



The Advice Quality Standard

June 2016

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Dear Colleagues

It is with very great pleasure that we introduce to you the Advice Quality Standard V2. In this document you will find all that defines the Advice Quality Standard; the AQS framework, the quality criteria and the organisation requirements. This is the definitive AQS document and we hope that you will find it an invaluable resource for driving the quality of advice services you provide to your clients.

A brief word about the Advice Quality Standard (AQS). The AQS is held by 700 independent organisations, providing advice to the public across a range of social welfare legal advice. Despite recent cuts in funding, mergers and rationalisation of the sector, the numbers of organisations holding the AQS has continued to grow. We find great hope in this growth: while organisations struggle with funding shortfalls and increasing client need, quality of service remains at the heart of advice giving. Your commitment to providing clients with the best advice not despite of, but because of their lack of choice is fundamental to social justice.

Importance of the AQS cannot be under estimated: it provides assurance to the public and to funders the advice provided to clients is likely to be good; it gives charity trustees, management committees and senior management teams the tools to govern more effectively; it demonstrates the fantastic level of service provided to clients who would have no other means of exercising their legal rights. Poorly managed services or inaccurate advice can be extremely detrimental to the client however well-intentioned the advice giver.

We are fiercely proud of the AQS and the way it drives the perpetual improvement of advice services. Importantly, the standard is owned and driven by the advice sector itself and yet is independent of any of the national advice networks or any funders of advice. We are committed to maintaining this independence to ensure your important work remains a feature of our civil society. We look forward to working with you as you implement the AQS V2 in your service.



Professor Avrom Sherr
Chair of the AQS Project Management Committee



Lindsey Poole
Director of the Advice Services Alliance

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- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
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And finally our thanks goes to the 700 advice organisations across the country who continue to use and value the Advice Quality Standard as a mark of excellence in advice giving and whose work makes an immeasurable contribution to the health and wellbeing of people in their communities and to the pursuit of social justice.

For services in Wales: Bydd fersiwn Gymraeg o'r ddogfen hon ar gael cyn diwedd 2016

Any errors or admissions in this document are entirely the responsibility of the Advice Services Alliance and any comments or feedback can be sent to info@asauk.org.uk.

Contents

Letter from the ASA and Chair of the PMC	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Contents	v
1. About the Advice Quality Standard	1
1.1 Elements of the Standard	2
1.2 Social Welfare Law	2
1.3 Organisations covered by the Advice Quality Standard	3
1.4 Language used	3
1.5 Structure of the Quality Framework Requirements	4
2. Application of the AQS to different services	5
2.1 Level of advice	6
Information service	
Advice service	
Advice with Casework (casework service)	
2.2 Categories of Advice offered	7
Subject categories	
Client categories	
2.3 Telephone requirements	8
3. Award of the Standard	9
3.1 Independent AQS	10
3.2 Relationship with other standards	11
Licence arrangements: Passported AQS	
Accreditation arrangements with other Quality Frameworks: Money Advice Service, Welsh Government	
4. AQS Quality Framework Standards and Supplements	13
4.1 Quality Framework requirements	14
4.2 Telephone standards	61
Casework Forms – see separate document	
5. Glossary of Terms	79
6. Appendices	83
I Definitions of Casework Categories (Case 1 Forms)	84
II About the ASA and our partners.	85
III AQS Appeal Procedure	87
IV Certification Mark and ownership of the AQS	88
V Money Advice Service Quality Framework: Organisation and Individual Requirements	89
VI Welsh Government Information and Advice Quality Framework: Definitions and additional requirements	90



1

About the Advice Quality Standard

The Advice Quality Standard is an organisation quality standard for legal advice services operating in the area of social welfare law. It comprises 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.

1.1 Elements of the Standard

There are three essential elements to the scheme:

- The Quality Framework Requirements: the specification of standards of quality assurance defined by a set of organisational requirements;
- The Assessment: the independent audit of organisations to ensure that the requirements are being achieved and maintained;
- Continuous Improvement: on-going application of the standard and development of the legal services offered by organisations to their clients.

The Standard supplies the minimum description of activities an organisation must undertake to offer good quality advice to the public. They are necessary, but not sufficient conditions for providing good quality advice. Simply holding the Standard does not guarantee that all advice given by an organisation will be relevant to the client or timely or accurate. Every advice-giving organisation must work on a daily basis to ensure that the Standard is maintained and that the service provided to clients is developed.

The Advice Quality Standard gives assurance regarding quality of advice by means of several proxies which, whilst not direct measures of quality themselves are fundamental to reliable delivery of a quality service. Key requirements include the training, support and supervision of all staff, the proper management of client information and case files, and the rigorous oversight by management.

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.

1.2 Social Welfare Law

The Advice Quality Standard approaches the assessment of quality of advice from the point of view of a client wanting advice in one of the following areas of law:

- Welfare Benefits
- Debt
- Housing
- Employment
- Community Care
- Consumer
- Education

These areas of law are collectively known as social welfare law. Within the not-for-profit sector, advice on matters of social welfare law is often given by advisers, paid or voluntary, who are not legally qualified and who may not consider that they are giving “legal” advice simply because they do not have detailed knowledge of, or training in, social welfare law or case law. However, any advice which involves interpreting how the law applies to a client’s particular problem or set of circumstances is legal advice.

For example, legal advice may include:

- advising someone on whether or not his circumstances satisfy the criteria for the award of a particular social security benefit
- advising an employee of her right to make a claim against her employer for unfair dismissal
- advising a homeless person on his rights to re-housing

It is important that advice agencies and advisers recognize when they are giving advice, as opposed to information, and ensure that advisers at all levels are properly trained and supervised in their role in order to ensure that the advice given is accurate and to protect the agency from being sued.

Some advice services also give advice on issues such as education, family, consumer and general contract. Immigration and asylum law may also be considered as social welfare law. The provision of immigration advice is regulated by the Office of the 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 including 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.

1.3 Organisations covered by the Advice Quality Standard

The Advice Quality Standard can be applied to any social welfare legal advice service operating at the generalist level and most operating at the casework level. In lay terms, this is any independent advice centres or other organisations also providing advice on benefits, housing and employment. 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 legal 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.

See section on the Application of the AQS to difference services for further definitions of Advice Level and Advice with Casework Level.

1.4 Language used

The AQS V2 strengthens the requirements and makes clear what organisations are expected to show in order to be awarded the AQS. In particular, the standard adopts the following definitions:

- Must** Organisations have to meet this requirement or to show concrete evidence of how they meet the requirement in order to obtain the AQS. Any organisations who can-not demonstrate this at the time of assessment visit or who are in the process of working towards meeting the requirement will be given a 'corrective action' in respect of the requirement.
- Should** Organisations are expected to meet this requirement or to show concrete evidence of how they consider they could meet the requirement in order to obtain the AQS. Any organisations who can-not demonstrate this either have to show why this would not apply to their organisation or how they intend to work towards meeting the requirement. They will be given an 'area for improvement' in respect of the requirement.

1.5 Structure of the Quality Framework Requirements

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.

The outline of the quality framework is as follows:

QUALITY FRAMEWORK

- | | | |
|----------|---------------------------------|--|
| A | ACCESS TO SERVICE | The aim of the Advice Quality Standard is to improve access to legal services and to base the delivery of services on local needs and priorities. Members 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 community. |
| B | SEAMLESS SERVICE | Where a member of the Advice Quality Standard cannot provide the particular service needed by the client, they must inform the client and direct them to an alternative service provider, where available. |
| C | RUNNING THE ORGANISATION | Members of the Advice Quality Standard must have structures and procedures that ensure effective management of the organisation and its resources. |
| D | PEOPLE MANAGEMENT | Members of the Advice Quality Standard must ensure that staff possess or acquire the skills and knowledge required for meeting the clients' needs. |
| E | RUNNING THE SERVICE | Members of the Advice Quality Standard must have processes and procedures that ensure an effective and efficient service to their clients. |
| F | MEETING CLIENTS' NEEDS | Clients using a Advice Quality Standard provider are entitled to receive advice and information relevant to their needs. |
| G | COMMITMENT TO QUALITY | All members of the Advice Quality Standard are committed to improving the quality of their service. |

The Advice Services Alliance is currently (June 2016) developing optional modules for the Advice Quality Standard. These will be added as optional quality areas. 'Assessing Quality through Peer Review' will become the first optional module.

2

Application of the Advice Quality Standard to different services

Providers must apply for the Advice Quality Standard at the level that best fits their service:

- Level of advice offered – information only through to casework
- Categories of advice – all areas of social welfare law through to specialisation in one area (for example housing or immigration advice) and how these may apply to particular client groups
- Mode of delivery – face to face, through to telephone and electronic modes

2.1 Level of Advice

The Advice Quality Standard takes the definitions for the different levels of advice from the cross sector work undertaken on the Working Together for Advice Project. The definitions are based on a combination of the depth of advice available to be given to a client and where the responsibility lies for moving the case forward. Advice agencies operating in Wales should also refer to the Welsh Information and Advice Providers Framework.

Information service

An information service gives clients the information they need, for them to know and do more about their situation. It can include information about rights, policies and practices; and about national and local services and agencies. Responsibility for taking any further action rests with the client.

An information service may include

- providing general information – e.g. leaflets or an information kiosk provided in a reception or waiting area. Clients select the information they want themselves and there is no direct guidance by a receptionist or other staff member
- signposting – e.g. providing factual information about the role of another organisation or how to find or contact that organisation.
- assisting clients to find information that relates to their enquiry – e.g. providing clients with leaflets, website addresses or other details which will help them contact other organisations, such as the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP)

Advice service

An advice service involves all the activities covered by the information service plus:

- 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 (what we mean by "merit" is explained in glossary) 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. (e.g. where a client is unable to make calls themselves). For practical reasons, it may not be possible to make these calls while the client is present. This may mean that calls are made after the advice session and the client is asked to make a further appointment to find out the results of the call.

Advice with Casework (casework service)

An advice with casework service includes all the elements of an advice service previously listed 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.

An advice with casework service 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. This does not need to comprise a challenge to a third party
- 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: e.g. a Disability Living Allowance appeal where the issues are factual ones relating to the level of a client's care need

2.2 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

1. Consumer/General Contract
2. Debt
3. Employment
4. Health and Community Care
5. Housing
6. Immigration/Nationality
7. Welfare Benefits

Client based

8. Asylum Seekers and Refugees Casework
9. Disability Casework
10. Older People Casework
11. Discrimination and Harassment Casework
12. Students Casework
13. Women Casework
14. Young People Casework

Detailed definitions of the individual Casework categories are provided in the Case 1 form (Section 4.3). Applicants for the Advice Quality Standard should state clearly on their application form which of these categories (if any) apply to their organisation.

2.3 Telephone requirements

Organisations that provide, by telephone, legal advice or services as a part or all of its work at either Advice Level or Advice with Casework Level can be audited against additional telephone standards to be awarded the Advice Quality Standard with telephone.

The requirements of the telephone level should be read in conjunction with either the 'Advice' Level or 'Advice with Casework' Level requirements. The evidence for certain aspects of the service will be different from evidence that is required for face-to-face services

Examples of work under the scope of the telephone requirements are:

- National, regional or local telephone help lines;
- Organisations who offer an additional telephone services to their face-to-face service;
- Organisations who provide a service solely by the telephone.

The Advice Quality Standard does not currently refer specifically to advice delivered through the medium of the internet (by email, Skype, video link etc) and this may be developed in the future. Where organisations deploy these media, the requirements which most closely match the delivery will be used.

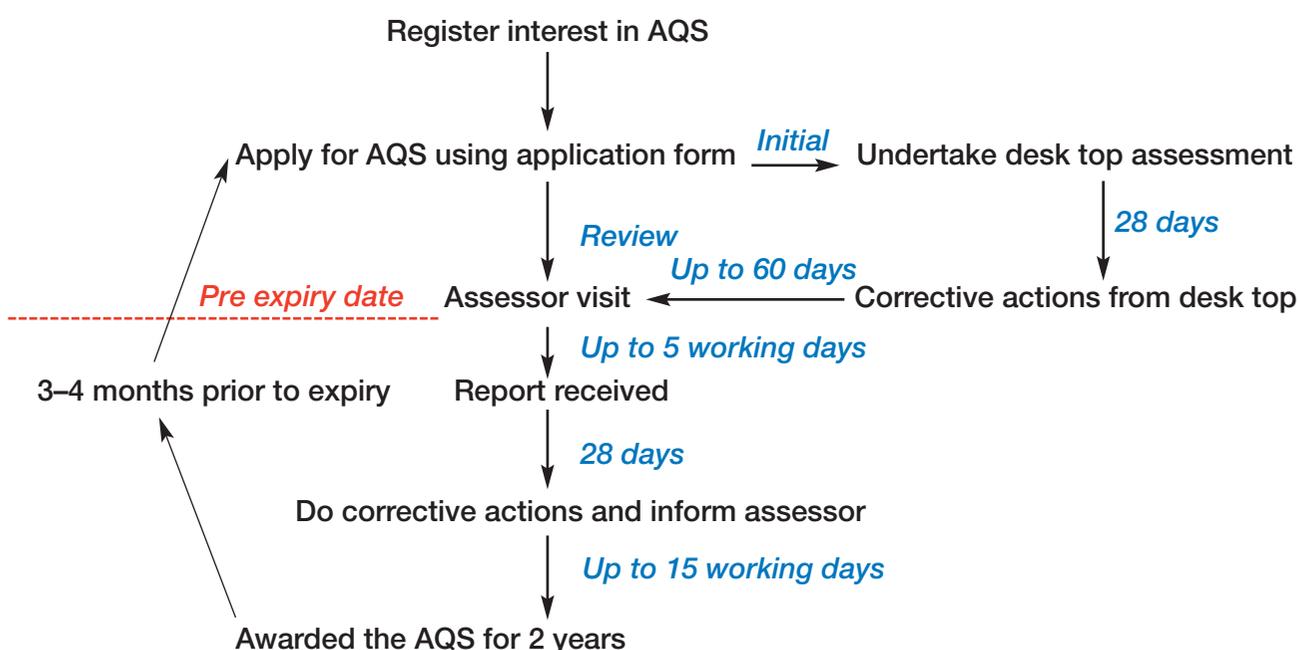
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**Award of the
Advice Quality Standard**

Organisations which meet the requirements of the Advice Quality Standard and have been assessed against the requirements will be awarded the AQS. The Advice Quality Standard is a Trade Mark and is owned by Advice Service Alliance and organisations are granted a licence to use the Advice Quality Standard logo. Separate guidance is published on the use of the logo and the logo can be provided as a window sticker and as an electronic file. No organisation may use the logo before the AQS has been awarded.

