



**Quality Assurance Framework
for Education and Training
Regulated by the Northern
Ireland Social Care Council**

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Preface

The 'Quality Assurance Framework for Education and Training Regulated by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council' sets out the key principles and procedures for the approval, annual monitoring, review and inspection of Degree in Social Work courses, Designated Practice Learning Providers and the Northern Ireland Post Qualifying Education and Training Partnership. There are three associated documents:

- 'Approval, Monitoring Review and Inspection Arrangements for Degree in Social Work Courses'
- 'Approval, Monitoring, Review and Inspection Arrangements for Designated Practice Learning Providers'
- 'Approval, Monitoring, Review and Inspection Arrangements for the Northern Ireland Post Qualifying Education and Training Partnership'

These four documents provide comprehensive information on the NISCC's approach to quality assurance for providers of social work education and training.

The Quality Assurance Framework aims to ensure:

- That social workers are trained to the highest standards to provide safe and effective practice linked to the NISCC's registration requirements;
- That teaching, learning and practice is fit for purpose;
- Effective service user and carer participation in education and training provision;
- A coordinated approach with regulators of social work service provision for example, the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA);
- Continuous improvement in education and training provision through monitoring and review including an annual programme of thematic reviews.

The NISCC is committed to ensuring the highest quality education and training provision and will keep its quality assurance arrangements under review. We look forward to working with education and training providers to promote the government's modernisation agenda of quality, safety and effectiveness in social work practice.



Jeremy Harbison
NISCC Chair

Interpretation

‘Council’ means the corporate body responsible for the functions as specified in the Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001.

‘Degree’ means a Degree in Social Work.

‘Designated Practice Learning Provider’ means an organisation which individually or together with other associate organisations is approved to provide practice learning opportunities for Degree in Social Work students.

‘External Examiner’ means a person who is independent and impartial, engaged to provide informed comment on the standards set for approved degree courses and student achievement in relation to those standards.

‘Independent Verifier’ means a person appointed by the PQ Partnership to provide an independent assessment of the Partnership’s systems and recommendations regarding candidate assessment and accreditation of training provision.

‘Joint Validation’ means a process whereby a course is jointly evaluated and approved by a Higher Education Institution and the NISCC.

‘Major modification’ means a substantive change to the approved provision.

‘NISCC’ means the executive function of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council.

‘NISCC Officer’ means an employee of the NISCC or any person authorised to act on behalf of the Chief Executive of the NISCC.

‘Post Qualifying Education and Training Partnership’ means a body approved by the Council to determine and manage the PQ arrangements as set out in the PQ Framework. It has representation from education institutions and social work employers engaged in the provision of post qualifying education and training.

‘Provider’ means Degree in Social Work courses, the Post Qualifying Education and Training Partnership and Designated Practice Learning Providers.

‘PQ’ means post qualifying.

‘Registration’ means Registration on the NISCC Register.

Introduction

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) is a non-departmental public body established on 1 October 2001 by the Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. The Act requires the NISCC to promote high standards of conduct and practice among social care workers and high standards in their training.
- 1.2 As the regulator of social work education and training, the NISCC is responsible for setting standards of social work education, ensuring these standards are being met, and that social workers are equipped with the knowledge and skills to deliver quality services that meet the needs of users of services and their carers.
- 1.3 The NISCC needs to be assured that the Degree and post qualifying training programmes are meeting the sector's needs in terms of readiness to practise (the Degree), and ongoing fitness to practise, linked to Registration (post qualifying).
- 1.4 The NISCC also needs to ensure there is sufficient training available and that qualifying and post qualifying education is of a sufficiently high quality and is meeting the needs of a diverse workforce. The NISCC therefore will need information on the quantity of provision, the quality of provision and the impact of social work training on the quality of services provided.
- 1.5 The NISCC works closely with other standards setting and regulatory bodies such as the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSSPS) and the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA).
- 1.6 This publication outlines the principles and procedures for the regulation of social work qualifying and post qualifying education and training by the NISCC, and is supplemented by specific quality assurance arrangements for:
 - Degree in Social Work courses;
 - Designated Practice Learning Providers;
 - The Northern Ireland Post Qualifying Education and Training Partnership (the PQ Partnership).

