

Chapter 07b: Managing the Work Focused Interview – QAF Good Practice for Advisory Team Managers (ATMs)

Overview of the process - what are we looking at?

1. The Work Focused Interview is committed to continual improvement. The key vehicle for this is the Quality Assurance Framework (QAF) for Advisers. While this guidance will focus on the QAF, its principles can and should be applied to any aspect of the process.
2. The QAF is primarily intended to help in the development and maintenance of a high quality advisory service. The QAF observation process looks at the application of Work Targeted Interviewing (WTI) and the associated interviewing skills. In addition to this the enhanced QAF also encompasses the other activities advisers are expected to carry out. Evidence is gathered which will help identify:
 - adviser strengths;
 - areas of development need; and
 - good practice that can be shared with others.

Basic principles to apply to managing the WFI

Flexibility

3. The QAF has been developed to reflect the needs of individual advisers from complete beginners to experienced advisers. It is designed to support the training in this technique that is provided by the Personal Adviser Learning Centre accessed via the Learning Support Sites and Learning Centres page and the adviser routeway. Whilst Advisory Team Managers (ATMs) will obviously observe a whole interview, they must only gather evidence on the specific aspects of a QAF Checklist that they have previously agreed with the adviser.

Frequency

4. As a minimum, one QAF per adviser per month. This will vary according to the skills and experience of the adviser. Inexperienced advisers, and those with clear development needs, will require more frequent observation than those who are more experienced and highly skilled.
5. However, ATMs may wish to carry out more frequent observations/discussions with experienced advisers to identify good practice.

Evidence

6. The enhanced QAF process relies totally on evidence. ATMs must not award a standard based on opinion. If the adviser does not provide evidence to support an aspect of performance then the adviser should not be awarded a 'score' or 'rating'. We must have evidence to:
 - justify the standard that is awarded;
 - ensure impartiality;
 - avoid potential of disputes (evidence is less prone to challenge);

- make it easier to define progress and agree when progress has been made; and
- show us where we have specific development needs as well as examples of best practice.

Standards

7. We need agreed standards to give a common and consistent approach to rating the performance of advisers. Having this consistent approach will make it easy to identify both good practice and areas that need development. The QAF Checklists all have set standards and clear definitions of standards. Each standard, or rating ATMs award, must be supported by evidence.

Feedback

8. Following any observations (QAF Checklists 1, 2 and 3) the ATM (or other observer) must give prompt feedback to the adviser. Where possible within 5 or 10 minutes of the interview ending would be considered best practice. This time should be used by the ATM to reflect on the elements of the interview observed so that coherent and integrated feedback can be offered.

9. QAF Checklists 4 and 5 are based on the portfolio of evidence provided by the adviser during their one to one discussions with their ATM, although it may be that some behaviour is observed by the ATM through day to day contact with an adviser. Feedback will therefore be focused on this evidence and the time taken out for the discussion.

Planning

10. To gain maximum benefit, using the QAF within the office must be systematically planned and co-ordinated.

11. Before you start be aware that many things can interfere with interview quality.

How external factors can affect interview quality

12. An external factor is anything outside the control of the adviser which adversely affects the adviser, their customer or both during the course of the interview resulting in a drop in interview quality.

Introduction

13. ATMs must ensure that external factors do not have an adverse impact on interview quality. Controlling external factors enables advisers to use their interview skills effectively. The investment that ATMs make in upskilling advisers will be wasted if external factors prevent them from applying the skills they have gained.

14. If the external factor affects the adviser, the effectiveness of the interview will diminish. They may be unable to employ work targeted interviewing techniques or apply their knowledge and skills appropriately.

15. If the external factor affects the customer they may be less willing or able to participate fully in the interview.

Recognising External Factors

16. Often ATMs will react to external factors as they occur during the working day. Interview observations are an ideal opportunity for ATMs to assess and take measures to control external factors they might not have previously recognised.

