set grade boundaries for each graded National Course. The process of awarding and setting grade boundaries uses a mixture of subject expertise combined with available qualitative and quantitative evidence to evaluate how the course assessment has performed. Awarding meetings also evaluate cohort-level exam performance. For further details, please consult SQA's [Guide to Setting Grade Boundaries](#).

Following the progress that was made in 2021–22, SQA has again designed a package of support for learners undertaking National Qualifications in 2022–23, in partnership with stakeholder groups. This package includes modifications to course assessments, an Exam

Exceptional Circumstances Consideration Service, a sensitive approach to awarding and grade boundaries as well as the Appeals Service 2023.

To inform our decision on the approach to awarding for 2023, SQA considered the views of learners, representatives from schools, colleges and universities, and our stakeholder groups. Feedback was gathered through a comprehensive evaluation of the approach to awarding used in 2021–22.

The approach SQA is adopting ensures the normal awarding procedure is retained. This uses well-established processes for awarding and certification that treat all learners fairly and equitably. At the centre of this approach is the expertise of SQA principal assessors, working with senior SQA staff, in making judgements based on a thorough evaluation of the course assessment and learners' performance. This ensures the standard and credibility of the qualifications is maintained and protected. The stakeholder groups mentioned above did not raise any concerns about the potential impact of the process on those learners with protected characteristics, and ongoing monitoring of fairness and consistency is built into the standard awarding procedures.

The measures SQA has taken through its package of support seeks to mitigate, where possible, the impact of the continued disruption to teaching, learning and assessment. They have been introduced as a safeguard for learners alongside the modifications already made to the assessment of National Courses. One of the benefits of the exam diet is that it ensures all learners undertake the same assessment, at the same time, under the same conditions. SQA recognises that the removal of subject-specific revision support that was available to learners in the 2021–22 academic year may have a negative impact on learners, particularly on those with the protected characteristic of disability. However, feedback from disabled learners and/or those with additional support needs who responded to SQA's 2022 National Qualifications Evaluation research suggested that there were differing opinions on whether they found SQA's revision support helpful. It is anticipated that as course modifications from the 2021–22 academic year have remained in place, this will mitigate any concerns of additional workload and stress for teachers, lecturers and learners in session 2022–23.

SQA has an established procedure in place for the awarding and grade boundaries process in which SQA principal assessors, working with senior SQA staff, carry out a thorough evaluation of the course assessment and learners' performance when determining final grade boundaries for this academic session. This element of quality assurance in SQA's approach to awarding ensures that once grade boundaries are determined, the same standard is applied consistently to all learners, regardless of protected characteristics or socio-economic status. While SQA recognises that the impact of continued disruption to teaching and learning, removing revision support and retaining modifications to course assessment will have an impact on some learners with protected characteristics, it is challenging to accurately and fairly determine how the impact has affected them. At the grade boundary setting stage, SQA is factoring the impact of the disruption and modifications into the awarding process and aims to ensure grade boundaries are set in a way that is sensitive to this, while remaining fair and equitable for all learners. SQA's approach to awarding in 2023 ensures that awarding is objective and eliminates prejudice and discrimination, while ensuring that grades awarded are a fair representation of learners' performance in external assessments. Information about the identities of individual learners

and centres is not available to the panel who make awarding decisions. This process contributes positively to equality of opportunity in terms of SQA's Public Sector Equality Duty.

The importance of ensuring fairness to all learners was at the centre of discussions. This is also balanced with the need to ensure the credibility and standard of our qualifications is maintained year-on-year. The views of learners and stakeholders with a particular interest in equalities were integrated into the decision-making process. This ensured that the approach to awarding and grade boundaries in 2023 meets SQA's equality responsibilities and requirements as an awarding body.

3.7 Appeals 2023 (for individual learners)

As outlined earlier in this assessment, adjustments and accommodations have been made which will help all learners taking exams in 2023. The Appeals 2023, along with the EECCS 2023, have been developed to provide greater support to individual learners who:

- ◆ experienced disruption at the time of their exam(s)
- ◆ experienced additional exam stress because of the disruption
- ◆ believe there may have been a procedural irregularity or administrative error in the marking of their coursework and/or exam scripts

Proposals were discussed in detail with the National Qualifications Strategic Group 2023, the National Qualifications Working Group 2023 and individual stakeholders. The Appeals 2023 service is based on PRS, a well-established service offered by SQA between 2014 and 2019 until the Appeals 2020 service was introduced. The service will be available after learners have been issued with their certificates on 8 August 2023. If it is believed that a learner's grade does not reflect what they were estimated to achieve, a request can be made for SQA to review the learner's coursework and/or exam scripts.

