

# HOW TO GUIDE 5 – INTRODUCTION TO THE EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT AND SELECTING AN EXTERNAL ASSESSOR

This guide explains how to plan for and undertake the external assessment. The main topics covered are:

- External Assessment process
- How to select an External Assessor
  - Who are the External Assessors?
  - Avoiding conflict of interest
- Strategies for selecting an External Assessor
  - Make a start
  - Undertake initial research
  - Make contact and request quotes
  - Assess the quotes, make a selection
  - Check and execute the service agreement

## EXTERNAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

An external assessment for ASES by an independent, third party determines whether your organisation's self-assessment is corroborated by its policies, procedures, systems, staff, clients, Board and other key stakeholders.<sup>1</sup>

The process for external assessment is outlined below.

- The organisation submits its completed self-assessment and supporting evidence to the External Assessor
- The External Assessor undertakes a desktop review of the self-assessment and may ask for clarification and further evidence
- The External Assessor visits the site
- The External Assessor provides a draft report 2 to 3 weeks after the last day of the site visit
- The organisation has a week to respond with any evidence-based comments to be integrated into the External Assessor's final report

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<sup>1</sup> Based on the South Australia. Dept. for Communities and Social Inclusion (now the Department of Human Services), *Australian Service Excellence Standards: A road map to an excellent organisation*, Third Edition, version 7, 2019.



- If any requirements are not rated 'fully in place', the organisation and External Assessor develop a Quality Action Plan to address the gaps
- The final report and Quality Action Plan are submitted to the ASES Team in South Australia for a quality check
- The organisation has 6 months from the date of the last site visit to make the changes required in the Quality Action Plan, collate new evidence and submit it to the External Assessor. Otherwise another 'mini-assessment' will be necessary, which will incur an additional cost.
- The External Assessor checks the completed Quality Action Plan and associated evidence to make sure all the requirements are 'fully in place'. This is usually a desktop review but an additional visit is sometimes required, which will incur an additional cost.
- The External Assessor submits the completed Quality Action Plan and associated evidence to the ASES Team in South Australia for a final quality check
- If all the requirements have been fully met, the SA DHS issues the organisation with an ASES Certificate of Accreditation and the ASES Logo (with the rules for use). The Certificate of Accreditation is dated from the last day of the site visit.
- The organisation can now display the ASES Certificate and use the ASES Logo for promotional purposes.

## Resources

The handout titled [External Assessment - Steps Summary](#), which is provided as part of this How to guide, contains a summarised version of these steps.

## HOW TO SELECT AN EXTERNAL ASSESSOR

Selecting an External Assessor should be approached like any other purchasing decision for your organisation. It should be based on factual market research, clear selection criteria and value for money.

It is also important that you select a provider that you feel comfortable with, who is 'a good fit' with your organisation's values and culture, as you will be working closely with them, possibly for many years.

The ASES Team in the SA DHS recommends organisations contact all of the approved External Assessors in the process of making their final selection. This Department has produced a guide on *How to Choose an External Assessor*, which you can access [here](#). The handout titled [Tips for Selecting an External Assessor](#), which is provided as part of this module may also be helpful with this task.

It is a good idea to start the selection process well before the dates you would like to have your site visit as some providers can be booked out weeks or months in advance.



## Who are the External Assessors?

External Assessors are private, independent companies that are authorised by the SA DHS to conduct ASES assessments.

External Assessors undertake all aspects of the external assessment, which includes a desktop review, site visit and overseeing the development and implementation of the Quality Action Plan.

Current members of the Panel of Approved External Assessors are listed at the SA DHS website:

<https://dhs.sa.gov.au/services/community-services/australian-service-excellence-standards/contact-ases-external-assessors2>.

ASES is a quality assurance system provided across Australia and New Zealand. If the External Assessor company is based interstate and does not have Assessors in your area, it will probably charge travel and accommodation costs, which you should consider in your cost and value evaluations.

External Assessors are contractually required to:

- Comply with high auditing standards and to be able to apply those standards to ASES external assessments
- Have current appropriate screenings and national police checks before entering sites
- Abide by a Code of Conduct requiring ethical and professional behaviour and avoidance of conflicts of interest with your organisation
- Add value through the process of assessment by providing additional services or supports.

