

**Advice Quality Standard**

**(AQSv4)**

**Complete Guide**

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**Who’s Who?**

**Introduction**

The Advice Service Alliance and Recognising Excellence recognise that preparing for an Advice Quality Standard can be a little daunting, particularly if it is for the first time. This document is designed to help you as the Quality Representative in your organisation prepare for your forthcoming AQS Assessment. It outlines the process, and also outlines the documentation which the assessor will need to receive, and by when, and also the documentation to which the assessor will need to have access when on-site at the time of the actual Assessment visit. It is intended that the document will be a useful aide-memoire for you, to facilitate the assessment and communicate with your Board, staff and volunteers.

**The Advice Service Alliance (ASA)**

ASA promotes the development of high quality advice services and co-operation between advice organisations. They provide a forum for members and undertake policy work on their behalf, including responding to government initiatives relating to advice.

The Advice Services Alliance (ASA) was established in 1980, and is the umbrella organisation for independent advice services in the UK.

In April 2012, ASA took over ownership of the General Help Quality Mark from the Legal Services Commission. It is now known as the **Advice Quality Standard (AQS)**.

**Recognising Excellence (RE) – Assessment Body**

The Advice Services Alliance has appointed **Recognising Excellence** as the Assessment Body for the Advice Quality Standard (AQS). Recognising Excellence manage the assessment process for the Standard. Recognising Excellence work with a team of Assessors specifically selected for their expertise in both the legal and advice sector.

**Advice Quality Standard (AQS)**

The Advice Quality Standard (AQS) is a quality assurance mechanism with a recognised award Standard aimed at organisations providing services resolving issues and problems which have fully or in part, a social welfare law solution. The AQS can be held either by organisations whose sole activity is resolving such issues or by one which provides variety of services including advice. Organisations eligible for the AQS provide services to people who would otherwise not be able to afford legal advice and so the majority of services are free at the point of delivery.

Organisations are assessed every two years and have to demonstrate that they are accessible, effectively managed, and employ staff with the skills and knowledge to meet the needs of their clients.

**Money and Pensions Service (MaPS) for Debt Advice**

The AQS has been accredited against the Money and Pensions Service (MaPS – previously the Money Advice Service) Debt Advice Quality Framework since April 2017 and as such, any debt advice provider applying for accreditation against the AQS will automatically be assessed against the requirements of the MaPS Quality Framework.

**Information and Advice Quality Framework Wales (IAQF)**

The AQS has achieved recognition by the Information & Advice Quality Framework (IAQF Wales) as approved accrediting body status.

The AQS fits the Welsh Government framework for providing assurance that AQS accredited services in Wales meet the needs of their service users. This status confirms that the AQS guarantees a consistent approach to assuring quality information and advice for the people of Wales.

The Welsh Government IAQF offer a slightly different definitions than some of those used by the Advice Quality Standard and assessors will apply the appropriate definition when visiting an advice service. **These definitions provided here for the IAQF will only apply to organisations operating in Wales (including national organisations which cover Wales):**

**Information** - describes a service which may discuss the advantages and disadvantages of different options without making specific recommendations.

**Signposting -** telling the client about information available to them and where they can go to obtain this. Examples include:

* a website where information can be found
* a helpline telephone number
* the name and address of an organisation who can provide the required support

**Referral** - a more formal process where, with their consent, a client is introduced to another service within your organisation (internal referral) or to another organisation or service provider (external referral) that will be able to meet their needs. This can be done by:

* taking the client’s details and passing these on to another organisation who will then contact them
* contacting another organisation on behalf of the client and making an appointment for them
* accompanying the client to the other organisation to meet an adviser who can help

**What is the Advice Quality Standard (AQS)?**

The Advice Quality Standard is an organisation quality standard for advice services operating in the area of social welfare law. The people working in such organisations are not employed as legal professionals even though they are giving advice on rights, entitlements, appeals and legal challenges to decisions. The AQS can be held either by organisations whose sole activity is resolving such issues or by one which provides variety of services including advice.

The quality framework includes a set of standards designed to ensure a service is well run and has its own quality control mechanisms and that in doing so, assures the quality of the information and advice services it provides and promotes social justice.

The quality standards and assessment methods used reflect the minimum standards necessary to ensure that clients seeking advice receive accurate, complete and timely advice, and that they are able to obtain this advice from an advice provider which is accessible to them, and which is able to act independently and in their sole interests.

**Who is the Standard for?**

The Standard has been designed to be applicable across the range, size and shape of the advice sector and each organisation holding the Standard will have given consideration to how the requirements apply to their organisation and what processes are in place to ensure these are followed. It is built on the principle that people who work in organisations where learning from experience and from their clients is valued, will also develop their practice and their services.

The Advice Quality Standard can be applied to any social welfare advice service operating at the generalist level and most operating at the casework level. These services will probably receive funding from sources such as charities, local authorities, or other public funding and whose primary objective is to provide independent, free, or affordable advice to members of the public, in particular those with limited options for legal advice:

* Some organisations holding the AQS will only be giving advice, whilst others may be delivering a range of services of which advice is one.
* An advice service is defined as one that is able to provide a client with basic initial legal advice in most areas of law. For organisations that provide on-going support and/or more detailed help, their service may be defined as a casework service and awarded the AQS for this level.
* An Advice with Casework Level service will be able to provide the basic initial advice, but is also able to provide clients with ongoing help with their problem, for example corresponding with third parties on the client’s behalf.
* As the Advice Quality Standard is primarily an organisational standard, designed to ensure legal advice organisations are well run and provide good client care, both types of work are covered by the Standard, although organisations will be expected to know which level their services primarily meet.

**What are the benefits of holding the AQS?**

Good, well run organisations will provide good quality service to their clients regardless of their choice of quality assurance process.

The AQS creates the right conditions for growing committed and supported practitioners, which is crucial to good advice. It provides assurance that advice is well delivered for advisers, managers, trustees, service users and funders as well as providing the common bond between different types of advice services serving different client groups. Whilst it is possible for organisations who do not hold a quality standard to provide good advice, the AQS helps ensure organisations are well governed and managed, which helps to ensure development, continual improvement and (most important in the current climate) sustainability.

