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## STAGE 2 – TOOL 6: Commissioning an assessment service

Employers are tasked with leading the process of defining the assessment requirements for each approved Apprenticeship standard. This stage 2 work to determine how an apprentice will be assessed is critical to preserve the quality of the Apprenticeship brand, ensure that every apprentice is fully competent to enter the profession and to maintain a pipeline of suitably qualified professionals.

There are three main tasks:

1. **Foundation work** to clarify what employers like about their existing assessment system, what they want to retain, elements that can be improved or adapted, and where innovations might be introduced. You will have done this in stage 1.
2. **Design a new assessment system** that can meet the above requirements and satisfy the latest BIS guidance.
3. **Implementation planning** of the new assessment system once the design is agreed. BIS will sign-off on these plans prior to implementation.

While employers may be clear about the outline assessment requirements for their standard (task 1), it will require specialist knowledge of assessment services to select, configure, and define an appropriate delivery solution and assessment elements that are rigorous, cost-effective, and practical.

**What is an assessment service?**

It is important that employers understand how important the assessment service is. It delivers the Apprenticeship plan and manages the training up to the point of completion, certification (including any qualifications) and registration (if appropriate).

An assessment service can comprise a number of activities on behalf of an employer, employer group, or sector, and can include:

* Recruitment and selection of apprentice candidates
* Delivering training activities on or off the employer premises
* Managing and dovetailing additional assessment and training activities
* Managing relationships with employers (line manager/supervisor)
* Undertaking assessment activities, grading and working with the independent bodies, awarding organisations and stakeholders
* Recording evidence, formulating judgments and collating achievement data for certification
* Ensuring certification when assessment standards met
* Facilitating registration to professional body membership
* Advising on progression to advanced learning
* Facilitating pathways to World Skills and other competitions
* Managing apprentice graduation or awards ceremonies
* Publicising apprentice achievements.

Some larger employers will have staff with assessment skills and knowledge within their organisations and maybe prepared to offer their services to a specialist sub-group tasked with taking on the detailed work.

However, for many employer steering groups, the task will be seen as one where they have limited experience and time to commit and so they will want to contract in an assessment service to support the detailed planning and design work.

**Who might deliver an assessment service?**

The reforms to Apprenticeships that emerged from The Richard Review of Apprenticeships in 2012 are intended to place the design and control of the content and delivery in the hands of employers.

This presents a challenge, since for the previous twenty years or so, Apprenticeships have been administered by organisations funded from the public purse such as the college sector and training providers (see box on right). It is likely that these organisations will continue to have a significant part to play in the future, as they have an enormous amount of knowledge and expertise on assessment but there is a challenge to move the emphasis away from publicly funded provision where feasible.

**Further Education Colleges and Training Providers**

These have a long history in delivering and assessing Apprenticeships. Not all colleges are true further education establishments. Some are local authority centres, others are privately owned. Training providers can be large or small training companies set up to deliver and assess Apprenticeships and other work-based training often with a sector specialism that allows for a more contextualised service than might be offered by a college.

Many of these organisations have well-developed employer relationships and are able to deliver a full range of assessment activities both on- and off-site. The Skills Funding Agency (SFA) holds a list of verified organisations.

All of these organisations are regulated and inspected and most of them are funded by the SFA.

The reforms offer opportunities for new assessment organisations to emerge, such as Trailblazer groups themselves, subsidiary organisations and private enterprise. These will be distinctive because:

* the offer will be more sector specific and adapted to the new standards;
* assessors will undergo training specific to the new assessment regimes;
* awarding organisations and assessment organisations will work more closely together.

For all of these, it will be important to gain the support of employers across the sector, particularly that of smaller businesses who will be end-users of the assessment system,

**Other sources of help**

Sources of assessment expertise that might support an employer steering group as they shape their detailed assessment strategy include:

* Sector skills councils
* Professional bodies
* Industrial partnership
* Larger employers with Apprenticeship assessment experience
* Training and assessment consultants
* Universities and other higher education institutions
* Awarding organisations

**Suggested approach to commissioning an assessment service**

1. Consider convening an internal assessment panel or group to manage this process.
2. Complete the foundation work. This will draw out employers’ views about the existing system and provide some ideas for new developments.
3. Create a design and development specification for the assessment plan. *Tool 4: Template for the indicative assessment approach* will help with this.
4. Carry out a stakeholder mapping exercise to determine key players. *Tool 7: Stakeholder mapping* will help you with this.
5. Invite tenders from those with an interest and capability to complete the detailed assessment development work.
6. Select an appropriate supplier and agree a project plan.
7. Monitor and evaluate the supplier's progress reports according to the agreed milestones within the development process.

