

NSW SPECIALIST HOMELESSNESS SERVICES EXPERIENCE OF IMPLEMENTING THE AUSTRALIAN SERVICE EXCELLENCE STANDARDS

1. Background

As the NSW Specialist Homelessness Services (SHSs) prepares for the full-scale implementation of the Australian Service Excellence Standards (ASES) accreditation, the NSW Homelessness Industry Partnership engaged AQP Consulting to interview and learn from some SHS that have already achieved ASES accreditation.

The insights and lessons learned that these organisations shared provide valuable information that all SHSs can benefit from.

2. Areas of uncertainty

The organisations commented that when they started the accreditation process, they had very little understanding of what to expect from an accreditation assessment or even a working understanding of the Standards and their requirements. This was their first venture into the 'quality space', and few organisations were able to employ a dedicated person to assist them through the quality journey.

Another area of uncertainty experienced by the organisations was around the adequacy of their evidence. Most uploaded as much evidence as they could in the hope that some of it would be relevant and adequate.

The final area of uncertainty was how best to engage consumers, Board, staff and stakeholders into the accreditation process and particularly how to prepare them for the on site visit and interviews conducted by the External Assessors.

3. Challenges

The greatest challenge identified by the organisations was high a level of fear and anxiety around accreditation. Accreditation was uncharted territory, and there was limited understanding of what was involved or what terms like 'quality' and 'continuous improvement' meant in the day-to-day service environment.

Some of the comments were:

'Completing the self-assessment went some way to letting us know what we would need to do to achieve accreditation but we were still really worried what the site visit would be like. Would the assessor understand our business, our clients' needs and would anyone be traumatised by the process? That was our real worry.' - Respondent

'Some of us (staff) had been through accreditation in other jobs and were able to reassure everyone that it would be okay. But it was a different accreditation so we didn't know what would be similar and what wouldn't and what the Assessor would do when they were on site.' - Respondent

All the organisations agreed that it would have been useful to have talked with an organisation which had already been through ASES accreditation.

The second most challenging area of the preparation phase for the ASES Accreditation was policy development. One organisation stated:

'This was a very daunting process. While we had implicit work practices, we knew they weren't documented or communicated as well as they could be...and we did not know where to start.' - Respondent

One organisation engaged a consultant to review and develop their policy suite. Some of the others created their policy manual using internal resources. This was achieved by either taking a worker off line for several months or sharing the load for policy development across all team members while the use of internal resources was time-consuming, it was seen as a key success factor in gaining staff buy-in and engagement in the accreditation process.

Some organisations used the Breaking New Ground (BNG) policy template as their starting point, while others used the Network of Drug and Alcohol Agencies (NADA) Policy Kit to inform their policies. Organisations said that ongoing policy review and development is now scheduled into operations and as a result, the preparation for their second cycle has been much less onerous.

4. The Support of External Assessors

Once the organisations engaged their External Assessors, the task became easier. SHSs commented that the Assessors were flexible, engaging and supportive. The organisations were able to negotiate a timetable with the assessor that would work for everyone (staff, Board, stakeholders and clients).

None of the organisations reported that their fears about the site visit came to pass and it was overall a positive experience for all concerned.

The report and feedback phase of the assessment were particularly valued. The organisations received their Assessment Reports from the Assessors within 2-3 weeks. Some of the comments about this phase were as follows:

'We were so delighted with the findings of the report - they confirmed for us what we were doing well and also what we could improve. The Assessor's fresh eyes provided new perspectives that we hadn't even thought about, and that was so valuable.' – Respondent



‘It was such an overwhelming process at the beginning, and we are so glad we’ve done it. The report confirmed we were on track and helped us to prioritise what we would do next. That was very helpful in guiding us about what to do next.’ – Respondent

5. Using feedback from the ASES-Accredited Organisations to Inform the Quality Standards Implementation Resource Kit

The NSW Homelessness Industry Partnership documented all the suggestions made in this project to inform the development of the Quality Standards Implementation Resource Kit. The table below lists the recommendations that the SHSs made and how they are being incorporated into the resources currently being developed for the sector.

Table 1: Using feedback from SHSs to inform the Quality Standards Implementation Resource Kit

Suggestions	Tools that are being developed
Not knowing about the assessment process and what it involves	An introductory 20-minute Webinar on the Process of accreditation and PowerPoint.
	How-to guides explaining each of the steps to ASES accreditation with checklists and other resource tools.
Not knowing about the ASES standards	An introductory Webinar on the content of 8 ASES Standards and requirements and PowerPoint.
Not knowing about evidence and the sort of evidence that would be considered rigorous	The how-to guide on the External Assessment has comprehensive information about evidence and the assessment process.
What to look for when selecting an external provider	The how-to guide on the Selecting and External Assessor has information about selecting and external assessor and what you can expect from them together with checklists.
How best to prepare consumers, Board, staff and stakeholders for the on site interviews	The how-to guide on the Planning and Undertaking an External Assessment will have information about how to prepare for interviews as well as questions themes by stakeholder groups and examples.
Concern about consumers being interviewed and possibly triggered	<p>The External Assessors are especially selected to ensure they are sensitive and experienced in working with ASES consumer groups. They will carefully go through the consumer interviewing process with you and make a plan to suit your consumer’s needs and any concerns.</p> <p>The resources being developed on the External Assessment explains that consumers have a choice about being interviewed and the mode of interview – face to face or phone; 1:1 or in a group.</p> <p>Consumers often feedback that they found the interviewing process empowering and appreciated the opportunity to provide their perspective on the services they receive.</p>
It would have been helpful to be able to talk to an organisation that has passed ASES	The Industry Partnership is currently working with ASES-accredited SHSs to identify those who would be willing to act as mentors and guides to services embarking on their ASES journey.
Policy development as an area of challenge	<p>A complete set of ASES-referenced policies and procedures are being developed for the Sector that each organisation can customise to their specific circumstances.</p> <p>In addition, there are policy and related documentation templates that organisations can use on the BNG platform.</p>