The previous PRS offered until 2019 involved two separate strands:

- ◆ clerical check — an administrative check to ensure the totality of the marks is accurately recorded
- ◆ marking review — a review of the marking of the learner's exam scripts and any coursework to ensure these have been marked according to national standards set by SQA

In 2023, an appeals request will be subject to a learner's exam script(s) and/or coursework being reviewed by an SQA examiner and an administrative check to ensure the calculation of marks has been carried out correctly. The service will also be free of charge and learners can submit a request directly to SQA if they are unable to do so via their school, college or training provider. As the school, college and training provider know the learner best, it is expected that they will support the learner to make an informed decision about whether to submit a request. In establishing the Appeals 2023 service, SQA is striving to provide reassurances to learners who believe an error was made in the initial marking process to

receive a qualification and grade which is a fair and accurate reflection of their knowledge, understanding and skills.

A key point in the development of the service was that the mechanism must be fair to all learners — not just those who access the service. The service should not advantage some learners at the expense of others.

As explained earlier in this assessment, SQA's aim of keeping modifications to courses in the session 2022–23 is to support teachers, lecturers and learners in catching up with course content that may have been missed in recent academic years as a result of the disruption from COVID-19. The aim of providing the EECCS 2023 and Appeals 2023 alongside the course modifications is to continue to support teachers, lecturers and learners to achieve credible qualifications without adding pressure on teaching and learning.

SQA considered feedback from teachers, lecturers and learners in determining the approach to be taken for a post-certification service in 2023. In SQA's 2022 National Qualifications Evaluation research project, a majority of learners with a disability or ASN were not satisfied with the process used in 2021–22 and felt that it was unfair. Respondents who were learners with disabilities or ASN suggested that the information in SQA guidance and communications were unclear and that language used needed to be easier to understand and user-friendly.

Fairness was also an overarching theme from all audience groups. Learners with the protected characteristic of disability felt that the service was misleading, that there were inconsistencies in how evidence was reviewed between subjects and that greater transparency on how marks were allocated was needed. Learners also fed back that it is important for them to be able to appeal directly to SQA without going through the school, college or training provider. Doing so would eliminate any potential teacher or lecturer bias; one learner explained that initial conversations with their school suggested an appeal was going to be submitted on their behalf but when this was followed up, an appeal had not been submitted and the learner was not given any further information about the reasons for this.

Appeals 2023 builds on the existing service offered in 2019. This is a longstanding SQA service and is of benefit to learners who believe an error has been made in the assessment of their exam scripts and/or coursework. Exam scripts and coursework completed by the learner will be reviewed by an examiner to ensure all materials have been marked according to national standards. If any discrepancies are identified, an appropriate amended grade will be awarded.

In the PRS 2019 service, a request could only be made for either a clerical check of the calculation of marks awarded or a review of an SQA exam script or piece of coursework completed by a learner. One of the main changes is that a request made for the Appeals 2023 service will include both a review of the SQA exam script or piece of coursework completed by the learner as well as a clerical check to ensure that marks have been calculated correctly.

Eligibility for the PRS 2019 was determined by the centre based on guidance provided by SQA and authorised by the head of centre or their delegate. Centres accessed the service to help support fairness of access and learners could not access the service directly. SQA will

review and strengthen the guidance to schools, colleges and training providers with key stakeholders to ensure the information is clear. Schools, colleges and training providers are required to support their learners to make an informed decision about whether a request would be submitted for the Appeals 2023 service on their behalf. As the school, college or training provider know their learners best, they are best placed to explain the purpose of the service to their learners.

To ensure fairness and equity to all learners, particularly for those with a range of protected characteristics, if the learner is unable to reach an agreement with their school, college or training provider, there will be a facility for the learner to submit a request directly to SQA for the Appeals 2023 service. Communications will be reviewed to ensure this is clear and easy to understand for learners with the protected characteristic of disability. A provision will also be made for learners with a disability or ASN, or those who do not feel confident in doing so independently, to authorise a representative to submit a request on their behalf.

The previous service offered in 2019 was a charged service which potentially affected learners from a lower socio-economic background. Although the charge was intended to be met by schools, colleges and training providers, SQA do not have evidence to determine whether this was the case or whether, in some instances, learners and their families were charged by the school, college or training provider to meet these costs. SQA acknowledges that, to ensure the service is fair and accessible to all learners, the Appeals 2023 service must be free of charge. This will have a positive impact on all learners, but particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Offering the Appeals 2023 service addresses the balance between the needs of the system (variable quality and volume of alternative academic evidence submitted by schools, colleges and training providers) and the needs of learners (equity for all learners). Evidence available to SQA showed that learners did not always benefit from the 2022 approach to appeals based only on alternative evidence provided by their school, college or training provider. The variable quality and volume of evidence meant that the evidence made available were not always comparable to each other. This made it difficult for SQA to ensure there was a consistency in the outcomes reached. It was not possible to incorporate a robust quality assurance process into the Appeals 2022 service due to the tight timescales SQA was required to deliver the service. The Appeals 2022 service was also only for learners who had an estimate higher than their SQA certified grade could apply. This created an equity issue as a large number of entries were not eligible for an appeal in 2022 based on the published appeals criteria.