3.1 Independent AQS

There are two routes to the award. The first route is through an independent application process made directly to the assessment organisation licensed by Advice Services Alliance to conduct this work. Currently (June 2016) this organisation is Recognising Excellence and their contact details can be found in the Appendices. First time applicants for the Advice Quality Standard by this route will be required to undertake a one-off desk top review prior to the first on site assessment. This is to ensure that the organisation is 'assessment ready' and that valuable time is not wasted on matters which could be easily rectified.



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) unless a renewal assessment visit has been undertaken and an award pending. The application form provides more details on the renewal process.

The assessment visit (either initial assessment or review assessment) 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 taken
- Not compliant with the Advice Quality Standard

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

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 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 and the contact details can be found in the appendices.

3.2 Relationship with other Quality Frameworks

There are two ways in which the AQS relates to other quality frameworks within the social welfare legal advice sector:

Licence arrangements

Some networks operate their own quality assurance processes. On application, these quality assurance processes can be licensed by the Advice Services Alliance as being comparable with the Advice Quality Standard and therefore the network is granted permission to award the AQS on our behalf. Such advice organisations are said to hold a 'passport' to the Advice Quality Standard. Organisations awarded the AQS through this route will enjoy all the same benefits as other organisations holding the AQS providing they continue to meet the requirements of their own quality assurance process. Passported organisations can only be assessed by network organisations that have been licensed by the Advice Services Alliance to carry out this work. In June 2016, there are two such organisations:

- Age UK
- Citizens Advice

Applications from other networks for their quality assurance processes to be licensed for passport status are welcomed.

Accreditation arrangements

Some funders of social welfare legal advice have developed their own frameworks for assessing the quality of services that they fund and/or where they wish to drive quality and improvements. In these circumstances, the funder will accredit standards owned by others against their own quality framework. Where such accreditation is granted, organisations benefit by not only meeting the requirements of the Advice Quality Standard, but also that of the funder. The Advice Services Alliance has submitted the AQS v2 for accreditation by:

- Money Advice Service Quality Framework
- Welsh Government's Information and Advice Quality Framework

Please visit the website for more details.



4

AQS Quality Framework Standards and Supplements

4.1 Quality Framework Requirements

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The aims of the Advice Quality Standard are 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.

Requirement

A1. The service must be appropriate to the needs of the local/target client groups.

Purpose

The service provider should know about the problems and information needs that members of the local or target client groups face, and should plan services to meet identified needs

Evidence

- A1.1** You must have a written strategy that sets out the key objectives or core values and principles of the service provider, and what the service provider aims to achieve.
- The strategy must identify the type and level of services provided and in which subject areas and how these relate to the needs of the client group. It should also provide detail of the skills and resources necessary to deliver the strategy.
- A1.2** You must have a business plan for the current year and in outline for a further two years ahead
- A1.3** You must have a review process for the strategy and for the plan

Access to service

A1. The service must be appropriate to the needs of the local/target client groups.

Planning is one of the cornerstones of effective service provision and should have two key documents: a strategy document which describes the long term direction for the organisation (2–3 years is a reasonable time frame) and an annual business plan which describes how you will deliver that strategy in the current year.

Your strategy should be current, relevant and easily understood by staff at all levels of the organisation. It should be relevant to the objectives agreed for the individual organisation and take into account the needs of the local/target community in terms of how they access the service in its broadest sense.

Your plan is essentially an expression of your organisation's service strategy and as such should contain explicit statements of intent. Your plan should address the following:

- The community profile and needs and the client groups to be served (i.e local advice plans)
- Your service aims and objectives.
- Main types of service delivery e.g. main areas of work and opening hours.
- Proposed enhancements and new services.
- A marketing or promotional plan that targets potential service users and relevant organisations with key information.
- Approaches to service delivery e.g. outreach service, telephone or online access.
- Outline of resources available to support delivery including people, premises, training, administrative support and information technology
- Funding strategy that identifies opportunities for expansion through new sources of funding
- Risk assessment (see C.2.3)
- Consideration of access issues, including physical access, the Equality Act 2010 and language policies (see additional guidance for service in Wales)
- Methods used for gaining feedback from service users for developing the organisation.

Your strategy should be reviewed as a minimum on an annual basis in the light of changes to the composition and needs of the local or target community and changes to available resources. Your annual plan must be reviewed quarterly. Reviews should, wherever possible, be based on evidence to evaluate performance against objectives and on feedback from service users.

Your organisation should review its future plans for work alongside any relevant local or national priorities and plans which identify needs for particular client groups or which relate to the provision of advice and legal services. These external strategies are crucial to organisational development and opportunities. Keeping up to date with the wider strategic environment is likely to give an early warning of changes in local and national priorities that may impact on clients or service users or on the provision of legal services.

Resources

- Local Advice Strategy Development: www.adviceservicestransition.org.uk/resources/toolkits/local-advice-strategy-development/
- Business planning guidance – Wales Council for Voluntary Action: www.wcva.org.uk/funding/advice/planning/business-planning
- Business plan primer – National Association for Voluntary Community Action: www.navca.org.uk/resources
- Wikipedia SMART Objectives: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SMART_criteria

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framework

The aims of the Advice Quality Standard are 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.

Requirement

A2. The community should be made aware of the service that is being offered.

Purpose

If the service is to be of value, members of the community will need to know what services are available locally.

Evidence

- A2.1 You must publicise details of your services and ensure that this is clearly communicated to relevant local service providers, to funders and to the public. You should seek their feedback on your service.
- A2.2 You must ensure that local service providers are aware of the services that you offer through regular monitoring of referrals made into your organisation and by reviewing your referral network.
- A2.3 Following certification, the Advice Quality Standard logo is displayed in accordance with guidelines.

Access to service



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guidance

Access to service

A2. The community should be made aware of the service that is being offered.

If the service is to be of value, members of the community will need to know what services are available locally so you need to actively promote your service. You should seek feedback to see whether you been successful in this promotion.

Information on your approach to promoting and marketing your service to members of the community and relevant local service providers should be included in your strategy.

You should have a website that is kept up to date and if you provide information of your services for other people's websites, this should also be kept up to date.

Local infrastructure organisations (such as community voluntary services) may be able to support you in promoting your services to a wide range of community and voluntary sector organisations. The following links can help you in identifying LIOs, advice networks, independent advice centres and advice workers in your area.

Resources

- AdviceUK: www.adviceuk.org.uk
- Citizens Advice: www.citizensadvice.org.uk
- Law Centres Network: www.lawcentres.org.uk
- National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA): www.navca.org.uk
- National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers (NAWRA): www.nawra.org.uk
- National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO): www.ncvo.org.uk
- Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA): www.nicva.org
- Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) www.scvo.org.uk
- WCVA www.wcva.org.uk/home
- Youth Access www.youthaccess.org.uk

You should regularly review the profile of referrals from local service providers and organisations within your referral network. This will enable you to identify trends in the volume and nature of referrals, to take action to address any gaps in your referral network, and raise awareness of your service to organisations that can help you to extend your reach into the community, in particular to under-represented and hard to reach groups.

Guidelines for use of the AQS logo can be found on the AQS website or can be sent by contacting the Advice Services Alliance.

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framework

The aims of the Advice Quality Standard are 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.

Requirement

A3. Organisations must be committed to providing equality of access to advice and legal services to all clients

Purpose

Legislation and good practice point to services being delivered without discrimination, both at the point of service delivery and in service planning.

Evidence

- A3.1** You must have an equality and diversity policy in effective operation that precludes discrimination in selecting and dealing with clients in the target groups.
- A3.2** Where organisational principles, charters or funding restrictions only allow the service or services to be offered to specific client groups, this must be reflected in your signposting and referral procedures.

Access to service

**A****guidance**

A3. Organisations must be committed to providing equality of access to advice and legal services to all clients

Good advice services show commitment to social justice. Assessing whether your organisation is reaching all parts of your target community will require an understanding of the make-up of that community and who in particular you wish to serve. Monitoring against this profile will enable service providers to identify areas of unequal delivery or access. Constant vigilance for bias contributes to sensitive service delivery.

You must ensure that your Equality Policy is compliant with the provisions of the Equality Act 2010. The Act came into force in October 2010 providing a modern, single legal framework with clear, streamlined law to more effectively tackle disadvantage and discrimination (see D.1)

There are requirements for services provided in Wales under the Office of the Welsh Language Commissioner.

Resources

Delivering Equality and Diversity – Acas
Equality Act Guidance – Equality and Human Rights Commission
Equality and Diversity Policy Template – The PIFA Project

Access to service

B

framework

Where a holder of the Advice Quality Standard cannot provide the particular service needed by the client, they must inform the client and direct them to an alternative service provider, where available.

Requirement

B1. Clients should receive a seamless service from an appropriate source either by signposting or referral.

Purpose

In order for individuals to receive the right advice at the earliest opportunity, it is important that information is available about the range of services and how they can be accessed

Evidence

- B1.1** You must describe clearly the service that you are capable of delivering and state clearly any potential conflicts of interest.
- B1.2** When appointments are offered, you must record client attendance and use information on non-attendance for service improvement
- B1.3** You must have a clear procedure in use for conducting signposting and referral, and staff must be able to demonstrate how they identify when to signpost or refer.
- B1.4** You must have access to a directory of alternative service providers, which is kept up to date, is accessible to all staff and is used to support effective signposting and referral.
- B1.5** You must maintain records of referrals, including records of all instances where no suitable service provider could be found, and review these at least annually.
- B1.6** For signposting, your procedure must confirm that, as a minimum, you will signpost any individual whom your organisation is unable to help.
- B1.7** For referrals, your procedure must include, as a minimum, the practical steps to be taken to identify appropriate service providers, giving first consideration to organisations holding the AQS.

continued overleaf

Seamless service



B

guidance

Seamless service

B1. Clients should receive a seamless service from an appropriate source either by signposting or referral.

The referral and signposting process is paramount in maintaining a seamless service of independent advice providers in the community, hence the importance of operating a robust referral and signposting system. You should have a clear procedure which should include guidance as to when your advisers, caseworkers or other appropriate staff members are expected to signpost to another service provider, and the circumstances when a referral may be more appropriate.

The need for referral or signposting can arise either when it becomes clear you cannot provide the service the client requires (for example, beyond level of expertise, specialist knowledge required or conflict of interest identified) or when there is another provider who could meet the clients requirements more effectively.

Although it is not a requirement for you to decide which alternative provider they should see, or to offer assistance in making arrangements for them, you are likely to consider this appropriate in certain circumstances. You should at least offer to guide clients through the list of organisations that you have produced by advice area and provide your own recommendation.

Where more than one appropriate provider is identified, you should give priority to organisations which hold the AQS as an indicator of good quality advice (see F.4). You can also provide the web address of the AQS directory and other relevant directories such as the MAS Debt Locator Tool (www.moneyadvice.service.org.uk/en/tools/debt-advice-locator).

Good referral practice means that you will usually identify the need for, and make, a referral before you reach the point where you cannot offer further help. In the case of referrals (unlike signposting), you are expected to make arrangements for the client to see someone from the new organisation.

Advisers should consider issues such as cost, accessibility, geographical coverage and language barriers when making recommendations to clients about other service providers.

It is important that your organisation both operates the referral and signposting mechanism correctly and is able to identify when an adviser has reached the limit of their experience, knowledge or competence. Referral or signposting can be to a more experienced adviser within your organisation prior to referring or signposting externally. The ability to understand the competence of an individual adviser is a key skill required of the supervisor. The AQS assessment process will look carefully for evidence that the point of referral or signposting has been correctly considered.

Records for all referrals should identify:

- the client or case
- who made the referral
- the type of client need
- to whom the client was referred
- key dates

continued overleaf



B framework



Where a holder of the Advice Quality Standard cannot provide the particular service needed by the client, they must inform the client and direct them to an alternative service provider, where available.

Requirement	Purpose	Evidence
<p>B2. Service providers should establish and manage an effective referral network of service providers.</p>	<p>It is important to monitor the use of your service, as this will help both to make improvements and refinements, and to gain information about the need for different types of service.</p>	<p>B1.8 When signposting or making a referral to another service provider, you must ensure that the client is told what role your organisation will take and what service they can expect from the other service provider.</p> <p>B1.9 You must ensure that any discussion with clients of the cost implications of them being signposted or referred elsewhere is clearly noted on the client's file.</p> <p>B1.10 Subject to the client providing consent, information about advice or assistance already given (and any relevant documentation) should be forwarded to the other service provider.</p> <p>B2.1 You must have a system of recording feedback on the services provided by the organisations to which clients have been referred.</p> <p>B2.2 You should regularly monitor incoming and outgoing referrals, including attendance/non-attendance by clients, in order to ensure effective use of resources</p>
<p>22</p>		

Seamless service





When you have referred a client to a service that does not hold the AQS or another recognised quality standard, you should provide a reasonable justification on the referral record (e.g. related to the scope of the type of client need, to case capacity, or to the limits of the adviser's competence).