There are many reasons organisations may want to apply for a quality standard, but we feel there are particular benefits to be gained from holding the AQS:

**Assurance of Quality**

* External validation that your service is working according to best practice

**Leadership**

* Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must have structures and procedures which ensure effective governance, leadership and management of the organisation and its resources

**Quality Values**

* Demonstrates that the quality of service delivered to clients is at the heart of your work and not an additional add-on
* When funding is tight, as it is now, this is more important than ever

**Better Client Outcomes**

* Evidence from other fields has shown that regardless of other factors, the outcomes for clients using a quality marked service are greater than the outcomes from those without

**Better Risk Assessment**

* The discipline of AQS ensures that services keep on top of the main areas of risk
* Knowing about and anticipating risk is a key factor in service sustainability

**Access to Funding**

* Many funders like to see quality standards in place, some funders insist on it.
* The AQS is accredited by the Money and Pensions Service (MaPS). Only services holding an accredited standard can apply for funding from MaPS

**Accountability**

* Board of Trustees and senior management teams can use the report from the AQS to evidence good practice and to build a better understanding of the service
* Corrective actions and areas for improvement can help Trustees develop long term strategies and business plans

**Benchmarking**

* As one of 700 organisations which hold the AQS you have access to a range of organisations undertaking similar or comparable work to you

**Opportunities for referrals**

* AQS holders refer to other AQS holders as their first choice
* Many partnerships have been built on the basis that the AQS is a common language across different services

**Community of AQS practitioners**

* Through the ASA website and through the other opportunities they provide, services have access to almost 700 other organisations in the same area of work

**What type of Advice does our Service Offer?**

**Advice Only Service**

An advice service involves the following activities:

* a diagnosis of the client’s enquiry and the legal issues involved
* giving information and explaining options
* identifying further action the client can take
* some assistance: e.g. contacting third parties to seek information; filling in forms.

It would usually be completed with one interview although there may be some follow-up work. The client would take responsibility for any further action.

An advice service may include:

* diagnosing the client’s legal problem and any related legal matters
* identifying relevant legislation and deciding how it applies to a client’s particular circumstances, including identifying the implications and consequences of such action and grounds for taking action
* providing information on matters relevant to the problem, including:
	+ advice on next steps
	+ identifying dates by which action must be taken in order to secure a client’s rights.
* helping a client with debt problems to draw up a financial statement and negotiate a repayment schedule. However, after receiving advice, the client would carry out any action needed.
* helping the client to complete a claim form (e.g. for a social security benefit) which requires the adviser to understand the legal issue: (e.g. the criteria for the award of a particular benefit).
* advising a client on the merit of their case (or telling a client that the adviser has not assessed the merit and then signposting or referring the client to an agency which can advise on merit if the client so wishes).
* referring or sign-posting a client to another source of help, having first assessed the nature of the query and the level of advice or help needed: e.g. a client seeking advice following relationship breakdown is given advice on a welfare benefits matter but also sign-posted to a solicitor for help with a family problem.
* drafting, or helping a client to draft, letters to third parties. In general, correspondence will be from the client, not from the advice provider.
* making telephone calls for a client to request information, to carry out one-off negotiations or check the progress of an enquiry. (for example where a client is unable to make calls themselves).

**Advice with Casework**

A typical advice with casework service includes all the elements of an advice service and also involves taking action on behalf of the client to move the case on. It could include negotiating on behalf of the client with third parties on the telephone, by letter or face-to-face. It will involve the advice provider taking responsibility for follow-up work.

Advice with casework services may include the advice provider:

* taking action to obtain detailed information from a third party in order to resolve a client’s problem
* challenging the decision or action of a third party
* corresponding or negotiating with third parties, to protect a client’s rights or interests. This will go beyond simple requests for information
* undertaking a large volume of work on a given matter and/or over an extended period of time
* any work the advice provider undertakes on behalf of the client – even if the client agrees to take some action him/herself
* representation at a court or tribunal where there are no complex matters of law to present

**Categories of Advice Offered**

The current categories for advice work (particularly casework) are split into subject and client based case categories as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Subject Based** | **Client Based** |
| * Consumer/General Contact
 | * Asylum Seekers and Refugees
 |
| * Debt
 | * Disability
 |
| * Employment
 | * Older People
 |
| * Health and Community Care
 | * Racial Discrimination and Racial Harassment
 |
| * Housing
 | * Students
 |
| * Immigration/Nationality
 | * Women
 |
| * Welfare Benefits
 | * Young People
 |
| * Family Law
 |  |

Organisations that are intending to apply for Casework accreditation should also consider the requirements of the supplementary AQS Casework Self Declaration Form available from the link below. The requirements within this form assures organisations are providing the full depth and breadth of advice against their chosen advice category. More information on Casework can be found in the Assessment Process Section of this guide.

**For AQS Self Declaration Form please see the link below:**

[AQS Self Declaration Form](https://www.recognisingexcellence.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/AQS-Casework-Self-Declaration-Form-Jan-2023.docx)

**AQS with Telephone Services**

**AQS and Debt Advice Services**

If you are a debt advice provider and wish to achieve AQS accreditation your assessment will include the Money and Pensions Service (MaPS) evidence criteria. This applies to any debt advice provider applying for accreditation against the AQS, either at Advice Only or Casework level irrespective of any funding relationship that you may have with MaPS.

**What does this mean in practice for AQS advice services?**

On a practical level this means that all advisers/caseworkers providing debt advice in your organisation must have undertaken MaPS accredited debt training or a debt advice qualification which enables the organisation to demonstrate that they have the appropriate knowledge for the debt advice related activities expected within their defined role.

In order to establish whether or not advisers/caseworkers have the appropriate knowledge MaPS have identified six activity sets which reflect the different tasks undertaken during the debt advice process; these activity sets are outlined below.