As the Appeals 2023 service involves a review of coursework and/or exams set by SQA, these will be marked and reviewed against national standards. This reduces the possibility of any potential teacher bias introduced in internal assessments that were submitted for the Appeals 2022 service. A positive impact of SQA setting the assessments to be reviewed is that there is fairness for all learners with a range of protected characteristics to access the Appeals 2023 service as the quality of evidence will not differ across Scotland based on geographical area. The existing robust quality assurance processes in SQA's assessment process will also reduce any potential bias when marking learners' assessments.

SQA received a number of enquiries and complaints from learners who were keen to use the Appeals Service in 2022 but believed the service did not meet their needs as there was no opportunity for their exam scripts to be reviewed.

Grades can go up or stay the same. There is a very small chance that a grade could go down. It is expected that this would only happen in very EC where an error has been identified during the clerical check that reduces the original certificated grade. SQA examiners undertake rigorous training to ensure they are clear on the marking process and that these must meet national standards, however errors albeit minimal do occur. SQA acknowledged feedback from learners that this will have a negative impact, but it is a difficult decision SQA must make to ensure the integrity of its qualifications.

There will also be a priority and non-priority service — the priority service will be available for learners whose place at university, education, training or employment is time contingent upon a grade. Full details of this will be released in due course.

The Appeals 2023 service has the potential to positively impact all learners, including those with a range of protected characteristics and, in line with the PSED, has due regard to the need to:

- ◆ advance equality of opportunity between people who share a [protected characteristic](#) and those who do not, and
- ◆ foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not

As most learners entered for NQs are of school age, it is recognised that learners aged 15, 16 and 17 would most likely access the Appeals 2023 service. Other factors affecting learners, such as socio-economic disadvantage, or circumstances that present barriers to accessing qualifications, have also been considered wherever possible. Although such factors are not covered specifically by the Equality Act (2010), SQA recognises that a wide range of factors can have an impact on a learner's ability to achieve qualifications. Furthermore, SQA has a corporate parenting commitment to ensure its EqIA process considers the needs of care-experienced young people, by treating care experience as if it were a protected characteristic covered by the Equality Act (2010).

Section 4: Conclusions

This EqIA suggests that SQA has sought to mitigate, where possible, the impact of continued disruption to teaching, learning, and assessment in the 2022–23 academic year on all learners, including those with protected characteristics. The core purpose of the arrangements for assessing NQs in 2023 is to enable learners to access qualifications and have their attainment recognised through awarding and certification.

SQA acknowledges that the continued disruption to teaching and learning has had significant impacts on those from minority and marginalised groups, minority ethnic people, those experiencing poverty and deprivation, learners with disabilities and ASN, those with mental health conditions, learners who are young carers or care-experienced, and learners who experience other contexts that present barriers to accessing education and qualifications.

There is no avoiding the fact that disruption to some learners' education continues to be more severe than others. As in previous years impacted by COVID-19, the disruption experienced will be specific to individual learners and depend on the factors outlined above — and potentially others. The individual and personal nature of the disruption means that even with the modifications to National Courses and the provision of EECCS 2023 and Appeals 2023, these arrangements cannot effectively address the differential impact on learners. This makes it very difficult for SQA to adequately put in place measures that are completely fair and equitable to all learners.

The education sector continues to work together to mitigate the impacts of disruption on learners: schools, local authorities and colleges have taken action to adjust aspects of learning and teaching. The Scottish Government has also continued to offer e-Sgoil support to learners.

This EqIA suggests that reasonable steps have been taken by SQA, within a highly complex set of circumstances, to consider the needs of learners across Scotland with protected characteristics, along with the requirement to ensure the integrity of qualifications.

SQA will continue to carry out monitoring work to understand and evaluate the impacts of different arrangements on learners for determining the approach to assessment in the 2023–24 academic year.

Appendix 1: Sources of evidence

[2022 Appeals statistics — SQA](#)

[2022 Attainment statistics — SQA](#)

[2022 Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment — SQA](#)

[2022 Equalities Monitoring Report — SQA](#)

[2022 Equality Impact Assessment — SQA](#)

2022 National Qualifications Evaluation Report — SQA (not yet published)

[Achieving Excellence and Equity: 2023 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan \(Dec 2022\)](#)

[Children and Young People's Mental Health in Scotland — The Scottish Parliament](#)

[Equality Evidence](#)

[Relationship between teacher estimates and results in Scotland — SQA \(3 November 2022\)](#)

[Review of exams and assessments](#)

[Scottish Funding Council. Joint call for Scotland's colleges and universities to address inequalities](#)

[SQA confirms assessment changes will remain in place for 2022–23 — SQA](#)

[Students in affluent areas more likely to challenge grades | Tes 6 December 2022](#)

[The Impact of the Pandemic on Requests for Access Arrangements | Membership | Communicate-ed](#)

[Your National Qualifications 2022–23 \(College edition\) — SQA](#)

[Your National Qualifications 2022–23 \(School edition\) — SQA](#)