Records should be kept every time a suitable service provider could not be found when the need for a referral had been identified, and these records should include the subject matter and what (if anything) was done to progress the client's case further.

The list of providers you signpost or refer to should contain correct information about the organisations. You will have to demonstrate that you have access to current details for any service providers used that are not in the AQS Directory, including telephone numbers, types of service offered, opening times, charging information, languages offered, and disabled access.

Resources

- Key steps to effective signposting and referral – AdviceUK: asauk.org.uk/archive/working-together-for-advice/partnerships/referral-networks
- UK Advice Finder – AdviceUK: www.advicefinder.org.uk
- Local Advice for London: www.advicelocal.org.uk
- Advice Quality Standard: www.advicequalitystandard.org.uk/?s=&post_type=agencies

B2. Service providers should establish and manage an effective referral network of service providers.

You should have a procedure for recording feedback (from clients and other sources) on the services provided by external referral organisations. As a minimum you should invite clients to return to your service should there be any problems and have a mechanism for recording their feedback.

It is also recommended that you undertake regular monitoring exercises on the quality of services provided by agencies to which you have signposted or referred clients. The purpose of monitoring is to help you to ensure that signposting and referrals are made at the level of adviser's competence, to an appropriate organisation and according to the needs of the client. This is best achieved by maintaining records of referrals/signposting including to whom and the subject area. Monitoring can be carried out periodically e.g. twice a year. These records can be used to consider client feedback and to identify trends for the review of service.



framework

Running the organisation

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

Requirement

C1. Service providers must have a clear management structure that identifies the governance, roles and responsibilities of individuals in the delivery of the service.

Purpose

It is important to the delivery of all services that members of staff know the limits of their own abilities and roles and where to turn for help if faced with a problem that is beyond them.

Evidence

- C1.1 Where a Management Committee or Board of Trustees runs an organisation, the governing body needs to demonstrate independence by ensuring that funding bodies remain a minority within the governing body membership. The governance document/constitution should be comprehensive, and the relationship between the governing body and those managing the organisation on their behalf should be clear.
- C1.2 Your organisation should be a member of recognised representative body.
- C1.3 Where appropriate, your organisation must be a member of a regulatory body.
- C1.4 You must have a clear written description of how the service is organised and/or an organisational chart.
- C1.5 Your decision-making structure should be defined in writing with an identification of key personnel and their areas of responsibility, including the designated person responsible for ensuring the organisation meets the Advice Quality Standard.
- C1.6 Your organisation must be registered with the Information Commissioner's Office.



C1. Service providers must have a clear management structure that identifies the governance, roles and responsibilities of individuals in the delivery of the service.

Roles of individuals responsible for making decisions within your organisation need to be defined. A description of your organisation's structure might be in the form of a diagram/family tree but must be contained in a written document accessible to all staff.

Where a management committee is involved in the day-to-day management of the organisation, decision-making processes should be identified in your constitution/governance document with the definition of its role, quorum and terms of reference.

An up-to-date list of members of your Management Committee and/or Board of Trustees needs to be kept, with explanations of their roles and responsibilities.

Organisations applying for the AQS are asked to belong to recognised bodies that have agreed policies and procedures for dealing with serious misdemeanours.

You must be clear whether any of the advice you are giving could be subject to a regulatory body. This will not apply to all advice providers, but you must show that you have checked whether any regulation applies to your organisation.

All practising solicitors are subject to regulation by the Solicitors Regulation Authority (www.sra.org.uk). If your organisation is providing debt advice you may be subject to regulation by the Financial Conduct Authority (www.fca.org.uk). If your organisation is working in the field of immigration you will be subject to regulation by the Office of the Immigration Services Commissioner (www.gov.uk/government/organisations/office-of-the-immigration-services-commissioner). You may be breaking the law if you provide advice in areas that are regulated but are not registered.

As all advice services will hold personal data, your service must be registered with the Information Commissioner's Office (www.ico.org.uk) and you must ensure that you comply with the data protection requirements. (Also see AQS Area F3.)

Most advice services are members of recognised national bodies such as Advice UK (www.adviceuk.org.uk), Citizens Advice (www.citizensadvice.org.uk) and Age UK (www.ageuk.org.uk). There are also practitioner networks such as NAWRA (www.nawra.org.uk) and Money Advice Liaison Group (MALG) (www.malg.org.uk).

If you are not affiliated to a national regulatory body or relevant membership organisation, the AQS Assessor will discuss your organisation with the Advice Services Alliance in order to determine your suitability for the Advice Quality Standard. The AQS Assessor will take into account relevant information disclosed during the application process about your service and individuals working within it to determine whether or not your organisation is suitable to become or remain an AQS holder.

Where records for individual employees and volunteers show that they need supervision, this then supervision will need to be evidenced as part of the AQS assessment. The type of supervision will need to take into account an individual's qualifications and the requirements of any relevant regulatory bodies.

Resources

- Good governance: a code for the voluntary and community sector: www.governancecode.org/full-code-of-governance
- Good governance for smaller organisations: www.governancecode.org/code-for-smaller-organisations
- Toolkit for good governance: www.kingstonsmith.co.uk/upload/pdf/Charties%20Governance%20Toolkit_Final.pdf
- National Association of Welfare Rights Advisers (NAWRA): www.nawra.org.uk
- Money Advice Liaison Group (MALG): www.malg.org.uk
- Advice Services Alliance (ASA): www.asauk.org.uk



framework

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

Requirement

C2. Service providers must ensure availability of resources to provide the service when and where it is needed.

Purpose

It is essential that quality services make best use of limited resources.

Evidence

- C2.1** You must review levels of service performance against your service plan on a quarterly basis.
- C2.2** Subsequent decisions about your service capacity are reviewed to reflect your available resources.
- C2.3** You must carry out an annual risk assessment and maintain a risk register, which clearly identifies all key known risks and what mitigating actions will be taken.

Running the organisation





C2. Service providers must ensure availability of resources to provide the service when and where it is needed.

Advice services have a long history of providing good services with very limited resources. Quality services will be clear about the resources available and what they can (and cannot) achieve within these resources. Service providers should take into account in their planning all types of resources including funding (the money), human resources (the people), equipment and buildings (the stuff).

Within a rapidly changing funding environment, service providers need to be sure that their offer to clients is deliverable for the entirety of the contact. This is particularly important with services offering casework where a sudden change in service might have a detrimental impact on clients. For this reason, it is important to review the levels of service performance on a regular basis and to make any necessary adjustments to your service delivery in the light of these reviews.

One key measure of the ability of organisations to provide a quality service when required is that the case load is commensurate with the resources available. Services need to ensure that case load is manageable by monitoring the number of open cases and ensuring that the case closure policy is effectively implemented.

Cost control has always been particularly important in the advice sector where funding is limited and often uncertain but with the objective of obtaining best value. Good quality advice services will demonstrate appropriate financial prudence without being unnecessarily risk averse. A key part of demonstrating this will be a risk register which outlines all the key known risks for the organisation and the processes in place for mitigating and/or managing these risks. There are many different risk registers formats available which provide different ways of thinking about risk, but ultimately all risks boil down to threats to the organisation function and this frequently means a financial issue (for example, poor personnel procedures could result in Employment Tribunal which could cost the organisation money to defend). Risk registers are therefore usually considered with financial reporting (see AQS Area C.3)

Service providers produce a variety of financial reports and the most appropriate will depend on the nature of your organisation and on the range and focus of your provision.



framework

Running the organisation

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

Requirement	Purpose	Evidence
<p>C3. Service providers must maintain effective financial control.</p>	<p>It is important that organisations produce basic financial information and monitor this information regularly. This will ensure that an organisation's resources are managed effectively thus contributing to greater financial stability and supporting longer term planning.</p>	<p>C3.1 Financial management is exercised in line with agreed statements of financial policies, procedures and authorities approved by the governing body. You must provide evidence of financial review by an independent source.</p> <p>C3.2 You must demonstrate how you use financial information to assist in reviewing the provision of services.</p> <p>C3.3 You must have professional indemnity insurance in place in accordance with the requirements of your relevant professional association. Organisations that are not members of a recognised association should be insured for not less than £250,000.</p> <p>C3.4 You must be able to provide evidence of compliance with regulatory requirements where appropriate.</p> <p>C3.5 You must be able to produce the following documentation and show how it has been used in managing the organisation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual budget • Quarterly reports of variance of income and expenditure against budgets • Annual profit and loss account or income and expenditure account • Annual balance sheet
28		



C3. Service providers must maintain effective financial control.

Cost control has always been particularly important in the advice sector where funding is limited and often uncertain but with the objective of obtaining best value. The standard does not seek to impose anything other than financial prudence.

Service providers produce a variety of financial reports and the most appropriate will depend on the nature of your organisation and on the range and focus of your provision.

Organisations are required to have policies in relation to finances. This may specify what their resources will be used to provide. Financial procedures should include the production of an annual budget for income and expenditure.

Some funders require reports specifying how funding has been utilised.

It is usual to have someone designated within the organisation with overall financial responsibility. Particular individuals may be designated with the authority to approve and handle certain levels of expenditure and this needs to be clearly described.

Organisations should ensure that they are compliant with legislative and contractual financial recording and reporting, as required by Companies House and the Charity Commission.

Financial year-end reports need to be prepared and audited by an independent source. Registered charities will need to be subject to the appropriate type of scrutiny depending on income. AQS Assessors will seek evidence of financial audits.

Financial information should be reviewed regularly in order to be confident of the continuing stability of the organisation. This information should feed into the annual review of service performance. Decisions can then be taken about what changes (if any) need to be made to the service strategy given the actual and expected financial position. It may be that an increased amount of funding is available and as a result, services may be able to expand. Where fewer resources are available your service will need to decide where they are focused.

All organisations should undertake a risk assessment on an annual basis at least, and following any significant changes to the service, and you should maintain a risk register. Charities have to undertake this exercise as part of their governance arrangements, but other organisations should also show evidence of having engaged with this process.

Management committees and/or Boards of Trustees should be engaged in the process, and in particular to agree what actions will be taken to mitigate identified risks. A regular review of the risk register will identify if these actions are successful.

Resources

- Practice note on professional indemnity insurance – The Law Society: www.lawsociety.org.uk/support-services/advice/practice-notes/professional-indemnity-insurance
- Professional indemnity – Advice UK: www.adviceuk.org.uk/prof-indemnity
- Professional indemnity guidance – Solicitors Regulation Authority: www.sra.org.uk/solicitors/code-of-conduct/indemnity.page
- Risk management – Small Charities Coalition: www.smallcharities.org.uk/resources-insurance-risk/
- Risk Register template – Charity Commission: www.gov.uk/government/publications/charities-and-risk-management-cc26
- Companies House

D



framework

Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must ensure that staff and trustees possess or develop the skills and knowledge required to meet clients' needs.

Requirement

D1. A clear commitment to equality and diversity and the fair treatment of all staff, volunteers and job applicants

Purpose

To ensure that staff are not discriminated against in terms of age, race, sex, gender reassignment, religion or belief, pregnancy, maternity or paternity, disability, sexual orientation, or marital or partnership status.

Evidence

- D1.1 You must have an equality and diversity policy in effective operation that precludes discrimination in the selection recruitment and treatment of staff, volunteers and job applicants. The policy must be compliant with the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.
- D1.2 You must operate fair and transparent recruitment processes to evaluate the skills, knowledge and experience of those applying for posts.
- D1.3 You must have induction procedures in place for all people who join the organisation or change role.
- D1.4 Where appropriate you should seek to take steps to create a workforce that reflects the communities it serves.
- D1.5 You must have clear disciplinary and grievance processes

People management



D1. A clear commitment to equality and diversity and the fair treatment of all staff, volunteers and job applicants

In the context of fair treatment, any policies should cover paid employees and volunteers, including (where relevant) members of the Board of Trustees or Management Committee. This will also cover potential members of these groups, for example in your recruitment policies and procedures.

Your recruitment procedures should be designed to ensure that:

- Recruitment is transparent, fair and effective, without discrimination, except where specified as positive action by current legislation.
- Advertising, whether internal or external, reflects the role and person description.
- Selection of applicants is conducted consistently.
- Documentation is retained to provide feedback to candidates and is available for inspection if required. Interview and assessment notes for all short-listed candidates (whether appointed or not) should be kept for not less than 12 months.

Recruitment processes and outcomes should be monitored and the organisation management should check for potential bias.

Where appropriate, the organisation should show that it has a process in place by which it can consider making 'reasonable adjustments' (as specified by the Equality Act 2010 to accommodate the requirements for people with disabilities), consider flexible working arrangements and shared parental leave and maternity leave as required by law.

The core induction process will generally be the same across the various job types within the organisation and should include all volunteers, paid staff, management committee members and/or trustees. When individual employees need a tailored approach, this should be documented on file. Any new adviser recruited to undertake legal work should have an understanding of core procedures of the organisation prior to giving advice.

Your organisation must have disciplinary and grievance processes. These need to be open and available to all staff and should include provision for whistleblowing for employees.

Resources

- Equality and Human Rights Commission: www.equalityhumanrights.com/your-rights
- Code of practice on disciplinary and grievance procedures – Acas: www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=2174
- Equality and diversity policy – Acas: www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/0/r/Equality_and_Diversity_Policy_October_2011.pdf
- Guidance on whistleblowing for employees: www.gov.uk/whistleblowing/what-is-a-whistleblower
- Public Concern at Work – whistleblowing charity that offers advice and resources to employers and employees: www.pcaw.co.uk

D

framework

Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must ensure that staff and trustees possess or develop the skills and knowledge required to meet clients' needs.

Requirement

D2. Training and professional development opportunities are provided for all staff and volunteers who work within the service including management of the organisation.

Purpose

Attention needs to be given to staff knowledge and skills, including customer care, in the service they deliver.