* **Initial Contact**

The member of staff who is the first point of contact in the service for the client, they may

explain the remit of the service, may gather basic personal information, provide information

and/or signpost the client if appropriate.

* **Support Work**

The member of staff may provide information relating to the remit of the service, collect client

information, identify the client’s problem, identify related issues, identify any immediate or

urgent priority matters, agree appropriate next steps and signpost or arrange a referral for

the client to other services where appropriate.

* **Advice**

The adviser will diagnose the client’s problem(s), giving information and explaining options

and helping the client decide between options. The provision of information alone is not

advice. Advice can include some action such as referral to another organisation, identifying

options and next steps, giving assistance such as form filling and contacting third parties for I

formation. There is no rule about the maximum number of client contacts.

* **Casework/Specialist**

The adviser takes on responsibility for the conduct of a case and/or an adviser takes action

on behalf of the client. The adviser drives and manages the case and maintains a continuing

relationship with the client. Negotiation, advocacy and representation where appropriate are

common features of casework.

* **Court Representation**

The adviser makes preparation for proceedings on behalf of the client, prepares the client for

formal proceedings, and/or represents the client in formal proceedings in relation to their

debts within the rights of audience for these proceedings.

* **Supervision**

The adviser provides technical debt advice support to other advisers within and/or outside

their own organisation. Line management alone does not constitute supervision, without the

provision of technical debt advice support.

**For more information on AQS and debt advice please see the link below:**

[**AQS Debt Advice**](https://www.recognisingexcellence.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/AQS-Debt-Advice-Self-Assessment-Guidance-Jan-2023.docx)

**Structure of the Quality Framework**

The Advice Quality Standard covers seven key core quality areas and together these are known as the Quality Framework and are labelled A to G. Each quality area has a number of requirements for the organisation to demonstrate that it meets the AQS. These requirements each have a number, and all must be met in order to achieve the AQS.

|  |
| --- |
| **QUALITY FRAMEWORK** |
| 1. **ACCESS TO SERVICE**
 | **The aim of the Advice Quality Standard is to improve access to independent advice services and to base the delivery of services on identified needs and priorities.** **Holders of the Advice Quality Standard should be aware of the environment in which they operate and develop their services to meet the needs of their communities and target client groups.**  |
| 1. **SEAMLESS SERVICE**
 | **Where a holder of the Advice Quality Standard cannot provide the particular service needed by the client, they must inform the client and either signpost or refer them to an alternative service provider, where available.**  |
| 1. **RUNNING THE ORGANISATION**
 | **Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must have structures and procedures that ensure effective leadership and management of the organisation and its resources.**  |
| 1. **PEOPLE MANAGEMENT**
 | **Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must have structures and procedures which support staff, volunteers, and trustees to deliver quality advice to clients in line with their strategic aims.**  |
| 1. **RUNNING THE SERVICE**
 | **Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must have processes and procedures that ensure an effective and efficient service to their clients.**  |
| 1. **MEETING CLIENTS’ NEEDS**
 | **Clients using a service that holds the Advice Quality Standard are entitled to receive advice and information relevant to their needs.**  |
| 1. **COMMITMENT TO QUALITY**
 | **Holders of the Advice Quality Standard are committed to the continuous improvement of the quality of their service.**  |

**For full details of the Advice Quality Standard v4 please follow the link below:**

[**AQS Standard**](https://www.recognisingexcellence.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/AQS-V4-April-2023-Final.pdf)

**How do you get started on the AQS Journey?**

**AQS Support Package**

Deciding to work towards a quality standard demonstrates your commitment to implementing quality assured advice services. We recognise this can feel daunting at first and as a result of consultation with our partners and funders in the sector, coupled with listening to your feedback, we have developed a cost effective support package. The AQS Support Package includes three strands of support to help you prepare for assessment.

* **AQS Suite of Webinars**

The AQS Webinar Suite includes a series of webinars that you and your team can access at any time, with expert explanations, highlighting common corrective actions and top tips. There are 10 webinars in total covering each of the 7 sections of the Standard, Casework, and Debt Advice.

* **Quality Manual**

The Quality Manual has been developed by our AQS team to set out the operational standards and guidance for your advice service. The Manual includes template policies and procedures that you can adapt to your own practice and will enable you to set out what you are aiming to achieve, and the quality standards to which you adhere to.

* **On-going Technical Support**

As part of the package, you will gain access to on-going support from the AQS Quality Manager. You can decide how much or how little support you need and can access the Quality Manager by telephone, email and video conferencing (Microsoft Teams). You may wish to involve your colleagues during these sessions and we welcome these group question and answer sessions.

* **How much does it cost?**

We are confident you’ll be interested in our support package as a cost effective and efficient way of enabling your advice service to become an AQS holder within a very short time scale. As a result, we offer the complete package (including all the solutions outlined above) for a small fee of £275.00 + VAT.

**To purchase the Advice Quality Standard Support Package please follow the link below:**

[**Support Package**](https://www.recognisingexcellence.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AQSv4-Support-Package-Form-Feb-2023.docx)

**Additional Support Options for New and Existing AQS Holders**

**AQS Self-Assessment Internal Review of Compliance**

The AQS Self-Assessment Internal Review of Compliance template has been developed for new and existing AQS holders. If you are just starting out on your AQS journey and do not wish to purchase the AQS Support Package you can use the Self-Assessment template to help map your organisation/advice service against the standard.

If you are an existing holder and wish to conduct an internal review in preparation for a review/monitoring assessment, the Self-Assessment template will ensure you measure your organisation’s progress in meeting the requirements of the standard. It will provide evidence against evidence criteria G2.3 and you can provide your assessor with a copy of this document to assist them in the preparation for your assessment. The Advice Quality Standard contains the evidence requirements in full, with accompanying definitions and guidance. It is important that you refer to the Standard when completing this document.

