

Quality Assurance Guidance

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Document History

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<u>Contents</u>	<u>Page Number</u>
Introduction	3
Purpose of the guidance	3
Key Requirements	4 – 5
Responsibilities and Expectations	6 – 11
MCA Quality Assessment Procedures	12 – 19
Practice Observation Procedures	19 – 25
The future of Quality Assurance at the Parole Board	25
What do I do if?	25 – 28

Introduction

- 1.1 The Parole Board operates two systems of peer led quality assessment, which is a two-way process between the assessor and the member being assessed. This is to help ensure that, in conducting MCA panels and oral hearings, members meet the required standard of performance. For MCA procedures, decision letters and directions are sampled to be quality assessed by an accredited member ("assessor") against Parole Board expectations, instructions and the relevant competencies. For oral hearings, a member's involvement from planning through to agreeing the panel's decision letter is also assessed by an accredited member ("practice observer") – again, according to Parole Board expectations, instructions and the relevant competencies.
- 1.2 As a member undergoing MCA QA (quality assessment) or practice observation, you will receive feedback about your participation and can be involved in agreeing a report which records the overall effectiveness of your performance. The processes for assessing members' participation in MCA and oral hearing assignments differ but the principle of undertaking assessments to help maintain standards and improve member performance is common to MCA QA and practice observation.

Purpose of this guidance

- 2.1 This guidance explains the Parole Board's procedures for MCA QA and practice observation. In MCA QA, an assessor monitors the quality of MCA panel decision letters and directions and rates their effectiveness. In practice observation, a practice observer observes panel chairs and co-panellists through all stages of an oral hearing, from planning to agreement of the panel decision letter.
- 2.2 In each of these procedures:
 - assessments are made against set competencies and required standard of performance.
 - formal feedback is provided which can be discussed with the assessor/practice observer if there are any issues the member wishes to raise.
 - documentation and next steps have been developed to record and action the outcomes of these peer reviews.
- 2.3 This guidance explains each of these steps and places the assessment procedures in a wider organisational context.

Key requirements

Quality assurance framework

- 3.1 No organisation can properly organise and deliver quality outputs without established procedures and accepted standards for ways of working. The Parole Board delivers a demanding schedule of reviews and hearings reflecting its legal powers and statutory functions. Its ways of working derive directly from the Parole Board Rules and are set out in a succession of instructions and practice advice which is reinforced and contextualised through guidance, training courses, workshops, conferences, newsletters and monitoring exercises.
- 3.2 An organisation may also need to demonstrate *externally* that it operates on the basis of established principles and processes. In the case of the Parole Board, this demands high standards of integrity and fairness. Credibility and legitimacy must be demonstrated to Ministers, government officials and partner agencies. Stakeholders include prisoners, their representatives and not least the public and victims of crime.
- 3.3 The Parole Board's oversight of decision-making at key referral points takes the form of its "quality assurance framework". This reflects the Board's statutory responsibilities, its mission and values. Quality assurance focuses on how well risk assessment and decision-making are conducted. By evaluating organisational capability and skills, quality assurance activities contribute to continuous improvement by informing learning, training and corporate knowledge.
- 3.4 Quality assurance is not, therefore, an end in its own right but an integral part of the Board's reflection and decision-making processes. Its overarching aims are:
 - to ensure that decisions are logical, fair, evidence-based and reflect current law and guidance.
 - to ensure that directions are viable and effectively progress a case.
 - to ensure that practice safeguards the reputation of the Board and promotes fair treatment and respect.
- 3.5 Currently, the components of quality assurance include guidance and developmental activities; accreditation processes; performance data; reviews of complaints and compliments or other feedback; mentoring and coaching; and Review Committee outcomes. Peer review provides another key component through MCA quality assessment (MCA QA) and oral hearing practice observations. All quality assurance activities must be underpinned by the Parole Board members' core competency framework.