What to do when an external factor affects an interview

17. Evaluate the impact of the external factor on the specific interview being observed rather than applying a level of tolerance to all advisers. Reassure the adviser that the assessment of their performance in the interview will not be penalised by factors beyond their control.

18. Consider how the external factor affected the interview and what action can be taken to avoid a repetition.

19. Many external factors can affect concentration or build unnecessary pressures and thus adversely affect the quality of the interview. The most common are:

- workload pressure.
- interview environment.
- difficult interviews.
- lack of training/development/management support.

Workload Pressure

20. Most people can cope with intermittent workload pressure, but constant pressure is a more serious problem that affects performance if not properly managed. Look out for warning signs that work related pressure is or could become a problem. There are a number of sources of uncomfortable pressure that must be effectively managed:

Office Organisation

21. Ensure that the office organisation meets the needs of advisers by consultation with adviser teams.

Time Pressure

22. Time allowances for interviews are set on LMS. These can be altered for each appointment as it is booked or changed for each appointment type at individual sites. Time pressure increases during interviews if time allowances are reduced or tasks to be completed increase.

23. If time is short advisers may cut corners, especially during the evaluation and exploration parts of the interview. The interview can become focused on procedure rather than on the customer's needs.

24. However, since the introduction of Flexible Interventions as part of the work focused support available through the Jobcentre Plus Offer, time pressures should be significantly reduced if ATMs and advisers set the timing of flexible interventions appropriately to each customer's needs.

25. Ensure that all referrals from assistant advisers to advisers or from one adviser to another are necessary, serve a useful purpose and are not simply because the assistant adviser or adviser is unsure what to do with the customer.

Factors that increase time	Suggested Remedial Action
-----------------------------------	----------------------------------

pressure in interviews	
New processes introduced	If national changes cause problems give details in appropriate reports. Review existing interview content.
Excessive clerical work	Make sure there are sufficient adviser support officers/assistant advisers to support advisers. Avoid introducing local forms, unless essential. Make full use of the reports available from ADAPT instead of collecting clerical MI. Further information on these reports can be obtained from your local ADAPT contact.
Time pressure caused by other advisers not finishing interviews in the time allowed	Make sure advisers conform to time allowances. Monitor interview content as part of observation and feedback.
Appointment systems/diary management	Review local time allowances regularly and ensure you and your advisory team understand their role in diary management and flexible interventions.
Customer is late for appointment	Decide an office policy on lateness and rebook if the customer is later than the time specified in this. Stick to the policy. Further information on reducing fail to attends and late attendance can be found in the Performance Team Leader Manual.

Changes within Job Roles

26. Jobcentre Plus advisers work in a constantly changing environment. The responsibility for managing changes locally lies with ATMs, but everybody is responsible for identifying problems and suggesting solutions.

27. Steps can be taken to minimise the effect of changes in job roles:

- give as much advance notice as possible of changes to advisory work.
- focus on the benefits of the change.
- establish the limits of local authority/discretion regarding the change.
- encourage debate on how the changes can be implemented locally, giving affected staff ownership of those areas which they can influence.

28. Negotiating change implementation in this way rather than imposing it has a number of benefits:

- it gives people as much advance notice of the change as possible, allowing them to adapt their working practices.
- affected people participate in the change.
- unrealistic expectations are managed; local limits of discretion are established.
- advisers' experience is taken into account as part of the implementation process.

Interview Environment

29. The interview environment must be as comfortable as possible so that customers and advisers can concentrate, making the interview effective. There are several areas to consider when assessing the interview

environment and observing interviews that can have an effect on interview quality. This section looks at some of these and some remedial action.

Location of Equipment/Facilities

30. Any equipment the adviser uses in their normal job must be within easy reach of their desk so that the flow of the interview isn't disturbed by their long absence. In contrast, any shared equipment (for example printers) must not be too close to the interview area to cause distractions when other people use it. It is important to get the balance right.