These arrangements are contained in separate publications which can be accessed from the NISCC website **www.niscc.info**

2 NISCC Equal Opportunities Statement

2.1 The NISCC promotes education and training that produces competent social care and social work staff who can provide high quality services in our diverse society. The NISCC recognises that equal opportunity is something each individual wants for themselves and to which they have a legal right.

2.2 Students and candidates will therefore:

- Accept and respect individual rights and circumstances and understand how these affect the delivery of services for children and adults, families and communities;
- Learn how to counter discrimination, racism, poverty, disadvantage and injustice in ways appropriate to the situation and their role.

2.3 Providers of social work education and training and the PQ Partnership will seek to:

- Eliminate unfair discrimination and disadvantage in all aspects of their work regulated by the NISCC;
- Demonstrate this consistently through the quality assurance process.

2.4 The NISCC will:

- Take action to ensure the implementation of equal opportunities through the quality assurance process.

3 Principles underpinning the quality assurance system

In undertaking its function of regulating social work education and training, the NISCC will work to the following four principles:

3.1 Continuous improvement

The NISCC will focus on the continuous improvement of social work education and training and the consequent outcomes for services. Constructive dialogue between NISCC staff and providers is encouraged so that any ongoing or development issues can be dealt with as they arise.

3.2 Efficiency and effectiveness

The NISCC will work in partnership with providers and other key stakeholders as appropriate, to implement these arrangements and to avoid duplication of effort where possible.

3.3 Consistency

The NISCC will be consistent in its approach to all providers and in the interpretation of the Rules, Standards and Requirements.

3.4 Transparency

A summary of quality assurance reports will be made available to key stakeholders and the public.

4 Key aspects of quality assurance

4.1 Providers are required to deliver against standards as set out in the following documents.

For the Degree and Practice Learning Providers:

- The Northern Ireland Framework Specification for the Degree in Social Work, March 2003;
- NISCC Practice Learning Requirements, June 2003;
- NISCC Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work, including the Standards of Approval, May 2003;
- NISCC Learning, Teaching and Assessment Requirements, March 2004;
- Reference Paper: Practice Learning for the Degree in Social Work, May 2004;
- The Standards for Practice Learning for the Degree in Social Work, April 2006.

For Post Qualifying Education and Training:

- The Rules for the Approval of Post Qualifying Education and Training in Social Work in Northern Ireland November 2006;
- The Standards for Approval of the Post Qualifying Education and Training Partnership, September 2006;
- Northern Ireland Post Qualifying Education and Training Framework in Social Work, December 2006;
- NI PQ Framework - NISCC Requirements for Accreditation, September 2006

4.2 In addition, provision will be monitored against agreed targets, action plans from submission documents or previous reports. The NISCC will also take account of the outcomes of inspections of services carried out by the RQIA and other relevant inspection bodies.

4.3 In its annual monitoring, the NISCC will measure the performance of providers against a set of indicators in order to assess levels of risk, their impact on the provision and the need for the NISCC to intervene, e.g. conduct a review visit or initiate a preliminary investigation. These indicators are specified in the Approval, Monitoring, Review and Inspection documents for each type of provision.

4.4 The NISCC will also require statistical information which gives an overall picture and understanding of developments and trends in social work education. The Approval, Monitoring, Review and Inspection documents for each type of provision will detail the statistics required.