**What else can I prepare for the Assessment?**

When preparing for your assessment you can assist the process by compiling additional information that will help your assessor build up a picture of your organisation/advice service. There may be pieces of information such as Impact Reports, Funder Monitoring Reports, Equality & Diversity Plans, and collaborative work that will demonstrate to your assessor where you have gone above and the beyond the standard. Additional examples include:

* Promotional material / brochures
* Advice Leaflets
* Fact Sheets
* Annual Report
* How to Complain? - Making A Complaint – Leaflets
* Quality Standard Reports / Assessment Outcomes:
* Investors in People
* IS0 9001:2015
* Matrix
* Board of Trustee / Management Committee meeting minutes
* Chief Executive / Director / Service Manager Reports
* Team Meeting Minutes
* Case Studies

**To access the AQS Self-Assessment Internal Review of Compliance template please follow the link below:**

[**AQS Self Assessment**](https://www.recognisingexcellence.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AQSv4-Self-Assessment-Internal-Review-of-Compliance-March-23.docx)

**The Assessment Process – Step by Step**

**Step 1 Submitting Your Application Form**

When you are ready to apply for the AQS, you should complete and submit the AQS Application Form and your supporting policies and procedures.

The Application Form is your contract to proceed with the AQS assessment process and triggers the allocation of your AQS Assessor. It enables Recognising Excellence to calculate the assessment fee (see Stage 3) based on the number of staff and volunteers involved in the advice service.

**Step 2 Desktop Audit – New Applicants Only**

If you are applying for the AQS for the first time, the assessment process will include a Desktop Audit. Your assessor will complete a desktop audit of your policies and procedures. The Desktop Audit seeks to confirm whether from a documentary perspective, your organisation is ready for an AQS assessment. As part of this process, we will consider the various written policies and procedures that underpin the way you work as an organisation, against the requirements of the AQS standard.

These documents may be comprised in your Office Manual or Quality Manual or held as individual documents. Please get in touch with a member of the Recognising Excellence team to arrange the quickest and easiest way to submit documents.

The Desktop Audit report will set out any corrective actions and/or omissions which you will be expected to address before your on-site assessment takes place. During this time, your assessor will liaise with you to arrange an on-site date for the next stage of the assessment process and address any of the actions identified in the report.

Once the Desktop Audit is complete you will be invoiced the Desktop Audit fee £475.00 + VAT.

* **Casework Applications**

Organisations that are intending to apply for Casework accreditation should also consider the requirements of the supplementary AQS Casework Self Declaration form available from the link below. The requirements within this form assure organisations are providing the full depth and breadth of advice against their chosen advice category.

**Step 3 On-Site Assessment – New Applicants following Step 2**

The on-site assessment visit needs to take place **within 60 days of the Desktop Audit** and every 2 years thereafter. You can liaise with your assessor to arrange a date that suits you and your team.

The on-site assessment will be for at least a day and your assessor will need to speak to members of the advice team as well as the person responsible for the advice service. You need to make sure staff are available on the agreed date and consider any planned annual leave.

Your assessor will produce an Assessment Plan in consultation with you so you will have a clear schedule for the day and know what to expect throughout the course of the assessment.

At the end of the on-site assessment your assessor will produce a report which may include further corrective actions which you must address within 28 days in order to achieve accreditation.

**Step 4 Corrective Action**

You must complete the corrective actions identified and send the evidence required to your assessor (usually by email) within the specified timescale of 28 days.

All assessment reports are signed off by the Advice Services Alliance at which point the Advice Quality Standard is awarded.

**Step 5 Accreditation**

Celebrate your success! You will be given access to the AQS logo which should display on your website and within your promotional material.

Share your success with Recognising Excellence and the Advice Service Alliance; please feel free to send us photographs of your celebration event and we will include this in the quarterly ASA newsletter.

**Step 6 The Monitoring Review Assessment – Every 2 Years**

The AQS award is made for a period of 2 years (24 months) and at the end of this period, the Advice Quality Standard will lapse and with it the licence to use the logo.

In order to maintain AQS accreditation you are required to be reviewed every 2 years and your monitoring review assessment should not exceed your 2 year anniversary accreditation date.

Recognising Excellence will get in touch with you well in advance of your accreditation anniversary date to remind you that your review is due.

* **AQS Self-Assessment Internal Review of Compliance template**

In preparation for your organisation’s earlier Desktop Audit your organisation will have drafted several policies and procedures to support the certification process. You need to make sure these are reviewed annually in line with AQS requirements. However, to help you prepare for your Monitoring Review Assessment you may wish to use our Self-Assessment template to measure your organisation’s progress against the standard. It will provide evidence against evidence criteria G2.3 and you can provide your assessor with a copy of this document to assist them in the preparation for your assessment.

* **Staff and Volunteer List**

You will need to provide a list of staff and relevant volunteers with names, job titles, hours and days worked. This information is essential and will ensure your assessor is able to produce an assessment plan that will provide structure to the on-site assessment, minimising disruption and ensuring the assessment runs smoothly.

* **Advice with Casework Applications**

Organisations that are intending to apply for Casework accreditation should also consider the requirements of the supplementary AQS Casework Self Declaration Form available from the link below. The requirements within this form assure organisations are providing the full depth and breadth of advice against their chosen advice category.

**Please note you are not subject to another desktop review at the Monitoring Review Assessment stage.**

**Step 7 - Annual Internal Compliance Check**

Although your organisation is required to undergo a monitoring assessment every 2 years you should also complete an internal annual appraisal of your continued compliance with the AQS. Where you identify any areas of improvement, you should be able to demonstrate how you have acted to address these. By completing this activity on an annual basis your quality framework will be embedded in everything you do and should inform your business planning processes and cycle of continuous improvement.