Evidence

- D2.1 You must have systems for staff appraisals, which must be undertaken at least annually and recorded.
- D2.2 Training and development plans must support the needs of the service and must be reviewed annually.
- D2.3 You must record all training and professional development undertaken on individual training and development plans
- D2.4 Where you deliver advice as part of a regulated service you must ensure that you comply with relevant professional standards and professional development frameworks.

People management



D2. Training and professional development opportunities are provided for all staff and volunteers who work within the service including management of the organisation.

Many organisations have staff appraisal systems in place which include support and supervision. Whatever feedback or appraisal system is adopted, consider whether the system is:

- Appropriate for the type of organisation; too formal in a small organisation, or too informal in a large one will lead to difficulties;
- Able to relate the performance of the individual to the needs of the service;
- Cover knowledge, skills and customer care
- A two-way communication process to facilitate feedback from staff;
- Able to identify training needs as well as set objectives.

Individual training and development plans should be prepared for all members of staff and the information in them should follow from issues identified at the appraisal.

Training records need to be kept for all members of staff and should include records of informal and formal training. Where relevant professional competencies apply, evidence of meeting these should be recorded. Training and development plans should be reviewed annually with individual staff, and collated to provide feedback to the management committee/board.

For organisations providing debt advice, staff must be appraised against the Money Advice Service Quality Framework for Individuals. You also need to be aware of the role of the Financial Conduct Authority and the activities which fall within their regulation regime (www.thefca.org.uk/authorisation/regulatedactivities?field_fcasf_sector=unset&field_fcasf_page_category=unset).

If your organisation provides immigration advice, you must be registered with the Office of Immigration Services Commissioner (OISC) who regulate immigration advice. To give immigration advice and not be registered is a criminal offence.

If your organisation employs a qualified lawyer working for you as a lawyer, you must ensure that the appropriate regulator is informed and that both your service the individual complies with the professional requirements.

Resources

- Continuing Professional Development policy – Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD): www.cipd.co.uk/cpd/policy.aspx
- CPD Personal Development Plan template – CIPD: www.cipd.co.uk/cpd/examples-templates.aspx
- Staff induction checklist – Acas: www.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=4701&q=staff+inductio
- Training and staff development – Advice UK: www.adviceuk.org.uk/training
- National Occupational Standards
- (MAS) list of accredited training providers: www.debtquality.org.uk/learning-pathway
- How to become a regulated immigration adviser: www.gov.uk/government/publications/how-to-become-a-regulated-immigration-adviser/how-to-become-a-regulated-immigration-adviser
- Legal Services Board: www.legalservicesboard.org.uk

D framework



Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must ensure that staff and trustees possess or develop the skills and knowledge required to meet clients' needs.

Requirement

D3. Procedures to ensure clients get advice from the most appropriate source that take account of the knowledge and skills of staff.

Purpose

Clients need to have confidence in the ability of the person who deals with their problem or enquiry.

Evidence

- D3.1 All staff must be aware of their responsibilities. These should be documented in role or job descriptions.
- D3.2 Procedures must be in place to match the skills and competencies of all staff giving advice to the areas of advice needed by clients.
- D3.3 All staff must be aware of the need to inform the supervisor if the case is beyond their competence.
- D3.4 Your staff should have easy access to relevant and up-to-date legal reference material. You must have a process in place to provide timely information to staff about changes in the law pertinent to their service delivery.

People management



D3. Procedures to ensure clients get advice from the most appropriate source that take account of the knowledge and skills of staff.

The organisation must ensure that all staff, both advice and non-advice giving are aware of the range of their responsibilities, particularly (but not exclusively) in relation to giving advice. It is important that administrative staff such as receptionists understand their role and whether this extends to information giving, signposting or referral. Clear and up-to-date job descriptions with an understanding of the skills needed to deliver each of the roles will assist in allocating tasks and responsibilities to individuals.

The role of the supervisor in meeting this requirement is crucial (see also D4 below). The supervisor should have an understanding of the abilities of advisers and/or caseworkers within the organisation. Cases and enquiries need to be matched to the capabilities and workloads of advisers. Supervisors will be asked to identify how this process is undertaken.

The abilities and experience of each individual worker needs to be considered when identifying how the member of staff needs to be supervised. It is for the supervisor to assess the competencies of individuals using various tools, such as appraisal. For example, frequent and formal supervision discussions may be appropriate for those who have little experience. For new inexperienced advisers it may be necessary to review all incoming and outgoing correspondence. For experienced advisers, a less formal approach may be warranted.

You should identify what approaches supervisors have taken with whom. This will need to be set out in a manner that allows everyone involved to understand how it works in practice. Staff should feel supported by supervision and should feel comfortable to approach their supervisor for advice and guidance on their cases.

You must provide your staff with access to websites and other reference materials in order that they can easily check and record the advice they are giving. You should identify how you communicate with the advice team any changes in key areas of law.



Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must ensure that staff and trustees possess or develop the skills and knowledge required to meet clients' needs.

Requirement

D4. Processes to ensure the delivery of quality work to clients.

Purpose

To ensure overall quality control of the work done by an organisation. This can best be achieved by advisers having access to a suitably experienced person, who can provide guidance and manage their work.

Evidence

- D4.1** You must identify at least one person responsible for supervising individuals who work with clients (this may be someone external to your organisation). The supervisor must have:
- At least two years' recent and ongoing experience (either by undertaking advice themselves or involvement in others' cases);
 - Have experience of managing advisers;
 - Demonstrate how they have maintained their knowledge of legal changes and practice; and
 - Be accessible to the staff and volunteers they supervise.
- D4.2** Where there is more than one person identified as the supervisor there must be at least one person ultimately responsible for meeting the requirements of the standard. This may be one of the supervisors or the manager of the service.
- D4.3** You must have a clear method of allocating cases/enquiries to advisers/caseworkers according to their abilities.
- D4.4** You must have a supervision system that is responsive to the skills of individual advisers.
- D4.5** If you deliver advice as part of a regulated service, you must ensure that you comply with relevant professional standards and professional development frameworks for supervision.



D4. Processes to ensure the delivery of quality work to clients.

The organisation represented by the Board of Trustees, the management committee or the senior management team holds responsibility for the delivery of quality work to clients and it is their duty to ensure processes are in place to maintain this. On a day to day basis, it is the role of supervision given by the supervisor which assures this process. The role of the supervisor is therefore crucial to the delivery of quality advice and they should provide appropriate guidance and management to specified workers to ensure and to promote this service. It is preferable that the supervisor is located within an organisation although where this is not possible, supervision through other organisations should be formally arranged (see E4).

The supervisor need not hold a formal legal qualification but will need to comply with the requirements given in D4.1 of the AQS Standard. 'Recent' experience is defined as the equivalent of two years in the last four. Where there is a continuous gap of more than 12 months, it will be necessary for the supervisor to demonstrate how they have brought their knowledge up-to-date.

The supervisor acts as a resource for supporting advisers. They do not need to have detailed knowledge of each area of work delivered by the service (given the diversity of work offered by generalist providers) but they must demonstrate basic knowledge and skills across the areas provided. You should ensure that procedures are in place for supervisors to access specialist guidance from outside your organisation where a case falls outside their areas of expertise. Effective networking with other advice organisations can assist you in identifying potential sources of external guidance and specialist support. The AQS Directory provides a useful resource to support you with this task.

Supervisors can both benefit from and contribute towards the continual development of staff and the organisation. They are most likely to pick up on the learning and development needs of staff as well as the key problems areas identified through client contact. Using this position to generate feedback and to share learning can demonstrate the organisations commitment to continual development (the third part of the AQS).

Supervisors need to maintain their own caseloads and/or to demonstrate an involvement in cases that are the responsibility of other advisers. Experience has shown that this continuing practical involvement is necessary for supervisors to sustain knowledge about best practice. Their involvement in other cases should be focused on cases where advisers need guidance.

Supervisors managing the delivery of the service by advisers need experience of supervising staff, unless they were previously working as a sole provider and were self-supervising. This experience may be supplemented by attendance on management and/or supervision courses and/or by mentoring from other individuals (possibly outside of the organisation).

Accessibility to a supervisor for caseworkers is key to making arrangements work. Occasions where the supervisor is not at work or when they are unavailable for long periods need to be catered for e.g when the supervisor works part-time, or has long meetings or is on extended leave of absence.

Where a supervisor leaves the organisation, you will need to demonstrate at the next AQS assessment that arrangements to appoint a suitably qualified replacement had been made as quickly as possible (either by way of recruitment or by training). In the interim, arrangements need to be made with a suitably skilled and experienced person to supervise caseworkers.



Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must ensure that staff and trustees possess or develop the skills and knowledge required to meet clients' needs.

Requirement	Purpose	Evidence
<p>D5. Client cases are dealt with by competent staff.</p>	<p>Work carried out by your service is delivered by staff who meet specified competencies. It is essential that the work be carried out by someone with the relevant competencies.</p>	<p>D5.1 You must identify the individual caseworkers undertaking casework in the service strategy and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate that at least one of the identified caseworkers spends at least 12 hours per week and any other identified caseworkers spend at least 6 hours per week each dealing with cases falling within the relevant casework category; and • Demonstrate that the caseworkers (either individually or together) have undertaken casework across the breadth and depth of subjects within the relevant casework category within the last calendar year and subsequently every 12 months. <p>D5.2 You must identify a casework supervisor who meets the required criteria. These are designed to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate previous experience in casework. • Demonstrate availability to supervise caseworkers. • Demonstrate continued involvement in on-going casework.
38		



D5. Client cases are dealt with by competent staff.

It is essential that the work carried out by your service is delivered by staff who meet specified competencies or are working towards competency and are appropriately supported and supervised. For most generalist advisers, this will have been demonstrated by meeting the previous requirements of the AQS.

The requirement here applies specifically to organisations undertaking case work (defined as taking action on a client's behalf including negotiation and advocacy). It is a key requirement of any client seeking a casework service that the advice they receive is correct and appropriate to their problem and circumstances. This is most likely to be achieved where caseworkers have a specified depth and breadth of experience and skills or competencies.

Organisations providing advice and casework will therefore need to demonstrate that their caseworkers are competent to undertake casework in the relevant categories of work. It is also important that within the casework categories, a minimum range of casework can be undertaken by the service. This improves access for clients and reduces the need for referrals.

- Casework is taking action on behalf of clients. This is likely to include negotiation and advocacy on the client's behalf to third parties by phone, letter or email, or face-to-face.
- Casework involves putting the client's case to a third party in order to move the case on, which often involves convincing them to make or to change a decision in the client's favour.
- Third parties may include central or local government departments, housing associations, private landlords, employers, people to whom the client owes money, tribunals and courts.
- Most cases will involve follow-up work, although occasionally it may take place within the interview.
- The service provider is likely to assume responsibility for further action.

Organisations providing a casework service (as defined by the requirements above) will usually concentrate on cases within a specific area of law (e.g. Housing casework). Where the service is established to support a particular client group they may concentrate on cases that relate to the types of problems for clients in that particular target group (e.g. Disability casework).

A certain amount of experience in a specified range of cases will be just one of the measures used by the AQS assessor to assess the competence of individual caseworkers. Supervisors will also need to have regard to the requirements set out in AQS Standard D2 that relate to training and development of individuals with regard to their casework skills. This provides a cross-reference to the requirement in AQS Standard B1 to provide a seamless service, as it is also clearly important that caseworkers understand the limits of their competence and provide signposting or make referrals wherever appropriate.

- Money Advice Service Accredited Training & Qualifications:
www.moneyadvice.org.uk/en/corporate/accredited-training-and-qualifications

For organisations providing debt advice, staff must be appraised against the Money Advice Service Quality Framework for Individuals. See <https://debtquality.org.uk/guidance-and-forms-for-organisation-quality-framework-requirement-2-6/> for details of requirements. See Appendix V for more information.



Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must have processes and procedures that ensure an effective and efficient service to their clients.

Requirement

E1. Client information and case files are well organised.

Purpose

In order to access information quickly and easily for the purposes of supervision and audit, it is important that records are managed and stored in an organised way.

Evidence

- E1.1 You must be able to provide access to client records for AQS assessment purposes.
- E1.2 You must have systems in place to locate the client's information records/case file and to trace all relevant documents.
- E1.3 Case files should be retained for a minimum period of six years.
- E1.4 You must have procedures in place to identify and deal with any conflict of interest in acting for a client.
- E1.5 You must operate a key dates and action items diary, where appropriate.
- E1.6 Your systems for storing case files and information records must be orderly, and progress on case files and information records should be clear to any other caseworker.
- E1.7 Case files and information records must include a clear written record of the advice the client has received.
- E1.8 You must have procedures in place to ensure clients know their right under the Freedom of Information Act to see all information held on them, and how they can obtain this.
- E1.9 You must ensure that clients provide consent for any information or data held on them and that this is recorded before it can be shared with any external parties, including external organisations or service providers and AQS Assessors

continued on page 42



E1. Client information and case files are well organised.

Case records may be kept manually or electronically but regardless of system, all case records must be held in a manner that allows swift identification of records and that ensures confidentiality. You should ensure that all advisers are made aware of your case recording policy. Keeping clear and orderly case records is important for a number of reasons:

- It ensures that the agency holds relevant information on clients, so that they do not need to keep repeating details of their case.
- Clients themselves often do not keep records so it allows them to access information they might need.
- To allow other advisers to easily understand progress on a case, if they need to undertake some work, or respond to an enquiry from the client, or deal with a third party.
- To provide evidence to back up a client's case where there is a dispute with a third party about facts, e.g. lost correspondence, previous discussions, dates etc.
- To be used as part of supervision with advisers, to discuss cases and to help to identify staff training and development needs.
- To demonstrate that organisational policies are being followed and that clients are getting a consistent service.
- As evidence where there has been a complaint against the service.
- To identify conflicts of interest.
- To be used for a local advice needs analysis including, for example, providing evidence and data for your local Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (England only).
www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-strategic-needs-assessment-and-joint-health-and-wellbeing-strategies-explained

For clarity of manual records, it is helpful to develop a standard form for case recording (electronic systems will have similar fields). Case records should include:

- Client details. We recommend that name and address are kept as a minimum, however even where the client does not wish these to be recorded, a case record should be kept.
- The date and the adviser who dealt with the enquiry. You may want to use codes to identify the type of contact, e.g. face-to-face interview/letter/email/phone call/home visit.
- Details of the enquiry and what the client would like to be done about the problem.
- Advice given and action taken, including signposting or referrals internally or to external organisations.
- Copies of relevant documents e.g. application forms, letters.
- Follow-up work agreed, who will do it and any key dates.
- Subsequent contacts with the client and third parties should all be recorded on the file in a similar format to the record of the first enquiry.
- Where one client has more than one enquiry this should be recorded as a separate enquiry.