Core competencies

- 3.6 Expectations about how members should carry out their Parole Board duties are set out as core competencies. The Parole Board's core competency framework sets out expectations regarding members' knowledge, values and behaviour. These elements are classified and described with indicators of good performance in the competency framework.
- 3.7 The competencies are clustered in five domains:
- **Knowledge & Values:** to ensure a suitable level of knowledge of the jurisdiction, law and procedure of the Parole Board and an understanding of the appropriate principles and standards
 - **Communication:** to ensure effective communication between chairs, members, parties and members of staff and that all written communication is clearly drafted
 - **Conduct of cases:** to ensure fair and timely disposal of cases
 - **Evidence:** to ensure that all relevant issues are addressed by eliciting and managing evidence
 - **Decision-making:** to ensure effective deliberation, structured decision-making and disposal of cases.
- 3.8 These competencies reflect requirements driven by the Parole Board Rules and are the bedrock of all procedures and policies concerning Parole Board members. They therefore set the standard of competence sought in recruitment and selection; development and training; capacity to undertake various casework roles (accreditation); and quality assessments (MCA QA and practice observation). They inform other processes such as mentoring and underpin elements of the Board's business plan.
- 3.9 The Parole Board member competency framework was updated and ratified in 2012. It derives primarily from expectations on members of the tribunal service (2007 version, Judicial Studies Board/Judicial College) but adapted for the specific duties and terminology of the Parole Board. The Framework was amended and ratified in November 2013 and November 2016 to take into account procedural changes.
- 3.10 Assessing the quality of decision-making and member performance in MCA and oral hearing activities is based upon the performance indicators in the competency framework.

Responsibilities and Expectations

Parole Board members

- 4.1 The quality assurance methods of MCA QA and practice observation are most effectively provided member-to-member. Training, mentoring, coaching and other developmental activities are also best delivered member-to-member. Through these means of quality assurance, good practice in risk assessment and decision-making are identified and taken forward by the secretariat to implement into learning opportunities and the development of guidance.
- 4.2 The Board's values reflect the independence of members making impartial decisions and engaging with partners to meet organisational responsibilities and expectations. Individuals must feel confident and well-supported in taking and agreeing decisions. The organisation operates on a collegiate basis, maintaining respectful working relationships between members and other participants in the parole process. Fairness underpins its dealing with cases while protecting the public and showing sensitivity to victims.
- 4.3 Two other key values for members are transparency and reflectiveness. First, there is a presumption of openness and disclosure concerning Parole Board work and performance. Secondly, reflection is the key to understanding organisational and individual performances and how these may be improved. Quality assurance activities can contribute insights about improvement as long as feedback is delivered with empathy and in ways which support the learning process.
- 4.4 The Parole Board members' core competency framework has an expectation that all members should show professionalism and commitment by providing high standards of public service. This is expressed behaviourally in terms of a member's knowledge and values:
 - shows an ability and willingness to learn and develop professionally
 - complies with the training requirements of the Board and takes responsibility for his/her own professional development.
- 4.5 This means there is an expectation that members will actively and willingly engage with assessment procedures and incorporate legitimate feedback into their learning and self-improvement.

Parole Board structures

- 4.6 Collaboration between Parole Board members and the secretariat occurs in everyday case management and in various project working groups. These groups ensure that learning from quality assurance is fed into training and through developing guidance.

- 4.7 Quality Assessment Standardisations Meetings (QASM) attended by assessors have taken place since June 2015 where the MCA QA process has been scrutinised, reviewed and improved. The meetings are used to benchmark assessments, ensure consistency of practice and disseminate learning to members being assessed and the members undertaking the assessments. The meetings have also been used to develop and improve the MCA QA process and workshop new approaches to wider quality assurance activities.
- 4.8 The Standards Committee provides oversight and guidance about quality assurance and professional development. Its remit includes member accreditation, competency and performance; policy development; and maintenance of standards of practice.
- 4.9 The Review Committee reviews Parole Board decisions to release offenders or recommend a transfer to open conditions, where the offender is, within three years of the decision, charged with committing a serious further offence.
- 4.10 The Governance Hub services both the Standards Committee and the Review Committee
- 4.11 The Governance Hub and the People Hub work together to provide overall leadership and direction on quality assurance and professional development of members. They report on the Board's quality assurance strategy and ensure its fit with the organisation's strategic aims.
- 4.12 The Governance Hub ensures that resources are allocated to conduct benchmarking and standardisation procedures and the People Hub provide developmental support and additional training when QA identifies gaps in skill or learning.
- 4.13 Two key contributors to quality assurance are MCA QA and practice observation:
- MCA QA methods monitor standards and performance concerning decision letters and directions produced by MCA panels.
 - practice observation comprises review of panel chairs and co-panellists during an oral hearing and related activities.
- 4.14 The secretariat coordinates MCA QA and practice observation procedures by deploying assessors, dealing with the resultant feedback, preparing assessors, and staging standardisation meetings which allow MCA QA assessors to agree assessments and to benchmark standards. The work of the Review Committee and Standards Committee complements the assessment methods to help develop a continuous learning organisation by identifying, analysing and disseminating learning points.