* [**Advice Quality Standard Application Form**](https://www.recognisingexcellence.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/AQS-Application-Form-v17-Feb-23-1.docx)
* [**AQS Self Assessment Internal Review of Compliance**](https://www.recognisingexcellence.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/AQSv4-Self-Assessment-Internal-Review-of-Compliance-March-23.docx)
* [**AQS Casework Self Declaration Form**](https://www.recognisingexcellence.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/AQS-Casework-Self-Declaration-Form-Jan-2023.docx)

**Information for Staff and Volunteers – Putting them at ease!**

Staff and volunteers can often feel apprehensive about the assessment process particularly if they are selected to participate; they should be reminded that the assessment process is designed to assess the organisation not the individual and should view the process as a continuous improvement tool. You should use the preparation time to stress to workers that they are not being interviewed or tested, and that there are no wrong or right answers to the questions they are asked.

Staff should meet with the assessor in a confidential office/home working space where they feel comfortable and can answer questions candidly. Your assessor will stress the confidential process and the need to takes notes during their discussion however, staff names with the exception of the Quality Representative and Senior Managers will not be included in the report.

**Data Protection**

Recognising Excellence complies with current data protection legislation, the General UK Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018 or any codes of practices issued by the Information Commissioner from time to time.

For the purposes of this agreement to carry audits/assessments the Advice Services Alliance is the ‘Data Controller’, Recognising Excellence the ‘Data Processor’ and the Assessor the Sub Processor. The legal basis for Recognising Excellence for processing data is that of “contractual obligation” as set out in Article 6 (1) (b) of the GDPR.

* All information gathered during the Audit/Assessment shall be held as absolutely confidential however obtained or learned from the client in pursuant to or in preparation of, or obtained or learned during the term of this agreement, whether relating to the organisation/advice service or to its business or to any of its officers, servants, agents, clients, suppliers, or subsidiaries or to the business of any of the foregoing persons or otherwise, and whether or not expressly designated confidential;
* Recognising Excellence shall not without the Client’s prior written consent use or permit or cause the same to be used save for the direct purpose of this agreement;
* Recognising Excellence shall not without the Client’s prior written consent disclose or permit or cause the same to be disclosed to any person other than to those of its full-time employees and/or its Assessors and Verifiers who need to be informed thereof to enable Recognising Excellence to perform its obligations.
* No case files or employee records will leave the Client’s premises and Recognising Excellence’s Assessor will destroy all notes/records on completion of the Audit/Assessment process;
* Recognising Excellence on behalf of the Advice Services Alliance will securely retain any AQS related audit/assessment information for 5 years from the date of creation, for the period it holds the AQS license.

**Completing the Application Form**

Applicants are required to complete the Application Form. The Application Form should be completed in as much detail as possible in order for Recognising Excellence to a build a clear picture of your organisation and allow us to scope out the assessment correctly.

* **Welsh Government Funded**

Please indicate whether or not your organisation/advice service receives funding from the Welsh government.

* **Fee Charging**

If you charge a fee for your advice services, please include this information on the Application Form. Although we do understand that many charities have lost revenue and funding streams due to the pandemic, when deciding to charge fees for advice please consider the following AQS evidence criteria:

* A3 Organisations must be committed to providing equality of access to advice and legal services to all clients.
* A.3.1 - You must have an equity, diversity and inclusion policy in effective operation and be able to demonstrate what actions you have taken to ensure your service is equally accessible to all, that difference is valued and respected, and that your workforce is representative of your community.
* F.2.2 – When clients have to bear or contribute towards the cost of advice and they agree to those charges, you must ensure that they given clear cost updates in writing whenever there is a change from the last estimate and at least every six months.
* **Number of Outlets/Sites**

If your application for accreditation includes multiple sites, you should make it clear that you are making a multi-site application and include the details of all sites that you intend to be covered by the accreditation. Recognising Excellence and the Assessor will then co-ordinate the necessary assessment visit arrangements. This might include a combination of on-site and remote assessment activity.

* **Contact Details and Service Information**

The application form requests basic contact details including address, contact numbers and the identity of the organisation’s Quality Representative. You should provide information about the service, which will include the nature of the services provided and details of any specific client group(s) served. Further information required, includes the channels of advice delivery, geographical service areas, local authority area(s) and a client profile. All of this information is used to establish an accurate picture of your organisation and the advice / information service.

* **Type of Application**

You are required to indicate the level of Advice Quality Standard accreditation for which the application is being made. The Application Form also requests detail on the type of casework being offered and advice only categories.

* **Staff Profile**

A Staff breakdown is required in order for Recognising Excellence to allocate sufficient time for the assessment process and capture all workers (including volunteers) contributing to the advice / information service. Providing accurate information here will ensure your assessment is costed out correctly.

* **Volunteers**

Where the organisation uses volunteer resources to support the advice delivery, additional information should be provided on the working pattern and contribution each volunteer makes. This information will be used to determine if it is appropriate to give consideration to full time equivalents.

* **Special Circumstances**

Your completed application form should also identify if there are any specific requirements that you might have. This might include the need for a Welsh speaking Assessor, Interpreter, or sign language interpreter.

* **Membership of Recognised Body**

You should also provide details of any memberships including where relevant authorisation/certification details.

* **Regulatory Bodies**

Several advice services give advice in categories that are subject to mandatory regulation through relevant regulatory bodies. The provision of immigration advice is regulated by the Office of Immigration Services Commission (OISC) and any advice services providing such advice must be registered with OISC by law. Other regulators who may have an interest in services provided include the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) for all financial and some aspects of money advice, and the Solicitors Regulatory Authority (SRA) for those organisations employing a lawyer in the capacity of a solicitor.

* **Appendix 1 – Desktop Audit Checklist**

Both ‘The Assessment Process’ and ‘Additional Support Options’ sections of this guide provide information on preparing for a Desktop Audit. However, Appendix 1 of the Application Form includes a further reminder of the list of documents required for the Desktop Audit.

* **Eligibility**

The Application Form must contain sufficient evidence to enable verification that the advice / information service is eligible for membership of the Advice Quality Standard, otherwise it will be returned to the applicant without being subject to a further assessment, with an explanation of the reason for its return.