Case notes should contain all the relevant information. The notes may refer to attached documents that contain relevant information, e.g. letters to the client.

You should consider what information and data requirements might be useful monitor your service strategy. You will need to decide how to incorporate monitoring requirements stipulated by your funders e.g. clients' ethnicity, gender, postcode or borough, time records.

Third parties such as the AQS Assessors will from time to time require access to client records. Clients need to be made aware that it is possible their file may be assessed and that they have the right to opt out from having their file included in this process.

You should have in place a Data Protection Policy and a procedure for obtaining consent from clients to share information for this purpose. Clients need to be made aware that they have the right to see any information you hold on them and to know what the process for doing this might be. Where files also hold information about third parties, you need to ensure that the

continued on page 42



Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must have processes and procedures that ensure an effective and efficient service to their clients.

Requirement

Purpose

Evidence

E1.10 You must have and operate a clear case closure policy to ensure that the number of cases open at any one time is manageable within the capacity of your organisation.

Guidance continued from page 41

identity of the third parties cannot be found through the information you share.

For AQS assessment purposes, client records will need to be accessed and this can be done by either direct access to filing cabinets or from file lists. The latter may be hand written or computerised but must contain the names or other means of identification of every client who is currently receiving or has received help within the past 12 months. It should be clear from the list whether the file is open or closed. Files can be selected from filing cabinets but it will be necessary to ensure that they are segregated into open/closed records and the year of service provision clearly distinguishable.



How information in the file is organised is up to the service provider, however regard must be given to the purpose of this guidance with the expectation that an AQS assessor should be able to follow a case history. Having set out how records and files should be maintained, you should ensure that this practice is adopted throughout the organisation. The processes for opening files/ records for clients are likely to vary, depending on the nature of different client problems. The AQS requirement is that all relevant information about a client can be found easily.

Procedures for identifying conflicts of interest should allow for identification to take place as early as possible. They should clearly describe how the process is undertaken and who is responsible for doing it. As a minimum your organisation should have written procedures to deal with the following:

- Acting for both sides in a dispute.
- The client's case involves a member of the organisation's staff or management committee/ Board of Trustees.
- The client is presenting a case that the adviser or another member of staff knows is based on false information.
- The client's case involves or potentially involves undertaking action against the organisation or a funder.

The decision as to what is a 'key date' and 'action item' within an organisation will depend on the services provided. As a minimum, these must include dates which, if missed, would prejudice the client and may lead to a negligence claim. Advisers within an organisation are expected to share a common understanding of 'key dates' and 'action items' and how they should be recorded. Key dates diaries should be kept on the organisation's premises. AQS Assessors will want evidence of who monitors the diary system (including when advisers are away) and at what interval. Case and enquiry records may be used to test effective operation of this standard.

Service providers determine the circumstances in which it is necessary for a client to receive written information. However it is often considered as good practice to ensure that clients have copies of key documents such as court submissions. Clients should be given the opportunity to correct information about themselves which is held by the organisation. Written information to clients should be on a 'durable medium', which is defined by Consumer Contracts Regulation 2013 as 'paper or email, or any other medium that:

- allows information to be addressed personally to the recipient;
- enables the recipient to store the information in a way accessible for future reference for a period that is long enough for the purposes of the information; and
- allows the unchanged reproduction of the information stored'.

Where letters or emails have not been sent to the client, there must be some other way of substantiating the information that the client has been given, e.g. links to websites or copies of leaflets provided.

It is important that you have a clear policy and procedures covering case closure, archive and file destruction, and that it is acted on systematically. This should cover hard copies and electronic files, and comply with statutory requirements. You must provide evidence of how you implement this policy as part of the AQS assessment.

Resources

- Guidance on developing a Data Protection policy – NCVO: www.knowhownonprofit.org/people/employment-law-and-hr/policies-and-templates/dataprotection
- File Closure Management Guidance – The Law Society: www.lawsociety.org.uk/support-services/advice/practice-notes/file-closure-management



Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must have processes and procedures that ensure an effective and efficient service to their clients.

Requirement

E2. Independent review of quality of work and follow-up where needed.

Purpose

An independent and objective review enables organisations to test the quality of their advice and procedures and to identify both strengths and weaknesses.

Evidence

- E2.1 You must ensure that samples of work are independently reviewed to ensure the quality of advice provided and adherence to service procedures. The number of cases that should be reviewed and the frequency of case reviews should be set according to each adviser's skills and experience, and the volume and complexity of work.
- E2.2 A record of the review should be retained on the case file and stored centrally.
- E2.3 You must have systems in place to ensure that any corrective action required as a result of file reviews has been undertaken.
- E2.4 Reviews should be undertaken by supervisors or delegated to another experienced person within the organisation or, where appropriate, externally.



E2. Independent review of quality of work and follow-up where needed.

You should have in place an effective system to review a sample of work undertaken on behalf of clients. The case review is an independent check of a random sample of each adviser's work. It should focus on establishing whether your processes have been followed by the adviser and if there are any problems in the way that the case is being handled. In determining this, the reviewer should have best practice in mind in relation to the area of work. As a quality control sample, it can identify areas where the quality of advice, and compliance with your organisational procedures need to improve.

The frequency with which case reviews need to be undertaken and the number of files looked at will be influenced by a number of factors, including the experience and skills of individual advisers, the number of clients they see, and the outcomes of previous reviews. There is not a fixed requirement as to the number of files reviewed; it will vary with each organisation and the individuals within the organisation, and it depends on the other checks the organisation has on advisers' work (such as checks built into supervision, training and peer support). It is probably easier to specify a rate e.g. three per worker every two months, or it could be specified as a percentage. You will need to select a process that works for your organisation having taken these factors into account. The number and frequency can be changed as the process evolves. AQS Assessors will want to understand how the decisions were arrived at and if they are not satisfied, they may seek corrective action to increase the number or frequency of reviews.

Case file reviews do not have to be conducted by the supervisor. They should, however, be undertaken by a person who is able to recognise best practice and has an understanding of how that applies to the area of work. When supervisors delegate this task to someone else, there needs to be feedback to the supervisor so that they are fully informed of the performance of their workers. Outcomes of case reviews should be included within performance appraisals, or feedback given to individuals as soon as possible when it becomes available.

Records of case reviews need to be collected centrally.

Resources:

- AQS Pilot Peer Review Scheme: available from April 2017
- MAS Peer Review Scheme



framework

Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must have processes and procedures that ensure an effective and efficient service to their clients.

Requirement	Purpose	Evidence
<p>E3. Feedback process for service and performance reviews.</p>	<p>In order to continually improve the service to clients, regular feedback to individuals is essential.</p>	<p>E3.1 Results of independent reviews are fed back to the Management Committee or Board of Trustees.</p> <p>E3.2 Results of independent reviews of samples of work are fed back to the individual by the supervisor.</p> <p>E3.3 A summary of information from reviews is used in giving feedback to individuals within their appraisal. If an individual's performance is found consistently to fall below the standards set by the organisation, remedial action should be taken and recorded.</p> <p>E3.4 You must undertake a review of the central record of independent file reviews at least annually to identify any potential organisational improvements.</p>
<p>E4. All advisers must have access to appropriate support and supervision</p>	<p>Supervisors and/or managers play a key role in assuring service quality and promoting best practice on a daily basis.</p>	<p>E4.1 You must have in place a system of supervision available to all advisers and caseworkers</p> <p>E4.2 All staff must be aware of the arrangements for supervision and how to access this</p> <p>E4.3 All staff must record on case file when supervision has been sought and the outcome of any discussions</p>
<p>46</p>		

Running the service





E3. Feedback process for service and performance reviews.

A summary of feedback from reviews should be used to give feedback to individuals within their appraisal. Where an individual performance is found to consistently fall below the standard set by the organisation remedial action should be taken and recorded.

You may also consider your approach to meeting this requirement in relation to the provisions in AQS Area G4 (Client involvement in development of services). Any client feedback in relation to a particular member of staff or team could be feed into service reviews and appraisals. Likewise processes for service reviews which involve clients (such as client focus groups, client surveys, and the use of consumer panels etc.) could equally shed light on the organisations achievements.

Resources

- Customer Feedback Form – Age UK East London
- Sample Client Feedback Questionnaire – Advice Services Alliance

E4. All advisers must have access to appropriate support and supervision

Supervision is one of the most important assurance mechanisms for delivering quality advice. Good supervision is both instructive and supportive and contributes to the advisers' development on a daily basis. It is the key mechanism for preventing errors that are detrimental to the client and as it is preventive is far more effective and less resource intensive than identifying mistakes post hoc file.

All staff who are giving advice must have access to the resources they need to undertake the role including reference materials and advice from others with an overview on cases. Staff need to feel that they can discuss a case with someone else without judgement and that this person will help support them to make the correct decision about the advice to be given.

In most cases, this supervision will be delivered by someone within the organisation, but in some cases, external supervision will be necessary (for example on specialist areas of law or where no one with the right skills and experience exists within an organisation). All advisers need to be clear about how supervision is provided in the organisation. If an adviser is self-supervising, the organisation will need to provide a strong justification for this decision and the onus is on the organisation to demonstrate why it is appropriate in these circumstances.



framework

Clients using a service that holds the Advice Quality Standard are entitled to receive advice and information relevant to their needs.

Requirement

F1. Clients receive information and independent advice relevant to their needs.

Purpose

How individual clients choose to resolve legal or social welfare problems will often depend not only on the problem, but also on the client's particular circumstances and experiences. An option suitable for one person will not necessarily suit another and this needs to be considered when giving information and advice.

Evidence

- F1.1 You must have processes in place that ensure clients receive independent advice.
- F1.2 Your records must show the client's needs, all advice given, and actions to be taken and by whom. In all appropriate circumstances, client authorisation must be clearly given and recorded.
- F1.3 Your clients should be informed when the advice includes action that your organisation may not be able to undertake, and they should be given the reason (e.g. organisational competence and policies of funders). When the reasons involve conflict with the policies of funders or with statutory duties, the organisation will need to demonstrate that the advice given was independent
- F1.4 Your clients should be informed of and consulted about any potential costs from any opposing party they may become liable for as a result of any action the organisation undertakes on their behalf, before any costs are incurred.
- F1.5 Where action cannot be taken immediately, e.g. when a client is awaiting a decision regarding an appeal, systems should be in place to ensure action is taken in the future. The procedures must address potential time restrictions, limitations or deadlines.
- F1.6 Your systems must ensure that clients are kept informed about the progress of a case and, in particular, any change in plans for future action.



F1. Clients receive information and independent advice relevant to their needs.

The concept of the Advice Quality Standard is to ensure that clients are able to access legal services based on their identified needs and priorities. The requirements in this section aim to ensure that the client receives the help that they need in a way that is clearly understandable to them. Procedures that assist to deliver services need not be complex but all advisers will need to share a common understanding of how they work in practice.

Any progress made should be recorded on the case file/enquiry record and clients kept informed of actions taken on their behalf.

Clients should be provided with an authorisation to act form or a written consent form in circumstances in which the organisation acts on the clients' behalf.

Service standards document should provide all the information a client will need to know about how their case will be managed and how they will be treated. It can also include what your organisation expects of them (including their behaviour). This could take the form of a leaflet, letter, verbal brief or Client Charter.

When future casework actions are planned, including deadlines, the client should be informed of these and who is responsible for them. Such deadlines may well sit under the 'diary system' as required under AQS Area E1.4.

Resources

- Example Customer Care Charter:
www.ageuk.org.uk/brandpartnerglobal/hillingdonvpp/documents/complaints%20and%20care%20charter/aikh%20customer%20care%20charter.pdf



framework

Clients using a service that holds the Advice Quality Standard are entitled to receive advice and information relevant to their needs.

Requirement	Purpose	Evidence
<p>F2. Client charges are transparent and explained at the outset.</p>	<p>Where a charge is involved, this must be pointed out at the outset, before any costs are incurred, to enable the client to go elsewhere if necessary.</p>	<p>F1.7 Your clients should be informed of the outcome of their enquiry as soon as it is known, and when this is done it should be noted on their file.</p> <p>F1.8 You must have procedures to identify when information must be confirmed to clients in writing. As a minimum, your clients should receive a clear written record of advice where an organisation is taking legal proceedings on behalf of the client before these have commenced.</p> <p>F1.9 You should inform clients of what they can expect of the service and this should be set out in a service standards document.</p> <hr/> <p>F2.1 When a service is chargeable, clear information about the cost and pricing structure must be given to the client in writing at the start of the case and before costs are incurred.</p> <p>F2.2 If a charge is made for a service, you must ensure that your clients receive an explanation of the charges and are told where they may be able to get the service free.</p> <p>F2.3 When clients have to bear or contribute towards the cost of advice, and they agree to those charges, you must ensure that they are given clear cost updates in writing whenever there is a change from the last estimate, and at least every six months.</p>
50		

Meeting clients' needs





F2. Client charges are transparent and explained at the outset

Many general advice service providers do not pass any of the costs of meeting client's needs to the client. Where this is the case this principle should be publicised in your Client Charter/ equivalent. They will not need to inform the client of the cost of any of the action.