- 4.15 The overriding ethos is one of support and fairness towards members undertaking and undergoing the quality assessment procedures of MCA QA and practice observation. Key to this is the use of core competencies as the criteria for performance. Consistent with the Board's values, the outcomes of MCA QA and practice observations are treated in confidence between the individual member and the secretariat. The assessor who is part of these processes is also bound by confidentiality.
- 4.16 Member anonymity plays its part during MCA QA procedures. The MCA QA assessor is not aware of the member's identity or assessment history. Members' comments are welcomed concerning fair recording and the effectiveness of feedback from an assessment. If they wish to challenge an assessment, MCA members may waive their right to anonymity by resolving issues direct with the QA assessor. Alternatively, they may retain anonymity and appeal to the MCA QA standardisation meeting. Assessors must attend these standardisation meetings which reinforce agreed standards. To ensure consistency of practice, members will only be listed for MCA QA work if they have attended the most recent standardisation meetings.

Assessors/practice observers

- 4.17 Like trainers and mentors, members who put themselves forward / express an interest in becoming an assessor/practice observer are selected on the basis of their experience and commitment. They must participate in a training workshop before undertaking assessments. In the case of MCA QA assessors, newly trained assessors can seek support from more experienced assessors. QA assessors are required to maintain regular attendance at standardisation meetings. These meetings review trends in MCA QA assessments, recommend any necessary changes in policy or practice, and evaluate contested assessments. Reviews of contested cases provoke debate about assessment standards, provide lessons about styles of assessing and provision of effective feedback, and confirm a final grading for the MCA decision letter or directions under review.
- 4.18 The foundation of quality assessment is the members' core competency framework which establishes expectations concerning member knowledge, values and behaviours. Assessors must employ these expectations and should embody the Board's values of transparency, reflectiveness, and fairness. These translate as aptitude to observe accurately, establish rapport, show respect, work collaboratively, remain objective, provide evidence and fully appreciate confidentiality. They must be prepared to analyse, explain, guide, handle feedback and work with any appeals or criticism.
- 4.19 Neither MCA QA assessors nor practice observers may interfere with a panel's independent decision-making. Both forms of quality assessment are two-way processes conducted by the assessor/observer and the panel

member in terms of strict confidence. Assessors and observers find that involvement in quality assessment activities provides continual insight into good practice and stimulates improvements in their own performance. A member’s mentor cannot act as MCA QA assessor or practice observer for that person.

4.20 Fee levels are set for MCA QA assessors and practice observers. These reflect the time commitment expected in preparing from a dossier, following panel correspondence, completing assessments and drafting feedback reports to a high standard and to strict timescales. For their fees, practice observers must attend a day’s oral hearings and subsequently agree a report with its recipient.

MCA quality assessing	One MCA member (two cases)	£150
	Two MCA members (four cases)	£300
Practice observing	Any two members (chair and/or co-panellists)	£450
	Observation for panel chair accreditation	£450
	One panel member (not for accreditation) either as panel chair or as co-panellist	£300

4.21 In particular circumstances, MCA QA assessors may claim for time spent supporting a member through a mentoring or coaching relationship by email, Skype or other means as arranged and agreed by the secretariat. Such fees are at the hourly non-casework rate.

Effective feedback about performance

4.22 As part of continuous improvement (which is an aim of the Board’s quality assurance framework), the high-level objective of MCA QA and practice observation is to provide peer-to-peer feedback in ways that contribute to the ethos of a learning organisation. Peer led review is seen as a component in a developmental model where standards can be monitored and maintained through effective feedback processes.

4.23 This puts a premium on provision of accurate, effective and sensitive feedback. Unless there is clear understanding of performance levels by a member, and what is needed to improve future delivery, that person will be less likely to be motivated to self-assess and develop. If done well, feedback increases awareness, reinforces good practice, improves confidence and self-esteem, and offers options for doing things better in future.

4.24 Effective feedback is balanced, structured, evidenced, and palatable to the recipient. Information offered about how well a member seems to be

performing, and about the consequences of their behaviour for others, must:

- be evaluated on the basis of required standards of performance/behaviour
- offer clear and specific details about observed behaviour which the member can control and change, presented as constructive and solution-focused learning points in a non-threatening style
- provide a balance of positive and less favourable evidence delivered in a non-judgemental manner and offered as information rather than directive advice or personal preference
- focus on essential issues or learning points in a well-structured format that does not overwhelm the recipient with criticism but blends commendation for good performance with suggestions for practice improvements.