* [**AQS Application Form**](https://www.recognisingexcellence.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/AQS-Application-Form-v17-Feb-23-1.docx)

**What to expect on the day of your assessment?**

The Advice Quality Standard assessment process has been designed to provide an objective and consistent framework for quality control for the Advice Service Alliance. Assessment visits are fixed in advance and organisations informed of the content of the Advice Quality Standard. Assessments generally take place over one day (depending on the size of the organisation/advice service and the numbers of staff/volunteers involved in advice delivery).

* **Assessment Plan**

In advance of your assessment your assessor will agree and prepare a formal Assessment Plan outlining the running order of the day.

* **Opening Meeting**

Assessments begin with an opening meeting during which the assessment staff will be introduced, reporting arrangements explained and the assessment plan set out by the Assessor.

The Assessor will explain how they will seek evidence for each of the requirements of the Standard; this evidence may be in the form of a document, central records, client /case records, or may be obtained by discussions with staff to clarify their understanding of the requirements and the systems and procedures put in place to meet them.

The Assessor will remain in contact with the Quality Representative throughout the assessment to ensure that the evidence presented has been correctly understood. The Assessor will ensure that the Quality Representative is aware of any changes that the Assessor considers are necessary before they are confirmed in the final assessment report, to ensure that the Assessor’s interpretation of evidence is correct.

* **Multi – Sited Assessments**

A representative sample of delivery sites will be visited during the assessment and the Assessor will seek guidance from the organisation’s Quality Representative. Where organisations have sites across a wide geographical area Assessors are encouraged to visit satellite sites or conduct interviews remotely, but will balance the time and cost in doing so and will consider the following factors:

* Head Office / Central Services
* How many advice sites
* The number of staff / volunteers at each site
* Are telephone/video conferencing interviews possible?
* **File / Case Reviews**

As part of the assessment process, the Assessor will review a sample of client / case files (open and closed) to confirm that the processes outlined by the organisation/advice service are reflected within the make-up of the client file and that clear audit trails of advice can be followed.

* **Client Consent**

All clients accessing advice should be informed at the outset of receiving advice, that their records may be used for the monitoring of quality, including external quality assurance assessments. If a client informs the organisation that they do not wish their information to be shared, a record should be made, and their file excluded from the assessment. Case file lists that are submitted should identify those clients where consent has not been given.

* **Assessment Feedback – Closing Meeting**

The assessment visit will result in the Assessor making one of the following recommendations:

* Fully compliant with the Advice Quality Standard
* Fully compliant conditional on evidence of corrective actions (CA’s) being addressed
* Accreditation should continue with some specified change to the Certificate for example if the scope of casework categories has changed
* Significant corrective action is identified that results in suspending Advice Quality Standard accreditation for a period of up to 6 months
* The Advice Quality Standard should be withdrawn

The outcome of the assessment and the initial findings will be discussed with the Quality Representative and any other members of staff that the organisation chooses to be at the verbal closing meeting. Should the assessment result in corrective actions the Assessor will provide a Corrective Action Report within 2 workings days for the organisation to start to address these areas as quickly as possible. A subsequent full detailed report of the findings will be forwarded to the Quality Representative following the assessment.

**Accreditation**

**Assessment Report**

After the assessment, the Assessor will send the Quality Representative a detailed assessment report.

The report will record how the organisation/advice service provided evidence of meeting the requirements, how this was tested during the visit and what if any changes are needed. This report will form the basis of future assessments and is intended to be helpful for internal development and continuous improvement.

The report will also set out areas where the applicant does not meet the quality requirements and these areas are highlighted in a supplementary Corrective Action Report. The assessment summary records the assessment results and recommendation, details of the assessment visit such as contact personnel, any changes required, and the timescale fixed by the Assessor for confirmation of amendments.

**Moderation**

Following successful completion of the assessment process, the Assessor will make a recommendation to Recognising Excellence to award the accreditation of the Advice Quality Standard to your organisation. Internal moderation procedures are completed by Recognising Excellence, however, the formal award of the AQS is subject to the full and final approval of Advice Services Alliance, the owners of the AQS Standard.

**Post Award – Client Agreement**

At the end of the assessment process, you will be required to sign a ‘Client Agreement’ document that sets out your obligations to comply and retain the Advice Quality Standard accreditation. Under this agreement you must continue to meet the requirements for the Advice Quality Standard and must notify the assessment body of any changes that may impact on the certification.

**Certification**

AQS accreditation is awarded for a period of 2 years; renewal **must** take place within the month it is due, failure to do so will result in automatic expiry and with it, use of the AQS logo.

The AQS Certificate is not provided until a signed copy of the ‘Client Agreement’ is received by the Assessment Body along with full payment of the assessment fee.

**N.B** The Correction Action period is included when calculating the renewal date. For example, an organisation may be due for re-assessment in November, assessed in December and corrective actions not cleared until the end of January the certificate is then backdated to the November.

**Celebrating Success**

Organisations are encouraged to celebrate their success by producing press release statements, including content in their newsletters and publications, and websites. Recognising Excellence will provide AQS branded window stickers, the logo and associated guidance. If you would like to share with us any publicity photographs confirming your AQS accreditation, please do, as we can include them on our website.

From time to time, we will also invite the community of AQS accredited organisations to contribute through open consultation, to the on-going development of the Standard.

**Advice Quality Standard Directory**

Once you have achieved AQS accreditation, your organisational details will be entered onto the AQS online directory. The directory provides a platform for signposting and referrals to other quality focused, like-minded providers. The AQS directory is designed to:

* Allow the public to identify quality assured organisations who are likely to meet their needs
* Allow providers to choose, or help clients choose other organisations that are likely to extend help to clients beyond that provided by the initial organisation

Information contained in the Directory is managed by the Advice Service Alliance.

**Debt Advice Locator Tool**

For organisations that provide debt advice, achievement of the AQS will also grant them entry into the Money and Pensions Service Debt Advice Locator Tool. This tool helps people seek free debt advice by enabling them to search for local or national services. This unique tool only features free debt advice organisations holding a Money and Pensions Service accredited quality standard or membership code, so people can be reassured the advice they are receiving is of a high and consistent standard

**Refusal, Suspension and Withdrawal Policy**

**Refusal**

At either the application / desktop assessment stage or at the subsequent initial / monitoring assessment, it will be within Recognising Excellences’ and / or the Assessor’s authority to refuse to process the application further or to recommend an award of the Advice Quality Standard.