When the client intends to take legal action or defend themselves in legal proceedings, they need to be informed that there is a possibility that they may have to contribute towards the costs of the other side, before any costs are incurred. Where the client is asked to meet some of the costs of the action, information about the potential costs must be given at the start of the matter, or as soon as it becomes apparent if the case circumstances change. It is accepted that at the beginning of a case this information may best be given by supplying a range of figures that the cost of the case is anticipated to fall between. As more information is becomes known, this range of costs should then be tailored to the situation of the client.

Where your service is providing advice and client support by telephone you should ensure that clients are informed when premium rates apply. Information about the cost per minute and, where possible, the likely length of the call must be given at the beginning of the call and be displayed prominently on any publicity material and given clearly on audio promotional material. Clients must also be informed where the service is available elsewhere from a service that does not use premium rates.

Resources

- Phonepay Plus Code of Practice: www.phonepayplus.org.uk/for-business/code-of-practice/archived-13th-code-of-practice



framework

Clients using a service that holds the Advice Quality Standard are entitled to receive advice and information relevant to their needs.

Requirement	Purpose	Evidence
<p>F3. Clients are entitled to confidentiality, privacy and fair treatment.</p>	<p>To maintain the confidence of clients, it is essential that services be provided in a private, confidential and fair manner.</p>	<p>F3.1 You must ensure that client information is treated confidentially. When client information needs to be given to a third party, client consent must first be given.</p> <p>F3.2 You must have arrangements in place to ensure privacy in meeting or contact with clients where required. This must cover face-to-face meetings, telephone contact, Skype and webchat facilities.</p>
<p>52</p>		

Meeting clients' needs





F3. Clients are entitled to confidentiality, privacy and fair treatment.

The principle of confidentiality is essential to building and maintaining trust between your service and your clients. However, it has several elements to it including legal requirements, local data sharing agreements as well as good client care and will depend on the specific nature of your service. Confidentiality should be carefully thought through based on your service and made clear to staff and to clients.

You should develop written policies and procedures for ensuring that client information is treated in a confidential manner. Your policies should make reference to the Data Protection Act and any data sharing codes of practice or protocols that you have in place. (see also AQS Area C3)

There are exceptional and specific situation where you may have to breach confidentiality e.g. child abuse, the prevention of harm, acts of terrorism. You need a clear policy on dealing with such breaches and clients should be informed of the policy.

On a more practical level, clients should be given access advice and guidance in circumstances that provide for privacy. This should govern all methods of consultation including face-to-face meetings, telephone calls, skype calls and webchat. Where your service is providing advice and client support by telephone you should consider the implications for client confidentiality, for example:

- Callers' numbers must not be identified when the service is provided on an anonymous basis.
- The service must obtain agreement for returning clients' calls.
- The service must consider blocking its number in outgoing calls; when it does not block the outgoing number, they will need to provide reasons why not.
- Clients must be asked for their consent when you want to listen in or to record conversations for the purposes of supervision, training or quality assurance purposes, so that they can opt out of the process or choose whether or not to continue with the call.
- Telephone services need to have systems to ensure that confidential information held on client records is only discussed after establishing the identity of the caller and where you are satisfied that you have the correct permission to discuss a case with the caller.
- The service must be provided in confidential surroundings as far as possible. This also applies to retrieving messages from an answerphone or engaging clients using Skype and webchat.

Resources

- Client Confidentiality and Data Protection Policy – Gateshead Carers: www.gatesheadcarers.com/confidentiality-policy
- Data Protection Policy – Gloucestershire Rural Communities Charity: www.grcc.org.uk/resources/templates-1
- Safeguarding Policy Template – Gloucestershire Rural Communities Charity: www.grcc.org.uk/resources/templates-1



framework

Clients using a service that holds the Advice Quality Standard are entitled to receive advice and information relevant to their needs.

Requirement	Purpose	Evidence
<p>F4. Quality is maintained where part of the service is delivered by an external provider.</p>	<p>Services provided by others are part of the overall service provided to the client. It is, therefore, important that the quality of that service is monitored.</p>	<p>F4.1 Where part of the advice/case is done by an external provider, you must ensure that they are selected using objective criteria. Your clients must be advised at the outset and before any costs are incurred if they are going to be charged for this service.</p> <p>F4.2 Your clients must know who will be doing the work and have a say in who that is, if possible.</p> <p>F4.3 You must ensure that any service provided externally is monitored and recorded.</p>

Meeting clients' needs





F4. Quality is maintained where part of the service is delivered by an external provider.

This section applies to situations in which your organisation needs to use a third party to undertake work on behalf with and for the client, whilst maintaining responsibility for the case. The use of each external provider should be recorded on the case file.

Priority for referral should be made to holders of the Advice Quality Standard where possible.

You may wish to consider compiling a list of service providers who can meet your client group's requirements, particularly where the provider is not a holder of the Advice Quality Standard.

When a service provider needs to refer to an external provider without the AQS, they should be appointed on the basis of transparent selection criteria. This could include:

- Client centred approach
- Timeliness of service
- Relevant expertise
- Experience of previous clients
- Value for money (if there is a charge)
- Quality standards and/or regulatory memberships.

Where possible, external providers should be asked to sign an agreement to uphold the organisation's service standards as set out in its Client Charter, Confidentiality Policy etc.



All holders of the Advice Quality Standard are committed to the continuous improvement of the quality of their service.

Requirement

G1. There is a clear complaints process in operation.

Purpose

If a person is unhappy with the service they received they may want to complain, formally or informally. They might tell you directly, ask to see someone more senior or they may want to write. Complaints are important as they tell you how well the service meets people's expectations, and can provide information to help you to improve the service.

Evidence

- G1.1 You must have a clear procedure or policy in place for identifying and dealing with complaints, which addresses the stages, timelines, who should be involved and potential outcomes, who to complain to, who has overall responsibility for the complaints process, and how complaints may be escalated. This must be clearly communicated to clients and other stakeholders.
- G1.2 You must keep a central record of complaints made and how they were resolved. This must be reviewed on a regular basis to support staff training and development.
- G1.3 You must inform your governing body of the number and nature of complaints received and their outcomes, on a regular basis.



G1. There is a clear complaints process in operation.

When clients are unhappy with any aspect of your services they should feel supported by a complaints process that provides for the effective handling of all complaints. It is essential that the service identifies complaints quickly and everyone knows the process for dealing with them. The complaints policy should provide for the fact that some clients will not want to make formal complaints but may nevertheless have serious or important issues to be acknowledged and acted on by your organisation.

Improving the quality of service should take into account the expressed opinions of clients.

AQS Assessors will look for evidence that all complaints received are handled effectively and particularly where no complaints have been received, staff understand the complaints policy.

Critical to this process is showing an understanding the different ways complaints are made and who complaints should be referred to.

You will need to demonstrate that analyses of complaints received are fed into your service and performance review process, and are used to inform staff supervision, training and professional development.

Give guidance about what the complaints process should contain including, timelines, stages, who should be involved etc. which is variable according to the size and capacity of the organisations.

Resources

- A Guide to Good Complaints Handling – Legal Ombudsman: www.legalombudsman.org.uk/?portfolio=listen-inform-respond-a-guide-to-good-complaint-handling
- Sample Complaints Procedure – The Law Society
www.lawsociety.org.uk/support-services/advice/practice-notes/handling-complaints

G



framework

All holders of the Advice Quality Standard are committed to the continuous improvement of the quality of their service.

Requirement

G2. Providers have a clear commitment to quality services and to regular reviews of performance.

Purpose

Quality services need to be maintained and this is best done by appointing someone to be responsible for all quality systems. This person will make sure that changes are made where necessary and that everyone in the organisation is kept informed.

Evidence

- G2.1 You must be able to demonstrate a commitment to quality by appointing a named individual to oversee your quality processes and be the lead person responsible for the AQS.
- G2.2 All quality processes must be reviewed regularly and on an annual basis as a minimum.
- G2.3 You must have a system in place for updating your quality processes and procedures and the date that they came into effect
- G2.4 You must ensure that your staff have access to up-to-date copies of your quality processes.

G3. There is a facility for clients to participate in the development of services.

Regular feedback from clients will enable service standards to be developed and improved. Effective monitoring and evaluation is used to support service review and improvement.

- G3.1 You must have procedures in place for obtaining feedback from clients.
- G3.2 Client feedback and outcomes must be analysed annually to identify trends.
- G3.3 You must review your performance and strategy in the light of the results of the analysis of feedback and complaints.

Commitment to quality



G2. Providers have a clear commitment to quality services and to regular reviews of performance.

Quality services are built on a combination of systems and processes (to guide and support staff in their advice work), good supervision, regular checks that the systems are fit for purpose and are delivering the quality of advice expected. Whilst quality should underpin the practice of all staff, every organisation must have a named person who takes the lead role for quality.

The nominated quality/AQS lead should be familiar with the quality processes and understand the nature of the work carried out by the organisation. They will need to have sufficient authority within the organisation to ensure that any corrective action that may be necessary is implemented.

The areas for improvement recommended by the AQS Assessor will support the annual review of quality processes.

The Quality/AQS lead should act as the point of communication between the organisation and the body overseeing the award of the Advice Quality Standard.

Copies of your quality processes may be kept in a Quality Manual.

G3. There is a facility for clients to participate in the development of services.

A strong commitment to genuine consultation and the objective appraisal of services underpins best practice across every sector. Independent research has shown that curious practitioners who engage in critical analysis and evaluation of their work are more effective in delivering outcomes than those who don't. Further, services which actively involve their communities attract wider public support. This is the 'prima facie' case for gaining knowledge and insight into the difference your service makes to your clients through a variety of means.

Obtaining regular, meaningful feedback from clients should form a core component of your organisation's commitment to continuous improvement. Increasingly funders are looking for measurement of client outcomes and co-production of services both of which have their place in client focussed services. Such feedback can also support the development of your business plan (See A1.2).

The quality of advice provided by a service has moved beyond a simple measure of accuracy and could include the responsiveness of the service to client need/situation, the effectiveness of the delivery, the timeliness of the advice, the degree to which the client is able to act on the advice provided and enabling access to social justice. Your approach to assessing your service will need to reflect your organisations objectives and the resources available and should focus on the following linked elements:

- Accuracy and appropriateness of the advice given to a client (through independent file reviews and peer reviews)

continued overleaf



All holders of the Advice Quality Standard are committed to the continuous improvement of the quality of their service.

- Effectiveness and efficiency of the delivery (through client satisfaction, monitoring waiting times, caseloads etc.)
- Extent the service meets the organisational and/or funding objectives (including client outcome measures, degree to which clients act on advice provided, reaching the target communities etc.)

Your approach should not be restricted to measuring client satisfaction, such as the helpfulness and approachability of advice workers or the receipt of understandable information, but should strive to follow-up on client outcomes. Putting in place appropriate systems to capture client outcomes will not only support you in reviewing and improving your service but will also help you demonstrate the impact of your service to clients, funders, commissioners and the general public. You should consider the definition of positive client outcomes and consider using these outcomes to evaluate the effectiveness of your service in meeting clients' needs.

The approach you take is likely to be influenced by the size of the service, resources available and the profile of your clients and should be proportionate. Client and case management systems can be designed to support the production of monitoring and evaluation data and many IT based systems will easily do this. As a minimum the AQS Assessors will be looking for evidence of the following:

- A robust system in place for obtaining client feedback which is then analysed at least annually
- Key outcomes for your clients and how you would measure these
- The difference the service has made to individual clients (case studies)
- How client feedback, monitoring and outcome data are used to review and improve the service
- How results are feedback to clients and other key stakeholders

There are a range of toolkits and resources readily available that can assist you in putting in place your approach to obtaining feedback from clients and for measuring client outcomes. In addition, many funders and key stakeholders encourage and support the evaluation of services and provide guidance on how to do this.

Resources

- Debt Advice Evaluation Toolkit – Money Advice Service:
www.fincap.org.uk/common_evaluation_toolkit
- Evaluation Guides and Tools – Age UK:
www.ageuk.org.uk/professional-resources-home/research/evaluation-guides--tools/
- How to Measure Client Outcomes – Advice Services Alliance:
asauk.org.uk/archive/working-together-for-advice/how-to-measure-client-outcomes/
- Monitoring and Evaluation Guidance – Charities Evaluation Service:
www.ces-vol.org.uk/about-performance-improvement/about-monitoring-evaluation.html

4

AQS Quality Framework Standards and Supplements

4.2 Telephone Standard Supplement

The following guidance is aimed at organisations offering advice via telephone. The AQS requirement often assumes face to face contact with clients and this additional guidance suggests how the requirements may be applied to a telephone service with no face to face contact. It is essential that this guidance is read in conjunction with the full Advice Quality Standard, as it is additional (not alternative) to the full Advice Quality Standard requirements.

A



The aims of the Advice Quality Standard are 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.

telephone

Requirement

A1 The service should be appropriate to the needs of the local/target community

Evidence

A1.2 To make the standard more appropriate to a telephone service, the service plan should include details of:

- A call-handling system;
- Any backup system for information and communications technology (ICT) failure;
- The structure of the call centre or organisation; this can be provided in a family tree;
- Arrangements to ensure equality of access for the target group, including people who are deaf or hard of hearing or whose first language is not English, and consideration of evening and weekend opening.

Access to service

A2 The community should be made aware of the service that is being offered

A2.1 Information about the service should be given to relevant national and local services. An answerphone message, if there is one, should include further information about the service for people who call out of hours.

A2.2 Following certification, the Advice Quality Standard logo should be displayed, where possible.



Access arrangements to telephone services may be less obvious to clients than for a face-to-face service, so it is appropriate to know how a telephone service is structured to facilitate access.