4.25 Although some of these features of effective feedback are easier to achieve in practice observations (where there is personal interaction between the member and practice observer and no assessment report is submitted without resolution and agreement), they must also inform written feedback in MCA QA procedures. The hallmarks of effective feedback should characterise the reports of MCA QA assessors as well as practice observers. Assessors and observers are encouraged to use clear and constructive language in balanced, evidence-based, and competency-related reports.

4.26 Where assessment and feedback flow from the MCA QA and practice observation, these must reflect Parole Board values and encourage members to offer and receive feedback as part of maintaining respectful working relationships characterised by fairness, mutual support, transparency and reflectiveness.

4.27 Feedback about performance can arise too from self-reflection and other peer interactions. In particular, oral hearings provide opportunities for colleagues to reflect on proceedings and offer constructive feedback to one another about success in handling cases and performing as panellists. The mentoring process is also built around guidance and feedback.

4.28 The primary aim of assessment is to provide feedback on individual performance in order to increase awareness, reinforce good practice, improve confidence and self-esteem, and offer options for improving performance in future. However, a subsidiary aim of MCA QA and practice observation procedures is to capture a member's level of overall effectiveness for Parole Board processes such as accreditation.

Accreditation procedures

4.29 While the primary aim of assessment is for colleagues to share good practice and learn from personalised feedback, both MCA QA and practice observation outcomes are used in Parole Board accreditation processes. Along with evidence of experience and development, these outcomes contribute as shown:

Role	Milestones to achieving accreditation
MCA panellist	Training + mentoring (including co-working at least 4-8 MCA panels together and completion of a joint feedback report in which the mentor confirms competency) + two MCA QAs without "ineffective" gradings
Oral hearing co-panellist	Observe 2-3 days (approx. 4-6 cases), do not need to conclude all the cases. Sit supported over 2-4 days (approx. 4-8 cases), concluding at least 4 cases.
Oral hearing panel chair	Attained satisfactory rating in an MCA quality assessment of two cases + shadowing + training + mentoring + participation in 24 oral hearings + two successful practice observations.
Single-member panel chair	Shadowing + practice observation leading to joint feedback report in which the observer confirms competency
MCA duty member	Training + twice shadowing an experienced MCA duty member + joint feedback report in which the observer confirms competency
MCA peer mentor	One MCA QA with "effective" gradings + training
MCA quality assessor	Two MCA QAs with "effective" gradings + training + continued participation in MCA QA standardisation meetings
Practice observer	Training + continued deployment if no problems are raised and substantiated

4.30 In this table, "shadowing" is shorthand for sitting in and observing a panel at work. In the case of a new member who is about to undertake oral hearings, this will take place over two or three oral hearings, preferably with the designated mentor on the panel. A specialist Parole Board member should attend oral hearings where a psychiatrist or psychologist is a panel member, as appropriate. The number of hearings shadowed or observed can be increased on the basis of need and mentor recommendation. The mentor plays a formal role in agreeing when a member can proceed to undertake MCA casework alone or to sit independently as an oral hearing co-panellist.

4.31 Target points for holding practice observations are described elsewhere.

MCA Quality Assessment Procedures

Overview of MCA QA procedures

- 5.1 Quality assessment methods are applied to the outputs of MCA panels. A sample of one set of directions and one decision letter (directing or declining release) is selected at random from a member's caseload and is peer reviewed against expected standards of the competency framework and the MCA guidance.
- 5.2 Practice observations are a different form of quality assessment but both MCA QA and practice observation activities address how well risk assessment and decision-making are conducted and recorded. Both are based on agreed standards derived from the members' core competency framework.
- 5.3 The purposes of quality assessing MCA decisions and directions are:
- to ensure public protection is not compromised and the Parole Board's reputation for high quality, robust decision-making as recorded in these documents is maintained
 - to examine how consistently and appropriately members are applying MCA training, guidance and policy directions to risk assessment and decision-making in order to meet overarching standards
 - to identify good practice which can be shared more widely and detect practice that is below the expected standard which suggests gaps in organisational guidance and results in feedback that promotes development by the individual member.
- 5.4 These purposes are consistent with the Parole Board quality assurance framework, to which MCA QA activities contribute. It is the responsibility of the secretariat to identify for quality assessment a member who is approaching accreditation or seeking reaccreditation for MCA work or an experienced MCA member whose practice is due for periodic reassessment.
- 5.5 Assessment reports are shared with the MCA panel member. They offer feedback about performance which is designed to encourage improvement and best practice. This is the primary aim of MCA QA. However, an overall assessment grading must be given to each of the sampled cases because individual effectiveness contributes to Parole Board processes including accreditation.