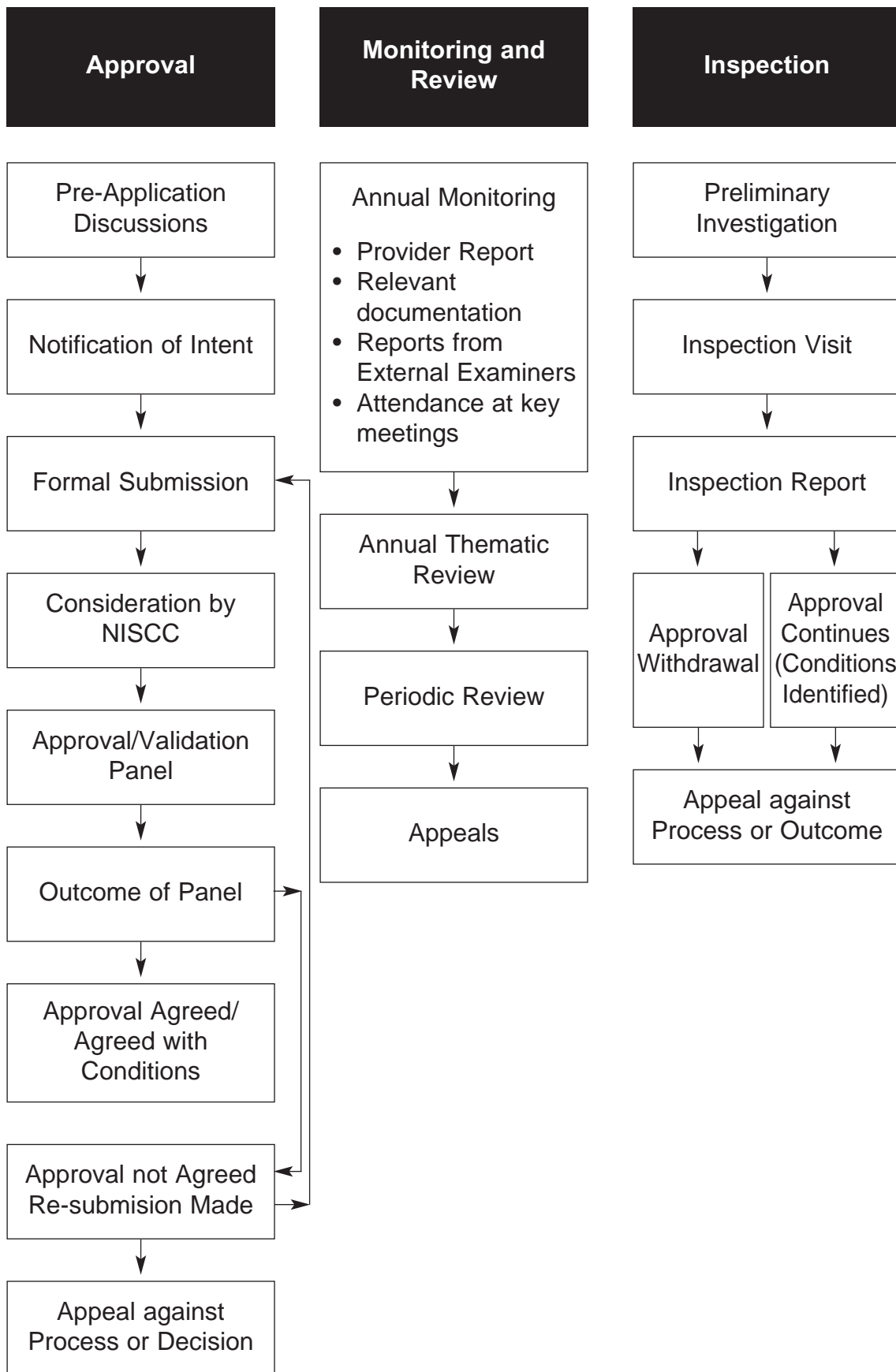
5 Outcomes of the quality assurance system

5.1 The system will ensure that:

- Regulated provision meets the NISCC's Rules, Standards and Requirements;
- Social work training at qualifying and post qualifying levels is fit for purpose;
- Action is taken where problems are identified with the process and/or outcomes of provision;
- An ethos of continuous improvement is promoted.

