

Advice Services Alliance

Advice Quality Standard Contingency Arrangements

IMPORTANT: Updated AQS Assessment Visits Policy Statement Covid – 19

August 2020

Headlines

- Assessments due up to the end of March 2021 can be undertaken either remotely, or by an on-site visit or by a mix of the two.
- Extension to AQS certifications can be requested in exceptional circumstances.
- Assessments will accommodate circumstances where services have changed delivery mode due to Covid-19. Preference will be for on-site assessment.

Introduction

The Advice Services Alliance owns and manages the Advice Quality Standard, (the AQS), the principal quality assurance mechanism for the social welfare advice sector. In March 2020, the ASA announced changes to the AQS assessment process to take account of the unique and difficult circumstances of the Covid-19 lockdown. These allowed the extension of AQS certificates due for renewal during lockdown and the option to conduct assessments remotely. As we move into a more stable phase of the recovery from Covid-19, we are now changing our policy in order to ensure standard holders undertake the assessment and maintain their quality assurance.

It is vitally important that advice services who continue to offer advice to the public do so within a quality assurance framework regardless of the new circumstances in which they find themselves. Equally, the regular assessment and feedback from our assessor team, the integrity of the AQS as a mark of quality services is maintained. For this reason, the expectation is that advice services due to renew their AQS accreditation will be encouraged to do so with some rigour.

Key stakeholders

- Social welfare advice organisations who hold or are applying for the AQS, including independent advice services, all local Citizens Advice and many local Age UK
- The AQS assessment teams from Recognising Excellence, Age UK and Citizens Advice
- Money and Pension Services (AQS accredited to their framework)
- Welsh Government (AQS accredited to the Information & Advice Quality Framework without Peer Review)

Who the Policy Statement applies to

- All organisations who are going through or will be going through the AQS assessment process between September 2020 and April 1st 2021
- All organisations who are booking assessment visits for the next 6 months to April 2021

This policy statement replaces the earlier one on Covid-19 dated March 2020.

Main issues

1. Options for assessments to be carried out during the Covid-19 virus pandemic

In common with all other organisations, the Advice Services Alliance has an overriding duty to protect the public, staff and volunteers from any risks from exposure to the Covid-19 virus. In common with many other voluntary organisations, the ASA has had to review our working practices in line with government guidance and our own risk assessment for our team. During the initial stage of the lockdown, we agreed to extend AQS Certifications and to offer an option for remote assessment. Whilst the main assessment activity has been provided remotely, this is now changing and we offer three options for advice services to meet with our AQS assessment partners.

We recognise that the Covid-19 virus still presents a unique challenge and therefore have agreed that AQS assessments can continued to be carried out in a number of ways:

- 1) remotely via Skype/telephone or other platforms
- 2) on-site visit with risk assessments being agreed prior
- 3) a mix of the two, so a blended approach

It is our expectation that all advice services which remain operational will be able to undertake an assessment by whichever process works best for them. We aim to ensure that AQS holders do not lapse by offering a variety of means to allow assessments to take place and that the quality of advice offered to the public will continue to be quality assured during these exceptional circumstances.

2. AQS extensions to current certification and booking assessments

Since March 2020, Advice Services Alliance has agreed to extend AQS certification for up to 6 months. For some organisations, this 6 month period is coming to a close. We are striving to contact each organisation in this category in order to agree a new assessment date. If we do not hear from organisations or a new date is not forthcoming, the AQS will lapse.

Failure to agree to book a new assessment date will lead to certification being withdrawn and the possibility of additional costs incurred.

However, if there are genuinely exceptional circumstances (over and above the Covid-19 lockdown) which prevent particular services being able to undertake an assessment, an additional extension may be possible. The Advice Service Alliance will consider each such request on a case by case basis. Services wishing to extend would normally be expected to contact us to discuss this in advance.

3. Where there are changes to advice service delivery due to exceptional circumstances

The ASA recognises that the exceptional circumstances may mean that there are considerable changes to service delivery including organisations moving to telephone advice or remote advice rather than face to face. We recommend advice organisations check the AQS telephone standard requirements as a guide to good practice, although we also recognise that not all services will comply with requirements beyond their normal delivery mode. Organisations will not be penalised for such changes made in response to the Covid-19 lockdown at the assessment stage of the AQS process.

4. Feedback on support and help for the sector

Where you can identify particular issues that are a consequence of the Coronavirus outbreak and delivering a service to AQS level, please do let us know (director@asauk.org.uk). The more information we have about your needs and issues, the better our policies to support you will be.

Review

This policy statement will be reviewed in October 2020 and updated if necessary.