**Key factors**

An invitation to tender would need to take account of the following key factors:

* Ensuring a rigorous and robust assessment system  
  BIS guidance emphasises the need for these characteristics to be included.
* Building in innovation  
  Look for how new ideas, perspectives and technology might play a part in widening participation, reduce costs, provide a better solution, and help employers to engage.
* Ensuring an independent assessment system  
  There are risks in asking those who will operate the assessment system and run their business by it to take a part in designing it. How will you ensure the system is truly independent and meets the needs of learners and employers?
* Creating an easy to operate, cost-effective, affordable assessment system.
* The need for Assessment to link to a range of training activities  
  Once assessment strategy is defined, what training will be needed to deliver the standard?
* Defining the part qualifications will play in the overall assessment system
* Definition and operation of the end-test  
  The content of this must be signed-off by BIS.
* Tracking progress of individual apprentices' progress in accumulating the knowledge, skills, and behaviours contained in the standard.  
  How might this operate for the standard and how will employers/providers access them? There are software systems available that can track individual competences.

**TOOL 6A: Initial questions**

This tool will help you shape your approach to control, risk and resource capacity to manage the assessment service.

**How to use this tool**

1. The employer steering group should ask themselves the following questions.

**After using the tool**

Work through the *Tool 6B: Checklist for commissioning an assessment service* to help develop the assessment service specification.

| **Questions** | **Your notes** |
| --- | --- |
| Are we looking for a single overarching provider to manage the end-to-end service, or can it be developed as a series of smaller activities? |  |
| How independent should the assessment service be? |  |
| How would the funding be structured? What would the milestones be? |  |
| How would progress be monitored? How would contract management be undertaken? |  |
| What would the selection criteria be for a delivery provider? |  |
| What previous success measures should be used? |  |
| What third party references should be sought? |  |

**TOOL 6B: Checklist for commissioning an assessment service**

This tool will review your commissioning process and ensure that you do not omit any essential areas.

**How to use this tool**

1. The employer steering group should consider the questions outlined overleaf.

**After using the tool**

Select an assessment service provider and contract with them to complete the detailed assessment development work under the monitoring and control of the employer steering group.

**Checklist for commissioning an assessment service**

| **Action** | **Key questions** |
| --- | --- |
| 1. Determine what assessment service elements are required or desirable. | Recruitment and selection of apprentice candidates:   * How will jobs be configured for apprentice candidates and who is going to sift potential applicants?   Delivery of assessment activities:   * Who will undertake assessment activities? * Which assessment activities should be on or off site? Is there a preferred method for off the job assessment? * How will assessment be managed so that activities are joined up and not duplicated? * How will assessors be recruited and trained? * Who will be responsible for recording and validating evidence to ensure that evidence is suitable for certification or completion? * How will independence be assured?   Certification:   * How will achievement data be collated and reported for certification? * Who will ensure that certification takes place? * Who will work with the professional bodies to facilitate progression to professional body membership?   How will relationships with independent bodies, awarding and certification bodies and stakeholders be managed?  How will the service develop and manage quality assurance and reporting systems (both internal and external)?  How will the public face of the apprenticeship development be managed (e.g. apprentice graduation or awards ceremonies or pathways to World Skills and other competitions)? |
| **Your notes:** | |
| 1. Decide on a preferred contracting structure. | What tasks would be desirable to manage internally (and by whom) and which would be better contracted out?  Consider roles and responsibilities, management, accountability, quality assurance, milestones and reporting, compliance with regulatory or awarding requirements.  What are the key questions to ask a potential bidder? |
| **Your notes:** | |
| 1. Develop the management plan and governance reporting steps | How will you manage risk, deliverables, milestones, and reporting?  How will the service report and interact with the employers (line manager/supervisor) of the apprentices? |
| **Your notes:** | |
| 1. Develop an assessment service specification. | The assessment service specification outlines the scope and range for the assessment service. For a commissioned organisation, this document will set out the requirements for assessment (such as components, timings, end assessment methods, grading and weighting).  How detailed should each task be defined?  Should you offer the chance to innovate, or prepare a detailed set of procedures?  Is the plan of duties and accountabilities complete? Is the ongoing role of the employer steering group in place?  Can the specification be used as the basis for contracting? |
| **Your notes:** | |
| 1. Select a service provider | What are the commissioning steps?  What are the selection criteria?  How will the quality of the service be measured prior to contracting? (Past track record, success, validating evidence provided) |
| **Your notes:** | |