5.2 An annual report will be produced for Council on the outcomes of the NISCC's quality assurance system.

6 Structure of the Quality Assurance System



6.1 There are three parts to the NISCC Quality Assurance system:

- i. Part 1 Approval
- ii. Part 2 Regulation through annual monitoring and review
- iii. Part 3 Inspection

There is an appeal process at each stage should a provider be dissatisfied with either the process undertaken or decision reached by the NISCC.

Part 1

Approval

7 Approval

7.1 This section explains the NISCC's process for approval. The Rules, Standards and Guidance for Approval are published in separate documents which are available on the NISCC website www.niscc.info

7.2 The NISCC has two processes:

- (i) Full approval for new provision;
- (ii) Re-approval for provision that has been previously approved but there have been major modifications and/or the NISCC has issued new Standards.

A NISCC Officer will be appointed to advise providers on the approval process. The decision making process will be separate from the advisory process and will be carried out by a different NISCC Officer.

7.3 The Stages of Approval/Re-approval:

- (i) Preliminary discussions between the applicant and NISCC staff.
- (ii) Formal Notification of Intent to apply to become a provider. (This will not be required for a re-approval).
- (iii) Confirmation of a submission date to the NISCC. Where a joint validation process is appropriate, this will be the date of the Joint Validation Panel meeting.
- (iv) Application submitted to the NISCC for approval.
- (v) Consideration of material by the NISCC/Joint Validation Panel. The NISCC approval panel will comprise two Council members and two NISCC staff.
- (vi) Providers will receive the NISCC's decision within three months of the date of submission.
- (vii) Feedback and action planning.

7.4 Outcomes of the approval process
There are three possible outcomes of the approval process:

- The application is acceptable and can be approved;
- The application can be approved with conditions;
- There is not sufficient evidence for approval or the submission does not meet the NISCC standards. The provider will be informed what further work is required and arrangements will be made for a resubmission.

7.5 Once approval has been granted the approval submission will become accessible as a public record.

Part 2

Regulation through annual monitoring and review

8 Annual monitoring

8.1 Annual monitoring has the following components:

- Annual report;
- Information from any internal quality improvement processes;
- Copies of relevant external reports;
- Copies of relevant documents;
- Attendance by the NISCC staff at key meetings.

8.2 Annual report

The contents of the annual report will differ depending on the type of provision. Common elements will be:

- Statistics on admissions/enrolments, practice learning opportunities, terminations, including equal opportunities monitoring information;
- Information on the progression of students/candidates;
- Reports on action plans;
- Information on complaints and appeals;
- Information on any minor modifications;
- Information on sufficiency of resources;
- Evidence of service user and carer involvement;
- Feedback from employers;
- Feedback from students/candidates;

The NISCC will issue specific guidance and arrangements for each type of provider.

8.3 Information from internal quality assurance processes

This will include copies of the Annual Subject Review Report (Degree courses), Designated Practice Learning Providers' internal quality assurance systems and information on monitoring of post qualifying programmes (PQ Partnership).

8.4 External reports

Relevant external reports include External Examiner reports (Degree programmes) and External Assessor reports (PQ Partnership). The NISCC may also take account of inspection reports on service provision.

8.5 Relevant documents

The key relevant document is the provider's annual handbook/manual. Other relevant documents would include any guidance documents issued for students/candidates/employers.

8.6 Attendance of NISCC staff at key meetings
NISCC staff will attend Management Board and other key meetings. The purpose is two-fold:

- (i) To gather information about the activities of the provider and any issues arising that may contribute to the quality assurance process;
- (ii) To give advice and guidance from the NISCC on any relevant developments or issues.

9 Outcomes of annual monitoring

9.1 Following the annual quality assurance process the provider will be informed that:

- The provision meets the NISCC's standards; or
- Further information/clarification is required; and/or
- A visit will be necessary; or
- An inspection is required.