Assessment methodology for MCA QA

- 5.6 MCA QA is a quality assessment mechanism. MCA QA assessors are members who have put themselves forward / expressed an interest to

assess peers' practice as part of a commitment to maintaining standards and supporting colleagues' development and improvement. Their accreditation, training, fee levels, and commitment to regular standardisation workshops are set out elsewhere.

- 5.7 MCA QA assessors submit possible dates through the relevant monthly page in the Web Access Module (WAM) system. When rostered on a specified day, they are sent electronically the dossier and MCA panel output for two cases. One case is a decision letter (directing *or* declining release) and the other is a set of directions for an oral hearing. Outside this requirement, sampling is random within a caseload for the MCA panel sitting on a specified date.
- 5.8 The secretariat informs the MCA member which two cases from a recent panel have been submitted for quality assessment. The same dossier as the one provided for the MCA panel plus the resulting decision/directions are sent to the assessor anonymously, the MCA member's name having been erased. The assessor is, therefore, unaware of the MCA member's identity. The assessor is also not aware of previous assessment outcomes for this MCA member (or whether it is their first assessment of an MCA panel, seeking initial MCA accreditation) and does not know why cases have been sent for assessment.
- 5.9 The MCA QA assessor thoroughly reads the dossier in each case as though completing the decision; then considers the panel's written decision or directions carefully and reflectively. The criteria for the assessment are based on the members' competency framework and directly reflect MCA guidance. Key pointers for good practice have been summarised and published for MCA panels as a checklist for drafting decision letters and another for setting directions.
- 5.10 The assessment report form used by the MCA QA assessor differs from a decision letter or set of directions. Report forms are structured to reflect key elements of MCA guidance. There is a report form for assessing decision letters and another for assessing directions. In Word format, the boxes in the documents expand to accommodate text. As part of each report form, relevant competencies are listed to accentuate the link between the assessment and the standards set.
- 5.11 MCA QA assessors make ratings for each element of the decision letter or set of directions. They write comments to explain their findings. Aspects of good practice are commended and practice that is below the expected standard or questionable performance is identified. To avoid assessments appearing to be an exercise in box-ticking, the overarching aims for the task must be kept in mind. The overarching aims are defined at the start of each report form. These statements set the context and focus attention on the *overall* effectiveness of the work being assessed. The aims are:

Overarching aims for MCA decision letters:

- effective decision letters provide sufficient evidence in support of a clear decision against the Parole Board tests, follow Parole Board templates and meet the requirements of MCA Guidance
- effective practice safeguards the reputation of the Board and promotes fairness and respect.

Overarching aims for MCA directions:

- effective directions follow Parole Board templates and meet the requirements of MCA Guidance; they are likely to lead to viable oral hearings without undue panel chair directions or deferral
- effective practice safeguards the reputation of the Board and promotes fairness and respect.

5.12 MCA QA does not seek to challenge the decision of the panel. The role of the assessor is not to question the judgement and independence of the MCA member. However, it is legitimate to consider whether decision-making was reasonable on the basis of the evidence provided and to assess whether actions have been justified and adequately *explained* in the MCA decision letter or set of directions. On very rare occasions, MCA decisions which seem unsafe may be brought to the attention of the secretariat by the QA assessor. Consideration can be given by the secretariat outside the QA process to matters which appear, on the face of available evidence, to undermine fair treatment or public protection.

5.13 The MCA QA assessor submits the completed report form to the secretariat on the date scheduled for assessment. Reports are signed off with the assessor's name though, at this stage, the MCA member remains anonymous. The assessor's comments which accompany the ratings are effective feedback for the MCA member, balancing points of good performance with suggestions for practice improvements.