Lack of Privacy

31. As part of interview preparation, the adviser should check if the customer requires a private interview room. The Appointment Booking System allows a room to be booked but this is often dependent on the customer requesting it. Reasons for requiring a private room include:

- customer has a hearing impairment making communication in the main interview area difficult.
- customer has emotional issues.
- confidential information is to be discussed.

Temperature

32. It will be difficult for advisers and customers to concentrate if they are uncomfortably hot or cold. Take steps to prevent either of these extremes occurring.

Noise

33. Background noise is certain to occur in an open plan layout, especially when large numbers of interviews are taking place. Take action to reduce avoidable noise from sources such as telephone calls, public/staff access terminals and printers, nearby conversations, etc.

34. Music can be useful in providing a non-physical barrier, creating a degree of privacy, but make sure that the volume is limited to a level that doesn't interfere with the course of business.

Volume of Conversations

35. The noise generated by several simultaneous interviews can be considerable. Some people are unaware of just how loudly they talk or how far their voice projects. For advisers this can cause problems for their colleagues and result in the loss of privacy for customers.

Telephone Calls

36. Encourage advisers to divert their telephones to colleagues during interviews.

37. Staff should not use their mobile phones in the office and customers should be encouraged to turn theirs off.

38. Telephones for public use should be located away from interview areas to cause as little disturbance as possible.

Special Interview Needs

39. Ensure advisers make arrangements for interviews with people with special needs. For example, people with hearing impairments may need

induction loops, lip speakers or sign language interpreters. A longer interview may be necessary.

Office Layout

40. The layout of the office area must take account of the needs of both advisers and customers. Consider levels of lighting, noise and temperature and access for disabled people.

Reception

41. Make sure there is sufficient reception/floorwalking resource to meet demand to avoid customers approaching advisers and disrupting interviews.

Interruptions

42. Adopt an office strategy that avoids interruptions of any kind during interviews. For this to work it may be necessary to make arrangements for dealing with queries from inexperienced staff.

Difficult Interviews

43. Most contact with customers are efficient, effective and friendly. Some interviews, however, may cause extra pressure whether there is hostility or not. Examples of difficult interviews:

Example	Suggested Action (take account of this during observation and feedback)
Communication is through an interpreter	Allow more time for the interview.
Customer has learning and/or emotional difficulties	The work targeted interview may take place over several interviews.
Customer has been affected by the availability, quality or reputation of local provision	Seek advice from your District Third Party Provision Manager (TPPM) if there are no improvements. Encourage advisers to identify and report gaps in available provision. Consider use of the Flexible Support Fund to fill any gaps in local provision but only after all other avenues of financial support have been fully explored and it is confirmed that none is available before committing expenditure.
Customer's benefit has been affected by a labour market decision	Avoid discussing benefits in the work focused interview. Sometimes it may be necessary to consider postponing the interview if the customer is unresponsive until the benefit situation has been resolved.

Complaints from Customers

44. These should be dealt with impartially. For example where sanctions have been imposed, direct the complaint to the regulation, steering it away from a member of staff.

Lack of Training/Development/Management Support

45. Customer Service Operations Managers (CSOMs) have to strike a balance between meeting the training needs of advisers and staffing the office. Adviser learning and development can come second to chasing targets; staff not being released for fear of missing targets. This, however, is a false economy. Recent evidence suggests that if advisers follow the work targeted interview structure (using PIGEEP) correctly, they are more successful in getting people into jobs than those who don't. As adviser training focuses on using PIGEEP, the benefits are obvious and almost immediate.

46. New advisers must undertake appropriate training before conducting unsupervised interviews. Advisers with some experience are still likely to benefit from further training and development to:

- allow them to develop new skills, ideas and methods;
- share good practice;
- feel valued;
- prevent complacency and maintain standards; and
- ensure interviews are work targeted.