There are other access issues that are relevant to telephone services, e.g. are there text-messaging facilities for people who are deaf or hard of hearing? Is there an interpretation service for people whose first language is not English? Providers should show that they are aware of the needs of their client group and consider what provisions are necessary according to these needs. For example, textphones and/or TYPETALK may be appropriate. It may be appropriate to recruit staff with particular language skills where the service is provided for communities in which languages other than English are commonly spoken, or subscribe to a service such as Language Line.

Advisers should be given training so they are aware of the expectations of them where communication is difficult. Where the organisation is unable to provide a service to people because of communication difficulties, they must be actively signposted to another service.

Where there is no suitable alternative service, records must be kept and made available to the audit body on reasonable request. The organisation's postal address should be included on stationery and on publicity material. The call-handling system should explain the initial and ongoing access arrangements for the client.

You may wish to consider the following points: Is there an answerphone message? Is there any out-of-hours information? Can a client leave a message and will they be called back? Is there an automated response? The details of the call-handling system will depend upon issues such as the size of the organisation, the number of advisers providing the service, the client group, and the telephone and/or computer technology used by the service. For a small organisation, there may be only one telephone line and answerphone.

The standard does not require complicated systems and expensive technology. However the service is structured, it is important that the system for accessing the service and dealing with calls is clear to clients and to workers.

Details of any backup system for ICT failure could include maintenance agreements with reasonable callout times for telephone or computer systems, and paper-based information and record-keeping systems for times when computer-based systems are unavailable.

Organisations will not be expected to demonstrate that they are providing the same volume or type of service in the event of ICT failure, but they must show that they have contingency plans.

A2.1 Organisations that hold the Advice Quality Standard will find out about the service through the list of holders. However there are other types of organisation that provide services to people, which may wish to refer their clients for legal advice, e.g. statutory providers such as health services or social services, or other not-for-profit organisations such as those which provide housing, day centres or counselling.

A2.2 It is not possible to "display" a logo over the telephone, but you are expected to use the logo on any stationery and publicity material. A welcome or answerphone message could contain the information that you hold the Advice Quality Standard. This may help the client feel confident about using your service. However, we recognise that answerphones may already contain a lot of information for the client to take in, and there may be a limit to the length of message; therefore this is not compulsory.



B telephone



Where a holder of the Advice Quality Standard cannot provide the particular service needed by the client, they must inform the client and direct them to an alternative service provider, where available.

Requirement	Evidence
<p>B1 Clients should receive timely service from an appropriate source either by active signposting or referral</p>	<p>B1.8 Telephone services should discuss with clients the cost implications of actively signposting or referring them to other services, and give confirmation of costs in writing. Services should demonstrate that they assess whether a face-to-face service may be more appropriate for clients</p>

Seamless service





B guidance

B1.8 It is probably rare for a telephone service to take responsibility for contacting the other service on behalf of a client, i.e. a making referral, but where this happens, clients must have the cost implications confirmed in writing. This includes cases where the referral is to a premium rate service.

To demonstrate that an assessment is made of whether a client needs face-to-face advice, a requirement for such an assessment could be included in the organisation's active signposting and referrals policy; it should be ensured that all advisers are aware of this requirement.



C



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

telephone

Requirement	Evidence
<p>C2 Legal service providers ensure availability of resources to provide the service when and where needed</p>	<p>C2.1 The call-handling system must be monitored and considered in the review of service.</p>

Running the organisation





C2.1 You will see from the guidance for requirement A1 that telephone services should include the way they handle calls in their initial service plan. Services will need to monitor the effectiveness of this call-handling system, as the demand for the service is not so immediately apparent as for face-to-face services where there may be long queues in a waiting room.

Where a service is provided by telephone, it may not be apparent how many people are having difficulties getting through or are unable to access the service at all. Where the technology is available, information collected could include the number of calls received, handled or lost. For other services, this information could be collected on a periodic basis by including questions in the user satisfaction questionnaire asking how easy or difficult it was to make telephone contact.

The review of service required by C2 should include the results of any such call monitoring. This may result, for example, in a restructuring of opening hours, or a change in the use of telephone technology such as answerphones.

D



Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must ensure that staff and trustees possess or develop the skills and knowledge required to meet clients' needs.

telephone

Requirement

D2 Training and development are provided for all staff who work within the service

Evidence

D2.3 Services must show how individual training and development plans have addressed telephone advice skills.

D4 Procedures to ensure clients get advice from the most appropriate source taking account of the knowledge and skills of staff

D4.1 The accessibility of a supervisor is particularly relevant to telephone services.

People management

D2.3 Different skills are needed to elicit information and give help over the telephone than when working face to face. Training should be appropriate for the needs of the organisation. Some of the issues that training could cover include:

- Communicating on the telephone, including listening and responding;
- Understanding the nature of dealing with enquiries on the telephone;
- Beginning and ending calls;
- Structuring a telephone interview;
- Handling difficult calls, such as silent calls, distressed callers or abusive calls;
- Considering issues relating to the organisation's policies such as the call-handling system, confidentiality, signposting and referrals, complaints and user feedback, and use of information resources;
- Supervising other staff (for supervisors):
- Training may be provided internally or externally.

D4.1 Availability of supervision at all times that advice (and casework, if applicable) is undertaken is a key requirement of the Advice Quality Standard at the Advice level and above.

Regular supervision meetings should be held as appropriate to the experience of the adviser. If the supervisor is not physically present, they must be contactable, e.g. by telephone. If the supervisor is not based at the same site as the adviser/caseworker, formal contact should be made weekly with each adviser.

This may include the monitoring of calls and/or records of calls, or discussion of the work the adviser has undertaken. There must be a face-to-face supervision meeting at least monthly. Supervisors should demonstrate how they undertake supervisory tasks such as becoming familiar with advisers' capabilities and ensuring the advisers do not take on work beyond their capacity.

It is important that supervisors are aware of the practical difficulties of providing support when the adviser is at a different location from the supervisor. Supervisors should ensure that advisers feel able to contact them. This should be raised as a point of concern in supervision where advisers are not making contact regularly.

A deputy, ideally with the same knowledge and experience of the advice subject, should be appointed for any period that the supervisor is absent or not contactable, e.g. due to a holiday or when working different hours to the adviser. This is particularly relevant when a telephone service operates for 24 hours. If the deputy does not have equivalent knowledge and experience to the supervisor, this must be reflected in the level of service that is offered during the supervisor's unavailability. As a minimum, the deputy should have at least two years' ongoing experience of the advice (and casework, if applicable) that the organisation offers.

For longer absences, e.g. holidays and sickness, the use of a deputy should not exceed four weeks, nor be a continually repeated occurrence. Following a period of absence, the casework supervisor should demonstrate that they have received feedback from the deputy and that they have undertaken a review of advisers' casework.

Where the casework supervisor is part time, formal contact must be made at least once a week between the casework supervisor and any advisers undertaking casework, including the checking of cases. The casework supervisor will need to demonstrate they have received feedback from the deputy in the above situations.

Effective supervision arrangements are particularly important in the case of a virtual call centre,



D



Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must ensure that staff and trustees possess or develop the skills and knowledge required to meet clients' needs.

telephone

Requirement	Evidence
<p>D5. Cases are dealt with by competent staff</p>	<p>D4.3 The system of allocating work to advisers must include procedures to avoid burn-out.</p> <p>D5.1 and D5.2 These requirements apply in full to those organisations providing a casework service by telephone.</p>

People management





i.e. where advisers are based at many different sites linked by a common telephone system, giving the appearance to the client of being at one site. Auditors will seek evidence to ensure that advisers and caseworkers have access to the knowledge, experience and support of a supervisor or suitable deputy at all times.

D4.3 Supervisors need to ensure that there is sufficient time between calls for completing necessary paperwork, particularly a record of advice. Advice records should be completed as soon as possible after the call to ensure that they are accurate. Advisers should complete records at the end of a shift as a minimum, and must demonstrate how they recall details of the enquiry if there is a time lapse between taking the call and writing up.

Systems to avoid burn-out should be developed ('Burn-out' is defined as "physical or emotional exhaustion, especially caused by stress" in the Oxford Reference Dictionary). The culture of an organisation is important in allowing advisers control over taking a break and asking for support where they have had a particularly long or difficult call. Staffing levels and opening hours should be considered accordingly (e.g. having more than one adviser able to take calls at any time, and managing the length of shifts).

Organisations should also be aware of health and safety requirements, e.g. those relating to workspace and VDUs etc.

D5 Casework over the telephone is being undertaken by some services and is likely to increase into the future. In addition to the requirements of D5, services will need to consider how they obtain authorisation from clients to act on their behalf. For example, telephone technology allows three-way calls, so the adviser can negotiate with a third party and involve the client in the telephone call.



Holders of the Advice Quality Standard must have processes and procedures that ensure an effective and efficient service to their clients.

telephone

Requirement

E1 Client information and case files are well organised

Evidence

E1.6 Supervisors should give advisers time in between calls to allow records to be maintained.

Running the service





E1.6 Organisations must record information and advice given on client records. Supervisors should give advisers time in between calls to allow records to be kept. Record keeping is vital for telephone services. The advice given is more likely to rely upon a client's description or interpretation of their situation (e.g. a determination letter from the Benefits Agency, a stamp in a passport) rather than the adviser being able to see supporting documents for confirmation. For this reason, notes may need to be more comprehensive than for face-to-face advice where this supporting information is easily available and kept on file.



Clients using a service that holds the Advice Quality Standard are entitled to receive advice and information relevant to their needs.

telephone

Requirement

F2.3 Costing structures must be transparent and explained at the outset

Evidence

F2.3 Services should inform clients where premium rates apply. Information about the cost per minute and, where possible, the likely length of the call must be given at the beginning of the call and be displayed prominently on any publicity material and given clearly on audio promotional material. Clients must also be informed where the service is available elsewhere from a service that does not use premium rates. Premium services must also comply with the Phonepay Plus Code of Practice.

F3 Clients are entitled to confidentiality, privacy and fair treatment

F3.2 The effects of telephone technology on confidentiality need to be considered, for example:

- Callers' numbers must not be identified where the service is provided on an anonymous basis.
- The service must obtain agreement for returning clients' calls.
- The service must consider blocking its number in outgoing calls; where it does not block the outgoing number, they will need to provide reasons why not.
- Clients must be made aware when there is the possibility of "listening in" or the recording of conversations for the purposes of supervision or training, so that they can opt out of the process or choose whether or not to continue with the call.

Telephone services need to have systems to ensure that confidential information held on client records is only discussed after establishing the identity of the caller. The service must be provided in confidential surroundings. This also applies to retrieving messages from an answerphone.

Meeting clients' needs



F2.3 Further details of the Phonepay Plus Code of Practice are available on their website (www.phonepayplus.org.uk).

F3.2 If the service has a mechanism for identifying callers' numbers, providers will need to demonstrate that it is only revealed to advisers on a "need to know" basis. Where the number is used to link the call to client's records on a computer database, advisers should ensure they have established the caller's identity before revealing any information. For the purposes of monitoring where calls are coming from, only the first part of the telephone number needs to be identified. Where the caller does not wish to give their name, services may wish to consider giving callers a reference number so that their records can be accessed if they call again.

A common sense view should be taken regarding obtaining a client's agreement before returning a call. For example, where a client has left a number on an answerphone or included it in a letter requesting information, this will be taken as agreement for the call to be returned. Once advisers have checked that they can call clients, this permission will be considered to be ongoing unless the client states otherwise. Organisations should also check with clients as to whether they can reveal who they are to anyone else who answers the telephone when calling a client, and whether they can leave a message on the client's answerphone. Many clients use telephone services for their anonymity.

It is good practice for the service to block its own number in outgoing calls, particularly where the provider is dealing with sensitive issues and/or vulnerable client groups. The reason for this is to prevent other people discovering that the provider has called the client. Some services use "listening in" or the recording of conversations for supervision or training purposes. To make clients aware when this is a possibility an automated message could be used.

It is important to recognise that callers may not always be able to discuss their enquiry fully because of their situation, and it may be more appropriate for them to call back or for the service to return their call at a different time. The organisation must ensure that calls cannot be overheard by members of the public or other visitors, without the client's consent.



G



All holders of the Advice Quality Standard are committed to the continuous improvement of the quality of their service.

telephone

Requirement	Evidence
<p>G1 A clear complaints process in operation</p>	<p>G1.1 Complaints information should be given on client care letters and relevant publicity materials and leaflets.</p>
<p>G3 There is a facility for clients to participate in the development of the service provided</p>	<p>G3.3 The requirements for feedback are applicable to telephone services.</p>

Commitment to quality





G guidance

G1.1 During telephone conversations, it is sufficient to tell clients about the organisation's complaints procedure only if they are clearly unhappy with the service, rather than during every call. It is important, therefore, to have a clear definition of a complaint and to give training to staff so that they know when to give details of the complaints procedure. Details of the complaints procedure should be given on client care letters as well as relevant publicity materials and leaflets.

Because of their nature, telephone services may not always have names and addresses of clients. However, feedback may be given at the end of a call, either by the adviser asking a number of questions, or, for more impartial feedback, by passing the caller on to a supervisor or researcher. For organisations with the technology, an automated feedback service can be provided. Clients could also be asked for their telephone numbers and permission to call on a separate occasion for feedback, or for their address for surveys. Where the service sends information out to a client, a feedback form could also be included.



5

Glossary of terms in the Advice Quality Standard

Advice Service

An advice service involves a diagnosis of the client's enquiry and the legal issues involved; giving information and explaining options; identifying further action the client can take and 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.

Advice with Casework Service

Includes all elements of an advice service as above and also involved 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.

Advisers

Generic term for all members of the staff group, volunteers or paid, who give advice at any level.

Business Plan

The business plan is the short term document which describes how the organisation will deliver the actions within the resources available within specified time limits. It may also include additional elements such as how it will evaluate if these have been met. It will take a short term view, usually of one business year but occasionally more.