* **At Application / Desktop Stage**

A refusal to process the application further will be based on:

* Incompleteness of the Application Form / documentation. The grounds for the refusal will be that either the Application Form is incomplete in some material aspect or has been completed in such a way as to be misleading or incorrect in a material sense.
* Insufficient or inadequate evidence of meeting the standards – this applies to any required supporting documentation that has either not been submitted, despite being a requirement, or is insufficient / inadequate to demonstrate meeting the standards.
* The application is out of the scope of the work of the Advice Quality Standard

Please note notification of the decision to refuse an application will be within 28 days of receipt of the application.

* **At Initial Assessment Stage**

The grounds for refusing to recommend the award of the Advice Quality Standard will be based on:

* The service provided is found to be outside the scope of the Advice Quality Standard
* There is insufficient or inadequate evidence of meeting the standard. It will be at the Assessor’s discretion to determine whether it would be possible for the organisation to instigate measures to meet the requirements within a reasonable period of time for the Advice Quality Standard (28 day corrective action period)

Please note notification of the decision not to recommend the award will be within 10 working days after completion of the assessment process.

**Certification Suspension**

Suspension initiated by Recognising Excellence may be enforced for a number of reasons:

* The Advice Quality Standard implemented by the client has failed to meet the certification criteria, Correction Actions have been identified and they have not been met satisfactorily within the stipulated deadlines
* The Advice Quality Standard implemented by the client has failed to meet the certification criteria and significant gaps have been identified during the on-site visit that are fundamental to the Standard and require considerably more time than the 28 day corrective action period

**Implications to Certification Suspension**

Under suspension Recognising Excellence will advise the client that they may not make any claims to the effects that they are AQS certificated and all promotion should be ceased.

Recognising Excellence may also place notice on the Advice Quality Standard Directory that the client’s certification is in suspension and take any additional actions it feels appropriate to advise interested parties of the suspended status.

The maximum period for any extension is six months.

**Suspension Follow-Up**

Reports of overdue visits and suspended clients are reviewed monthly by both Recognising Excellence and the Advice Service Alliance. Recognising Excellence will review the status of each client that is in a state of suspension to ensure that the period of extension has not been exceeded.

A reminder notification is sent out to the client by the AQS Contract Manager two months prior to their deadline date. Should the maximum suspension period be exceeded withdrawal of certification will commence.

Where clients are withdrawn from certification they will receive written notification, requesting they stop (with immediate effect) promoting their status as AQS certificates and all promotional material be removed.

Clients who have been withdrawn that wish to come forward again in the future will be required to begin the AQS assessment cycle again and a desktop assessment, followed by an Initial/Full Assessment will need to be completed.

**Certificate Withdrawal**

At any stage after the award, it is possible either for the organisation to give notice of withdrawal or for the assessment body to withdraw the award.

The decision to withdraw the award may be based on the following grounds (all of which are detailed in the AQS Client / Terms of Agreement):

* The provider fails to meet the Advice Quality Standard at an assessment and effective corrective action cannot be agreed
* The assessment body deems them to be an inappropriate service provider
* The organisation ceases to provide services within the scope of the work of the Advice Quality Standard
* The organisation commits a material breach of the contract
* The organisation unreasonably withholds consent for inclusion in the Directory
* The organisation brings the Advice Service Alliance into disrepute
* Complaints from the public or other sources upon investigation demonstrate that the Advice Quality Standard is not being met and that the organisation failed to instigate corrective action that would bring the service back in line with the standards

Details of the reason for withdrawal and evidence of appropriate authorisation shall be recorded. The decision to recommend the withdrawal of certification shall then be communicated to the organisation’s Chief Executive Officer, in writing. If a formal appeal is made against the withdrawal of certification by the client, then the Appeal procedure is invoked.

An organisation can withdraw from the Advice Quality Standard at any point. In exceptional circumstances, the Advice Services Alliance may invite an organisation to withdraw and where this is due to extremely serious issues, the Advice Quality Standard may be withdrawn. Such cases are rare and extreme and should the Advice Services Alliance consider this course of action, the AQS holder will be given full notification.

Organisations who do not agree with the decision of an Assessor may lodge an appeal to the Advice Services Alliance.

**Appeals Process**

**Grounds for Appeal**

An appeal process is available to all providers facing a refusal, suspension or withdrawal of an award at any stage in the process following the submission of an application or a monitoring assessment.

The provider may appeal on the following grounds:

* The Assessor did not take full account of all the evidence available
* The decision taken by the Assessor / assessing organisation was unreasonable
* The provider can take corrective action within reasonable time so as to bring the service up to standard

An appeal on the grounds of unreasonableness will need to demonstrate that the information provided has been misinterpreted or had been given undue weight in the context of the assessment process or that the Assessor had failed to consider material evidence / facts in existence at the time of the assessment.

**Appeal Procedure**

Organisations must submit their appeal in writing to Recognising Excellence within 21 days of the date of the notice of the decision. The written appeal and any documentation in support should be submitted, along with the grounds for the appeal and reason why the decision is contested.

The AQS Contract Manager of Recognising Excellence will have 28 days in which to review the decision and reply to the organisation on the outcome.

Should the situation remain unresolved the organisation will have 7 days to refer the matter to the Managing Director of Recognising Excellence.

The Contract Manager will determine whether to:

* Allow the appeal
* Order a re-assessment
* Refer to the Assessment Appeal Body
* Confirm refusal or withdrawal

Recognising Excellence will give written confirmation of its decision within 14 days.

Should the situation remain unresolved the organisation will have 7 days in which to make written representations to Recognising Excellence.