47. Observations undertaken as part of the QAF are instrumental in identifying training and development needs. Feedback, following observations, is an opportunity to discuss this with advisers and allows ATMs to show commitment to their adviser's development. ATMs should design a tailored package to support the adviser's particular development needs. This could include:

- formal out of office training courses.
- mentoring.
- PC based learning.
- observations of other advisers (particularly those who demonstrate best practice in specific areas).
- coaching.

48. ATMs, by undertaking observations and giving feedback, are more able to find out if any external factors adversely affect interviews. Failure to tackle external factors can be seen as poor customer service by customers and lack of management support by advisers. There are a number of potential consequences including:

- interview quality, performance and results will continue to be adversely affected.
- the credibility of processes such as appraisal will suffer if they appear to be driven solely by performance without regard for difficulties imposed by working conditions.
- increase in staff sickness and turnover.
- Legal proceedings.

Starting to use the QAF

49. Prepare a plan to explain what the QAF is and how it will be used within the office. Circulate this to all staff. As a part of the plan, issue and explain the QAF standards. Explain how these will be linked to the training and performance and development processes within the office. The office plan will need to clearly define:

- the roles of all ATMs and their individual responsibilities for each step within the QAF observation process;
- how the agreement of personal objectives will take place, and how these will then feed into the appraisal system;
- clear guidelines on the number of QAF observations per adviser; the minimum is one QAF per month, but some advisers will, however, need more frequent observation and support, especially new and experienced staff;
- arrangements for regular feedback to report on how QAF use within the office is progressing and working. Examples might include looking at how QAF is used in the District, or team needs that are emerging from QAF use. Feedback might be on a monthly basis at staff meetings, or through any district/local marketing magazine. Good practice should be shared throughout the district; and
- office systems dealing with learning and development, so that individual needs identified from observations and discussions can be systematically addressed by the completion, implementation and evaluation of individual training plans.

50. Finally, build into the plan a process for making sure that the most up-to-date version of the QAF is known and used within the office/District.

Approach to observation (QAF Checklists 1, 2 and 3)

Training for observers

51. The plan will also need to ensure that everyone using the QAF is trained in its use and able to use it reliably and effectively. As a check on this carry out regular observation of all observers conducting the assessment and feedback process and provide feedback to observers on their performance. Provide training/development where appropriate. Ensure the feedback is delivered constructively and content reflects strengths and addresses areas for development, leading to improvements in performance.

52. ATMs and their line managers must share good practice within the office.

53. The Learning Support Sites and Learning Centres page and the Civil Service Learning site have a range of products that will give you the opportunity to develop the skills and techniques needed to be able to coach your team members. Once you have registered and are in the Civil Service Learning site, you can see the coaching material available if you use the 'Look for Learning' search facility (on the top right hand side of the page) and type in 'coaching' and click the 'Go' button.

Agreeing the observation process with the adviser

54. The primary emphasis in QAF observation is the WTI process and its supporting skills, but the observed interviews must also be 'right' procedurally. Other aspects of the advisory role are tested in QAF Checklist 4 to gain a rounded picture of adviser performance.

55. The observer should agree with adviser:

- which interviews will be observed;
- how many interviews will be observed;
- how often interviews will be observed (at least one a month);

- if the adviser is multi-functioning, what type(s) of interviews will be observed;
- what aspect is being observed, for example quality in terms of skills, or compliance with the procedures; and
- for QAF Checklist 4, the activities relevant to the adviser's role should be decided at the beginning of the observational period; for experienced advisers this will probably be at the start of the year or if their job role changes; for new advisers, it's likely to be updated more regularly.

56. They should also agree how to explain to the customer both the observer's presence during the interview and that it is the adviser, not the customer, who is under observation.

57. A single observation will not be sufficient to cover the application of all skills. A particular observation could be on one (or at most two) key behaviours, for example, evaluating and exploring.

Deciding what and how much to observe

58. An interview can be observed from several viewpoints. However, it is not practical to observe an interview from all of those viewpoints simultaneously. For example, it is possible to observe an interview to evaluate:

- whether the adviser conducted the interview in structured way, (QAF 2)
- how the adviser applied their interviewing skills, (QAF 1), or
- how the adviser applied their specialist knowledge (QAF 3).