Caseworkers

Term used to describe experienced and skilled advisers who offer more than the basic level of advice and who are able to take cases and to manage their progress over a length of time.

Information Service

An information service gives clients the information they need to know more and do more about their situation. It can include providing information about rights, policies and practices: and about national and local services and agencies. The responsibility for any further action rests with the client.

Management

The body which is legally responsible for the day to day activities of an advice organisation. In some cases, this may be the Board of Trustees or other governing body, whilst in larger organisations this may be a senior management team.

Merit

Merit is the legal term which refers to whether a claim has a valid basis in law. To have merit, a case must have sufficient facts set out in a way that would allow a court to make a judgement on its legal basis. A case without merit would have no such basis and a legal challenge could not be judged, either because there is no clear legal point to be argued or because the facts presented are insufficient to be clear. Merit is a subjective term and should be taken case by case. A few cases thought to have little merit have gone on to become important case law.

Policy

A policy is a deliberate system of principles to guide decisions making within an organization in order to achieve rational outcomes. A policy is a statement of intent, and is implemented as a procedure or protocol. Policies are generally adopted by the Board of or senior governance body within an organization and shared with the staff group.

Procedure

A written set of rules or step-by-step instructions agreed by an organization and understood by staff which describe how staff achieve a desired result. Procedures or protocols are often developed and adopted by senior executive officers and show how policies are put into practice within an organization.

Process

A set of inter-related activities which interact in order to achieve a desired result, a specific service or a defined product.

Referral

Providing a client with information about another organisation or service which undertakes work relevant to the client's needs. With the client's consent, the second organisation is contacted by the advice service on the clients behalf with the objective of securing access to the service.

The referral will include details of the client as required by the referral organisation so the client is known prior to first direct contact. The responsibility for a referral is jointly owned by the client and the advice organisation and the referring advice organisation should follow up the outcome of the referral.

Risk Assessment

The process within an organisation where risk areas are analysed, potential risks are identified and categorised according to level of likelihood and level of harm. Mitigating actions are identified which can help to minimise the likelihood of risks occurring and reduce the level of harm if they do occur.

Risk register

The document where all the main risks identified are recorded along with the actions taken to mitigate against the risk occurring and/or actions to be taken should they occur. The risk register should clearly identify who is responsible for taking the actions as well as who is responsible for ensuring that they have occurred.

Service

The provision for giving social welfare legal advice to the client group identified. This includes all resources within an organisation that contribute to this provision and may also include resources out-with the organisation but which still make an identifiable contribution.

Service provider

The organisation or the part/section/department of a large organisation where advisors and their managers are located.

Signposting

Providing a client with information about another organisation or service which undertakes work relevant to the client's needs. The information provided should be provided in a manner that the client can refer to it at a later time and should be sufficient for the client to a) decide whether this is an appropriate service for them and b) to know how to access the service if they so choose. The client holds responsibility for contacting the service.

Social Welfare Law

Social Welfare Law generally refers to those categories of law which govern entitlement to state benefits and public housing; the management of personal and business debt; an employee's rights at work and access to redress for unfair treatment; and access to appropriate care and support for people with particular health problems. Within the not-for-profit advice sector, advice is often given to members of the public on the following types or "categories" of social welfare law:

- Welfare benefits
- Debt
- Housing
- Employment
- Community care

Specialist casework

Specialist casework is casework (as above) requiring the presentation of complex legal arguments.

Strategy

An organisations strategy or strategic plan is a document which describes how the ends (goals) will be achieved by the means (resources). A strategy is used to communicate the organisations goals, the actions needed to achieve those goals and how it will mobilise the resources available to it in order to execute the actions. Generally, a strategy will take the longer term view (3-5 years).

Staff

Any person who makes a contribution to the delivery of an advice service either in a paid or voluntary capacity and includes people in advice, managerial and administrative roles.



6

Appendices

I. Definitions of Casework Categories

AQS with Casework: Case 1 Forms

In order to apply for the AQS with Casework for either a client based category and/or an area of law, you must complete each Case One Form that applies to your organisation. So, if applying for certification to Advice with Casework in the Asylum Seekers and Refugees category, you must complete Case 1 Form; Asylum Seekers and Refugees and so on. This form assists the AQS assessment in identifying your organisations competency to handle advice giving at this level.

The criteria for casework is set in AQS Framework D5.1 (i.e. the 12 hour casework route), and must also demonstrate the depth of knowledge and case handling to fulfil the requirements for AQS with Casework. If your organisation covers a range of subjects, these can be fulfilled by one or more of the named caseworkers.

For organisations intending to meet the criteria for casework through D5.2 (i.e. the caseworker/supervisor route), the range of subjects must be fulfilled by the nominated caseworker/supervisor.

Cases listed to fulfil the criteria must be cases which were active within the last 12 months. Please complete column 3 with either the case reference or file name. Please also state the caseworker responsible for the case if applying through the 12-hour caseworker route (D5.1).

Case 1 Forms:

Client based

1. Asylum Seekers and Refugees
2. Disability
3. Older People
4. Discrimination and Harassment
5. Students
6. Women
7. Young People

Subject based

8. Consumer/General Contract
9. Debt
10. Employment
11. Health and Community Care
12. Housing
13. Immigration/Nationality
14. Welfare Benefits

Copies of the forms are available on the AQS Website www.advicequalitystandard.org.uk.

II. About ASA and our partners

The Advice Services Alliance (ASA) was established in 1980, and is the umbrella organisation for independent advice services in the UK. Our members are national networks of not-for-profit organisations providing advice and help on the law, access to services and related issues. ASA promotes the development of high quality advice services and co-operation between advice organisations. We provide a forum for members and undertake policy work on their behalf, including responding to government initiatives relating to advice. ASA is a Charity and a company limited by guarantee.

Our aims are to:-

- champion the development of high quality information, advice and legal services
- ensure that people are not denied access to such services on account of lack of means, discrimination or other disadvantage
- encourage co-operation between organisations providing such services
- provide a forum for the discussion of issues of common interest or concern to advice organisations.

Membership of ASA is open to national networks of independent, not-for-profit advice services in the UK. Other organisations concerned with the provision of advice and legal services may affiliate to ASA. Our current members are

- AdviceUK
- AgeUK
- Citizens Advice
- Law Centres Network
- Shelter
- Youth Access

To contact us, please phone 07904 377460 or email info@asauk.org.uk.
Our website is www.asauk.org.uk.

Recognising Excellence

With over 20 years' engaged in assessment and quality assurance activities, Recognising Excellence has extensive experience of working within the advice and not for profit sector. We pride ourselves on ensuring that the client is placed at the centre of our work and that quality is an integral part of the advice journey. The AQS contract is managed by Amanda Jordan, who has worked within the advice sector for over 10 years. Amanda provides front line support to organisations that are seeking to apply for accreditation for the first time, and manages a central team of Assessors who undertake the assessment activity on their behalf.

Amanda can be contacted directly on: Email: Amanda.jordan@recognisingexcellence.co.uk
Mobile: 07584 355 486

Further information can be obtained from the RE website, www.recognisingexcellence.co.uk

Russell-Cooke

Russell-Cooke is a top 100 London law firm with around 200 partners and lawyers. Its highly regarded specialists, breadth of expertise and mix of commercial, private and public sector clients reflect the complex legal needs of contemporary London. Many of the firm's teams are leaders in their fields, and regularly attract work from across the EU and internationally. They have received peer group accolades in areas as diverse as commercial property, professional regulation, crime and children law.

There are few other substantial London firms offering such a full range of legal services. The charity and social business team is amongst the top three legal teams in the sector and advises across all areas of law from governance and commercial through to property, employment and disputes. Russell-Cooke offers a full range of legal services for private clients including children, family, employment, clinical negligence, personal injury and criminal litigation services.

Private clients also benefit from the firm's highly specialist contentious probate, French law, tax and cross-border estates expertise.

London's demanding businesses, public organisations and professionals are attracted by the firm's combination of serious expertise, unstuffy style and value for money fees.

III. AQS Appeals Procedure

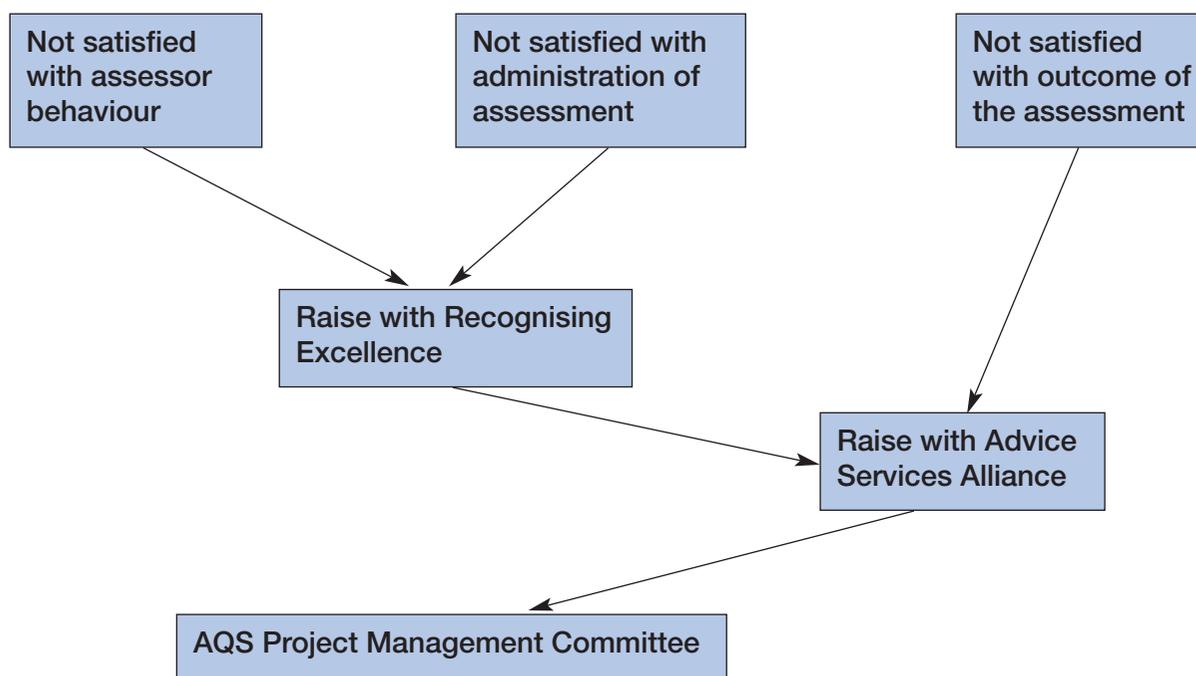
What to do if you are unhappy with your AQS assessment.

We believe that problems are best resolved quickly in order to both establish the facts and to avoid unnecessary escalation. To that end, we will endeavour to respond to any issue you have with the assessment process quickly and professionally.

However, there may be exceptional circumstances where an organisation wishes to raise a specific issue or a problem which cannot be resolved through the first point of contact. The diagram below shows the route to raise such issues the response you can expect.

For complaints to be dealt with through this procedure, you must make your complaint in writing and outline the specific issues that will require investigation. We will need a named person in the organisation to be our main point of contact in handling the complaint. Should the complaint not be resolved with staff, then it will be taken to the AQS Project Management for a final hearing. The AQS Project Management Committee is the final stage of the process and their decision is binding.

All complaints made will be recorded and reported to the AQS Project Management Committee with the quarterly reports.



IV. Certification Mark and Ownership of the AQS

Application Pending September 2016. Further details to be announced as soon as possible thereafter.

V. Money Advice Service Quality Framework: Organisation and Individual Requirements

The Money Advice Service was set up by government with purpose of helping people manage their money. They have provided a free and impartial advice service and work in partnership with other organisations to help people make the most of their money.

The Money Advice Service has two aspects of its work which impact of the voluntary advice sector. Firstly, MAS provide grants to consortium of advice services providing debt advice. Secondly, MAS has been given responsibility for driving the quality of debt advice across all sectors. To meet the second aspect of their work MAS has developed a quality framework, the details of which can be found on their website. Existing standards were invited to be accredited against the MAS quality Framework and the AQS achieved this accreditation.

The Money Advice Service state:

“Our quality framework comprises of two interlinked and essential parts – the ‘organisational’ quality framework and the ‘individual’ quality framework, which together, form our approach to ensuring the high quality of debt advice services in both the free-to-client and fee-charging sectors.

The framework provides a single, transparent and consistent mechanism which enables quality standards, membership codes, training and qualifications currently used in the debt advice sector to be assessed against the requirements of the framework and achieve accreditation from the Money Advice Service. This will ensure that both an organisation and its individual advisers are delivering consistent and high quality debt advice.”

Advice services providing money advice or debt advice need to ensure that the training of all their staff including volunteers accords with the Money Advice Service Accredited Pathway. Details of all training and qualifications that have been accredited to the Money Advice Service individual quality framework can be found on the Money Advice Service website (www.moneyadviceservice.org.uk/en/corporate/raising-standards).

When the Advice Quality Standard assessor visits your organisation and you provide money advice or debt advice, they will include compliance with the Money Advice Service Quality Framework as part of your assessment.

If you need further information, please contact Recognising Excellence or the Money Advice Service.

Please note: in 2015 the Treasury announced that the Money Advice Service was to be restructured into a smaller organisation with further announcements on the details to be made in Spring 2017. We are assuming that the responsibility for quality in debt advice will remain and we strongly advise all organisations engaged with debt advice to ensure they are familiar with the Money Advice Service Quality Framework and the MAS Self Assessment Criteria for Accredited Learning.

VI. Welsh Government Information and Advice Quality Framework: Definitions

The Welsh Government IAQF offer a slightly different definition of information and advice that used by the Advice Quality Standard. These 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
- making contact with 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'

IAQF April 2016



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