9.2 The outcome of the annual quality assurance process will become accessible as a public record.

10 Thematic reviews

10.1 The NISCC will have an annual programme of thematic reviews that will apply across all provision. These thematic reviews may be dictated by, for example, issues raised by employers or issues that have been identified through RQIA inspections and by other relevant inspection bodies. The NISCC may also undertake spot reviews if there are concerns about any area of provision. An independent visitor and a representative of service user or carer interests will be appointed to contribute to thematic reviews. For post qualifying training provision this may include visits to training providers.

11 Periodic reviews

11.1 Following approval, the NISCC will undertake regular reviews of provision. The frequency of reviews will depend on the risk assessment of the quality of the provision. Where annual monitoring continues to be satisfactory, the review period will be five years.

11.2 The review will be conducted by a NISCC Officer and a Council Member.

Part 3

Inspection

12 Inspection

- 12.1 The NISCC will initiate a preliminary investigation where it has determined that the provider is failing to meet the required standards. This will result in either an agreed plan for remedial action, with timescales, or the instigation of a formal inspection.
- 12.2 The primary aims of a formal inspection will be to establish:
- Whether a provider is operating within the Rules/Standards and conditions of approval set by the NISCC; and
 - If the provider has the capacity to make the necessary improvements to address identified deficits within specified timescales.
- 12.3 A formal inspection may be initiated when:
- A provider has not complied with an action plan resulting from the approval process or a review, or has refused or is unable to do so within a specific timescale acceptable to the NISCC; or
 - The approval process has been undertaken on more than one occasion resulting in findings that the provider has failed to comply with the Rules/Standards or any conditions of approval; or
 - A complaint or allegation of failure to comply with the Rules/Standards is so serious as to throw into immediate doubt the continued suitability of the provision.
- 12.4 The NISCC will establish an inspection team to carry out a formal investigation. It will have a minimum of two people, one of whom will be an Officer of the NISCC who will chair the team and one will be a member of the Council. The NISCC may also include in the inspection team a person deemed to have specialist knowledge of the issues involved, but no person will be involved who is connected with the provider.
- 12.5 The provider will be informed in writing by the NISCC of the decision to hold a formal inspection, including a date for its commencement.
- 12.6 A timetable and process will be established by the NISCC, which will take into account any reasonable requests by the provider. The NISCC will reserve the right to extend the process if it becomes clear in the course of the formal inspection that further information is required.
- 12.7 The NISCC will present the outcomes of the formal inspection, including its recommendations, in a report to the provider within a reasonable timescale.

12.8 Withdrawal of approval will be the final sanction.

13 Appeals

13.1 The NISCC will put in place an appeal procedure whereby the provider can appeal against a decision made in respect of approval, monitoring, review, formal inspection, or withdrawal of approval.

13.2 The provider can appeal against a decision of the NISCC on the following grounds:

13.2.1 The NISCC did not take into account material information which was made known to it at the time of the decision;

13.2.2 New information which could not have been made available at the time of the decision and which materially affects the outcome has since become available;

13.2.3 The NISCC did not observe its own procedures and this failure materially affected the decision.

13.3 The NISCC will appoint a Panel to consider any appeal.

13.4 Details of the appeal procedure for the Degree which includes designated Practice Learning Providers can be found in Appendix 1. The appeal procedure for the PQ Partnership is very similar to that for the Degree and is published as an Appendix in the Rules for the Approval of Post Qualifying Education and Training 2006.

14 Complaints Procedure

14.1 The NISCC has a Complaints Procedure, which may be used by any user of the NISCC's services at any time. Copies of the Complaints Procedure are available from the NISCC's Head of Corporate Services to whom complaints should be addressed in the first instance.