59. Subsequent observations may then focus upon specific developmental needs and/or good practice identified. Guidance on using the QAF Checklists is given in Chapter 7.

60. The observation Checklists are available for printing on the intranet.

61. Don't use more than one observation Checklist or try to observe other aspects at the same time.

Interview structure and observation

62. It is important to remember that:

- it is good practice not to cover too much in one observation as it is likely the interview being observed will include areas outside the QAF Checklist being used.
- although discussions will vary depending upon the customer's circumstances and the type of interview, the process is similar in most interviews.
- good quality interviews are organised and purposeful and go through distinct stages.

63. In contrast, an interview structure which is disorganised, or which encourages automatic probing of a standard list of topics, is wasteful and inefficient.

64. When observing, assess whether the adviser was:

- flexible in their approach whilst performing an acceptable WTI interview; or
- following some internal checklist of their own, taking no account of customer needs or the need for a WTI approach.

Feedback

65. After each observation:

- discuss the results as soon as possible with the adviser (book some time in the adviser's diary for this). If the observer cannot give feedback immediately, they should discuss performance briefly with the adviser and make sure they provide full feedback within 2 days;
- identify any factors beyond the adviser's control that may have influenced the conduct of the interview;
- agree appropriate action to develop or maintain interview quality. These may include office action, on-the-job coaching, or re-training; and
- where applicable, agree when to observe further interviews, to confirm that interview quality has improved.

66. As a general rule, feedback and discussion will be longer and more detailed with a new/inexperienced adviser when the observation is part of a longer coaching programme and somewhat shorter with a highly skilled/competent adviser when the check may be just to ensure there is no complacency and the excellent standard is being maintained.

Good Practice for ATMs giving feedback after observing interviews

67. 10 Tips for Giving Good Feedback:

- Be **specific** rather than general. Give specific, accurate examples of what a person has actually done.
- Feedback should describe **facts**. It should be **non-critical** in the sense of avoiding negative evaluation, so always try to use a neutral factual statement and avoid value words such as good/bad/poor/well.
- **Timing** is important. Ideally, feedback should be given immediately after the interview rather than being delayed. The adviser should have enough time to compose themselves and reflect on what they have done, but not so long that they have forgotten the interview. The interview should still be clear in the PA's mind.
- Feedback, like an interview, should be a two-way exchange. The adviser should be invited to speak first, comment throughout and ask questions as you go through and at the end.
- **Listen** to what the adviser says – the things they reflect back on are the things that they remember most about the interview. These are the things on which to focus your feedback.
- Most people can only assimilate **3 or 4 points** at a time. Feedback should be given in small enough chunks so the person can assimilate the information and remember it. Select chunks of information that are most important and limit your feedback to not more than 3-4 points. Don't feel that you have to give the adviser every piece of information. Only give as much information as the person can make use of.
- Concentrate on what was done, what was achieved and highlight a few selected **areas for improvement** rather than focusing on the PA's shortcomings.
- Feedback should be given in **plain language**. Try not to use jargon, simplify and explain where necessary, and check the PA understands.

- Feedback needs to be **honest but sensitive**. Being “nice” will not help the adviser to develop their skills. Think carefully about what to say and try not to make it a criticism.
- Be **constructive**. In giving feedback you should try to help people to work out for themselves where their strengths and support needs are and what needs to be done next.