External Assessors cannot ask for full payment prior to the external assessment. A portion can be paid prior to the site visit as part of a payment plan or to lock in an External Assessor.

## Avoiding conflict of interest

To ensure an unbiased assessment of your organisation, the External Assessor you select must be entirely independent of your service. A conflict of interest can exist between your organisation and the External Assessor organisation, or between your organisation and the individual contracted to be the Assessor. Both your organisation and the External Assessor must identify, declare and avoid any potential conflicts of interest, some of which are described below.

The company undertaking your external assessment must not have provided services (such as training, strategic planning and policy development) to your organisation in the past – otherwise, it would be assessing its own work.

The same principle applies going forward. For example, your organisation cannot engage the same External Assessor company to develop the documentation required to address the gaps indicated in your QAP.

Many contracted Assessors also operate their own, separate consultancies. Even though these consultancies are separate to the External Assessor company, you cannot engage the same person to work on the gaps in your QAP.

Other examples of a conflict of interest include where an External Assessor, allocated to your service:

- is a friend or relative of one of your staff members
- has worked for your organisation in the past
- is an applicant for a current vacancy for a position in your organisation.

If these or similar circumstances arise speak to the External Assessor about how you might avoid the conflict of interest. If this is not possible it is best not to proceed and to seek another provider from the ASES Approved Assessor Panel.

## Suggested strategies for selecting an External Assessor

### Make a start

- Review the resource materials provided for this module and customise these tools, if necessary, to suit your organisation. You may wish to appoint a selection panel.
- Develop your criteria for selecting the Assessor, listing the issues and qualities that are important to you

**Resource:** [Tips for Selecting an External Assessor](#)

### Undertake initial research

- Develop a list of questions you will ask External Assessors that address your criteria and other issues.
- Review the websites of External Assessors and make a list of those you will contact for a discussion. There is no limit to the number of providers you contact.

### Make contact and request quotes

- Document the outcomes of your discussions and select at least three organisations to approach for a quote.
- Prepare information about your organisation that the External Assessors are likely to require (ref handout) such as address and contact details; services provided; number of locations, staff, clients; the level of ASES accreditation you seek; and preferred dates.
- You may also seek more detailed information from the External Assessor at this stage such as their standard contract, code of conduct, privacy policy, and process for identifying potential conflicts of interest.
- Conduct referee checks and interview two other organisations the Assessor has worked with.



**Resource:** The handout titled [Selecting an External Assessor Checklist](#) is provided as part of this guide.

### **Assess the quotes, make a selection and seek approval**

- Review the quotes, together with any additional information and referee reports. If anything is unclear or you would like additional information, ask for it.
- You may wish to contact Homelessness NSW for information on assessment costs and subsidies for external assessment of organisations with annual revenue of under \$5m.
- Evaluate the quotes against your selection criteria and make a recommendation.
- Check that your organisation does not have a conflict of interest with the recommended External Assessor company or with the individual Assessor.
- Make a written submission to the Board for approval of the recommendation, with supporting documentation including the External Assessor's standard service agreement.
- Once the decision is approved, advise the successful External Assessor and also advise the unsuccessful companies of your decision.

### **Check and execute the service agreement**

- The successful External Assessor will provide you with a service agreement that detail the scope, the dates of your site visit, any penalties for late deferrals and cancellations, and a range of other particulars.
- Review this service agreement in detail. It is a legal document and the Board and senior staff need to be confident that the organisation is able to meet all its requirements within any specified time frames. They also need to be confident that the document includes any and all of the External Assessor's agreed actions and requirements.
- Check the service agreement has adequate coverage for avoiding and managing conflicts of interest and that the payment schedule does not require all or most of the payment before the services are completed.
- If anything in the service agreement or contract is unclear or you are uncomfortable with any part of it discuss it with them and, if needed, seek specialist advice before proceeding.
- When you have gained all the required internal approvals, follow your organisation's process for contract management in signing and executing the contract or service agreement with the External Assessor.
- Advise all the relevant staff and stakeholders in your organisation about the decision, diarise all relevant dates and flag that you are now in the external assessment stage of the accreditation process.



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- If the service agreement has penalties – for example, if there is a high fee for deferrals or cancellations one month before the scheduled site visit dates – make sure that you diarise a check that you are on track at least a week before that date. That way, if you need to reschedule the site visit for a later date, you will not be penalised.