**Advice Quality Standard Assessment Appeal Body**

In exceptional circumstances Recognising Excellence may refer the matter to the Assessment Appeal Body, which will comprise of staff based at the Advice Service Alliance.

Where Recognising Excellence decides to refer to the Assessment Appeal Body they will notify the organisation within 7 days, together with copies of the documents to be submitted as part of the appeal.

A decision will normally be made within 6 weeks of the appeal being submitted to the Assessment Appeal Body.

**Decisions on Appeal**

Where the organisation is successful in showing that the assessment was not correctly carried out a new assessment at no additional cost must be directed.

Where the organisation is unsuccessful, then the appeal will be dismissed. Only the Assessment Appeal Body may dismiss this.

The successful applicant must keep a record of the views expressed by the members of the Assessment Appeal Body. The Assessment Appeal Body must tell the organisation the full reasons for the decision, in writing, as soon as possible and no later than 14 days after the decision has been made.

**Frequently Asked Questions**

**Q**. **Can we apply for a different casework category to our last assessment?**

**A.** Yes, you can change casework categories. We recognise that funder requirements change and/or you may be working on a different project partnership. You may even decide not to apply for casework at all. this perfectly acceptable.

**Q.** **Can we apply for a casework in between assessments, before our 2-year anniversary monitoring assessment?**

**A.** Yes, no problem if you wish to achieve casework accreditation, please contact the AQS team at 01452 688357.

**Q. Our monitoring assessment is due, but we have experienced a lot of organisational change, can we delay our assessment?**

**A.** Unfortunately, we are not able to extend your assessment monitoring review beyond your anniversary deadline. Recognising Excellence are required to adhere to strict procedures which are essential to maintaining the integrity of the Standard and protecting the status of AQS holders.

However, we do offer preparation support and our Quality Manager can work with you to agree an appropriate approach to ensuring you are able to come forward for reassessment within your anniversary deadline.

**Q. I am new to the organisation/advice service and now have responsibility for the AQS, can I delay the monitoring assessment?**

**A.** Unfortunately, we are not able to extend your assessment monitoring review beyond your anniversary deadline. Recognising Excellence are required to adhere to strict procedures which are essential to maintaining the integrity of the Standard and protecting the status of AQS holders.

However, we do offer preparation support and our Quality Manager can work with you to help you understand the assessment process, the requirements of the Standard, and answer any questions you might have about the process. We’re confident this will provide you with the support you require to come forward in the required timeline.

**Q. What documents to I need to submit for my assessment?**

**A.** You need submit a completed Application Form making it clear which type of accreditation you are seeking for example:

* Advice Only
* Advice with Casework

If you are applying for casework, you will also need to complete and submit the AQS Casework Self-Assessment Declaration Form.

If this is your first AQS assessment and you are applying for a Desktop Audit you will also need to submit the policies and procedures set out in both the Application Form Appendix 1 and AQS Self-Assessment Internal Review of Compliance.

**Q. We only provide debt at Advice level do we still have to complete the Money and Pensions Service MaPS (previously the Money Advice Service (MAS) accredited training?**

**A.** Yes, MaPS accredited training applies to debt advice provided at both advice and casework levels.

**Q.** **We are part of a much larger organisation, can we come forward as a separate service/team?**

**A.** Yes absolutely, we assess several advice teams within larger organisations examples include:

* Student Advice Centres within Student Unions
* Macmillan Welfare Benefit Teams within Local Authorities
* Welfare Benefit Services within youth services

**Q. We are a multi sited organisation will the assessor visit every site?**

**A.** This will depend on several different factors and your assessor will work with you to develop an assessment plan taking into consideration:

* Location and geographical spread of site
* The services delivered from each site
* Numbers of staff located at each location
* Telephone/Video conferencing interviews

**Q. What do my staff/volunteers need to know about the assessment?**

**A.** The most important thing is that staff should not worry about the assessment process. Your assessor will adapt their approach to ensure staff and volunteers feel comfortableduring their interview. You should stress that there are no wrong or right answers, that their interview is confidential, and the process is about continuous improvement.

**Q. My Advice Manager/Supervisor is on annual leave on the day of the assessment do they need to present?**

**A.** It is essential that your Advice Manager/Supervisor is present during the assessment. Before agreeing your assessment on-site date with your assessor, you should check key members of staff availability and any annual leave they may have planned.

**Q. Will the assessor want to see our volunteers?**

**A.** When completing your Application Form, you will be asked to provide volunteer information. You should only include those volunteers who are involved in the delivery of the advice service for example:

* Volunteers covering reception and carrying out triage duties
* Volunteers completing form filling duties
* Volunteers providing advice at drop-in surgeries/outreach
* Volunteers providing advice at your advice offices

Your assessor will ask to see a small number of volunteers that are involved in the advice service and will take this into consideration when agreeing your on-site date.

**Q. When do we have to pay for our assessment?**

**A.** You will be invoiced on completion of the assessment and our payment terms are 14 days after receipt of your invoice.

**Q. Can we make an advance payment?**

**A.** Yes, no problem all you need to do is make a note on your Application Form and our accounts team will invoice you in advance of your assessment.

**Useful Contacts**

**Recognising Excellence (RE)**

**aqs@recognisingexcellence.co.uk**

**Main Line: 01452 688357**

**AQS Quality Manager: Liz Morris 07394 563357**

**Liz.morris@recognisingexcellence.co.uk**

**Advice Service Alliance (ASA)**

**info@asauk.org.uk**

**Main Line: 020 8016 4123**

**Money and Pensions Service (MaPS)**

[**https://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en/corporate/accredited-training-and-qualifications**](https://www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en/corporate/accredited-training-and-qualifications)

**Welsh Government Quality Framework**

[**https://gov.wales/information-and-advice-quality-framework**](https://gov.wales/information-and-advice-quality-framework)

**Information Commissioners Office (ICO)**

[**https://ico.org.uk/**](https://ico.org.uk/)

**Office of Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC)**

[**https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/office-of-the-immigration-services-commissioner**](https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/office-of-the-immigration-services-commissioner)