68. Suggested Feedback Structure:

- Allow time for you and the adviser to reflect and relax. Ask the adviser to spend a few minutes noting down the key things they did well, and something which they felt they would like to improve on.
- You should also do this – try and stick to 4 or 5 things which they did particularly well and one or two things which they could improve on. Remember to relate this to the aims and objectives of the particular skills practice.
- Give the adviser the first chance to talk. It is much more powerful for them to identify their strengths and weaknesses rather than face the criticism of another. Evidence can then be presented to qualify or develop the adviser's own analysis.
- Listen and follow up as appropriate with your feedback, supporting where the adviser was right about their performance and supporting where their performance is different to what they thought.
- Be specific and give examples of exactly what was achieved, exactly how the adviser performed to elaborate on the feedback so far.
- Cover only the main points. Try to limit this to 3-4 points. Include what was achieved and areas for improvement.
- Be positive and supportive.
- Give praise. Where an adviser has done a particularly good interview - acknowledge their effort.
- Check the adviser understands and give opportunity to ask questions.
- Use the feedback session after the interview to help the adviser identify next steps in building up their interviewing skills.

Observation Checklist for Customer Service Operations Managers

69. An Observation Checklist for Customer Service Operations Managers (CSOMs) can be found in Annex 1. This can be used by CSOMs as a simple compliance tool whilst observing the ATM's one to one feedback discussion with the adviser.

Non-interview activity – gathering and evaluating evidence (QAF Checklists 4 and 5)

70. Other aspects of the advisory role are tested in QAF Checklists 4 and 5 to gain a rounded picture of the adviser performance. QAF Checklist 4 was designed to give recognition to advisers' non interview activity, and QAF Checklist 5 relates to knowledge and how well advisers understand their role.

71. The activities listed on QAF Checklist 4 may not apply to all advisory job roles. It should be agreed at the beginning of the QAF process (or beginning of the appraisal year), which of the activities are relevant to the individual adviser so that they are clear which activities they will be 'scored' on. These

should also be consistent with the adviser's objectives. Once agreed the relevant activities should be 'ticked' on a sample QAF Checklist 4 in the column called 'role' for reference.

72. Evidence is gathered for QAFs Checklists 4 and 5 during a one to one discussion, although it may be that some behaviour is observed through day to day contact with an adviser. It is the adviser's responsibility to produce evidence to present during the discussion. As with QAF Checklists 1, 2 and 3 it should be agreed beforehand which areas of performance are to be discussed.

73. The adviser needs to prove that they meet one of the standards for each of the pre-selected activities. Evidence should be gathered throughout the year and the adviser may have lots of evidence, if so, they need only select the evidence that they think demonstrate best their competence in each specific activity.

74. As with QAF Checklists 1, 2 and 3 the performance rating (score) must be based on evidence, not opinion. The ATM should consider the quality of the evidence and not the quantity of it. They should consider it on its factualness and not in the way that it's presented. The evidence should be compared with the standards for each activity to enable the ATM to 'score' it objectively as 'Best Practice', 'OK for Role' or 'Development Need'.

Summary of Best Practice

75. In summary:

- communicate the importance of using the QAF Checklists and plans for using them to all relevant people;
- ensure you have the relevant skills to use each of the QAF Checklists prior to starting;
- inform advisers before using a specific QAF Checklist – i.e. what they will be looking for, observing or discussing with them;
- your feedback should be given as soon as possible (when using observation QAF Checklists); and
- next steps/development plans which include future QAF Checklists should be agreed.

Annex 1 - Observation Checklist for Customer Service Operations Managers

Activity/Behaviour to be Observed	Yes/No
ATM agrees observation process with adviser (which QAF Checklist, where they will sit, etc)	
ATM completes QAF Checklist appropriately during interview	
ATM does not participate in the interview (unless asked for guidance by adviser)	
ATM asks adviser to note down key things that went well and something to improve on.	
ATM first asks adviser for their self-assessment	
ATM provides 3 or 4 main points of positive behaviours	

ATM backs up these points with evidence from the interview observations	
ATM highlights one or two areas for improvement, providing examples as appropriate	
ATM is positive and supportive	
ATM checks adviser's understanding	
ATM provides adviser opportunity to ask questions	
ATM works with adviser to identify next steps in building on their interviewing skills (which are added to adviser 's Performance Improvement Plan)	