Appendix 1

Northern Ireland Social Care Council Appeal Procedure for the Degree in Social Work

August 2004

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The Northern Ireland Social Care Council is a statutory body established under the Health and Personal Social Services (Northern Ireland) Act 2001. The Act requires the Council to approve courses in social work and any requirements set by the Council
- 1.2 Social work courses are required to comply with the Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work.
- 1.3 This appeal procedure has been drawn up in accordance with these Rules, Section 11.
- 1.4 The Rules state that a Course Provider¹ may appeal to the Council against a decision made in respect of: approval, monitoring, review or formal investigation, withdrawal of approval.

2 Grounds for Appeal

- 2.1 A Course Provider may appeal against a decision of the Council on the following grounds:
 - 2.1.1 The Council did not take into account material information which was made known to it at the time of the decision.
 - 2.1.2 New information which could not have been made available at the time of the decision and which materially affects the outcome has since become available; or
 - 2.1.3 The Council did not observe its own procedures and this failure materially affected the decision.

3 Principles

- 3.1 The key principles which underpin the Council's appeal procedure are that it should be:
 - **Open and transparent** - All appeals decisions will be based on open and relevant evidence.

¹ The term Course Provider is defined in the Rules for the Approval of the Degree in Social Work as "a partnership of one or more education institutions together with social work employers, which has been approved by the Council to jointly design, plan, deliver and evaluate a course leading to the award of the Degree".

- **Speedy** - Appeals will be resolved as quickly as is reasonably possible, and, unless there are exceptional circumstances, within the timescales specified in the appeals procedure.
- **Facilitative** - The Council will seek to be responsive to and work with Course Providers to resolve appeals at the earliest stage possible.
- **Consistent** - The Council will be consistent in their approach to all Course Providers.

4 Procedure for appeal

Stage 1- Request for reconsideration

- 4.1 An application for reconsideration of a Council decision and/or procedure, in respect of approval, monitoring, review or formal investigation, or withdrawal of approval, should be made by the Course Provider Official Correspondent in writing, with supporting evidence, to the Council Director of Training within four weeks of the Course Provider's receipt of the Council's decision.
- 4.2 The relevant Professional Adviser will meet with the Course Provider within ten working days of receipt of the application for reconsideration. This meeting will explore the issues leading to dissatisfaction and attempt to achieve resolution. The outcome will be communicated, by the Director of Training, to all involved within five working days of the meeting.
- 4.3 If the Course Provider is not satisfied with the outcome of Stage 1, they can proceed to Stage 2.

Stage 2 - Appeal Panel

- 4.4 Where reconsideration fails to resolve the causes of dissatisfaction, the Provider's Official Correspondent should write to the Chief Executive of the Council within ten working days of receiving the Council's Stage 1 decision. The letter should set out grounds for appeal (see paragraph 2 above, Grounds for Appeal) and request formal consideration by the Council. The letter will be accepted as a Notice of Appeal.
- 4.5 On receipt of the letter the Chief Executive will consult with the Chair of the Council who will appoint an appeal panel.
- 4.6 The panel will comprise three members: a Chair who will normally be the Council Chair, and two other members, one of whom will be a Council member. The third panel member will be either a Council member or an independent person with relevant experience. No panel members will be connected with the Course Provider. The Director of Training will act as secretary to the panel.

- 4.7 Within ten working days of receipt of the notice of appeal the panel will consider the relevant paperwork and decide whether there is a prima facie case for further consideration. The panel will inform the Course Provider of its decision, in writing.

Stage 3 - Appeal Process

- 4.8 Where a review of the Council's decision is to take place the Course Provider will be informed of the date of the appeal panel meeting and will be invited to make oral submissions to the panel and/or send further written statements. No legal representatives will be permitted to appear on behalf of any party.
- 4.9 The panel will consider all relevant evidence, and may, on behalf of the Council, take either of the following decisions:
- Uphold the appeal; or
 - Confirm the original decision.
- 4.10 The decision of the appeal panel will be final. The Course Provider will be notified in writing. Stage 3 of the process should be completed within four weeks.

**For further information about the Quality Assurance Framework
for Education and Training**

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