5.14 An overall grading is recorded because the general effectiveness of the decision letter or set of directions contributes to accreditation and governs what happens next in the assessment process. Those implications are set out elsewhere. Reflecting the overarching aims, the gradings used in MCA QA are:

Gradings for MCA decision letters:

- **Effective:** letters follow the Parole Board template and MCA Guidance and provide sufficient evidence in support of a clear decision against the Parole Board tests

- **Adequate:** letters are generally effective but demonstrate some shortcomings against the expected standard
- **Ineffective:** letters do not meet the expected standard in one or more significant areas.

Gradings for MCA directions:

- **Effective:** directions follow the Parole Board template and MCA Guidance and are likely to lead to a viable oral hearing without undue panel chair directions or deferral
- **Adequate:** directions are generally effective but demonstrate some shortcomings against the expected standard – the panel chair may have to make further directions
- **Ineffective:** directions do not meet the expected standard in one or more significant areas – the panel chair will have to undertake substantial further work.

5.15 In broad terms, gradings of “effective” or “adequate” are interpreted as meeting the quality standards of MCA guidance and the overarching aims. An “ineffective” grading implies practice that is below the expected standard which leaves the MCA decision unworkable or open to challenge. Characteristically, “ineffective” and “adequate” gradings result from cumulative weaknesses and not one single error or failing.

5.16 Both assessment forms include a comments box for the MCA member to reflect points of agreement or disagreement with assessments.

Feedback procedures for MCA QA

5.17 On the scheduled date, two MCA QA report forms are returned to the secretariat by the assessor. They are shared by the secretariat with the MCA panel member. If areas for improvement are identified, support and training can be offered in the accompanying email. The MCA panel member is given 14 days to provide feedback on the assessment, using the comments box on the report form.

5.18 Commonly, the MCA member accepts the assessment and its feedback, even if qualifying comments are added. Comments can be fed back to the MCA QA assessor by the secretariat for information and as a stimulus to the assessor’s own development and improvement. The assessment is recorded by the secretariat and consequential actions (such as developmental support, reassessment or accreditation) are taken. The reassessment process is described elsewhere.

- 5.19 Less commonly, an MCA member challenges the MCA QA assessment outcome in one or both report forms. The reasons set out in the comments box by the MCA member are reviewed by the Parole Board secretariat; this may include explaining the basis of the assessment and seeking resolution of differences in terms of the MCA QA grading process. If this does not resolve the issue, the MCA QA assessor is copied in to the (anonymised) comments and asked to consider the member's views and to review the assessment.
- 5.20 If there is no satisfactory resolution from the MCA member's point of view, then two opportunities present themselves:

Discussion between the MCA member and the MCA QA assessor:

- The MCA member is invited by the secretariat to waive anonymity and to discuss the assessment directly with the MCA QA assessor in order to resolve disagreement which may be about the grading, the quality of the decision letter or set of directions, and its effectiveness in conveying the reasoning behind the MCA decision.
- This discussion is facilitated by the secretariat which helps arrange a convenient time for a telephone or Skype call to be staged between the MCA member and the QA assessor. The degree of resolution from their discussions is shared with the secretariat which takes the necessary next steps.

Referral of contested cases to an MCA QA standardisation meeting:

- If resolution cannot be reached through direct discussions, the impasse is reported to the secretariat who offer to take the case to one of the regular MCA QA standardisation meetings. Except in exceptional circumstances, such as where 'effective' gradings are required for accreditation, only unresolved 'ineffective' gradings will be referred to the standardisation meetings. All MCA QA assessors are required to participate in a minimum number of these meetings as part of their continuing accreditation and development.
- In order to consider any such unresolved cases of disagreement regarding an MCA QA assessment, MCA QA assessors are issued with the dossier, the anonymised MCA decision letter or set of directions, the anonymised QA assessment report, and the member's comments. Assessors review contested cases and evaluate assessments, the assessor's feedback and the MCA member's responses.
- Having completed this preparatory work, MCA QA assessors attend a standardisation meeting to debate cases systematically. Discussions result in a final agreed grading for reviewed cases. Findings and reasons are recorded by the secretariat in minutes which are published on

SharePoint and notified via the newsletter to the membership (without prisoner, member or assessor names), including the final agreed grading for each contested assessment. The MCA QA standardisation meetings are open to any Parole Board member to observe on application to the secretariat.

- The meeting's agreed findings inform the secretariat's next steps in terms of recording a final assessment grading and taking the necessary administrative actions. This grading is communicated to the member. The original assessment may be confirmed by the meeting or the grading may be varied favourably or adversely. This may have implications for the member's accreditation, continuing MCA practice, or reassessment.
- Since MCA QA meetings are held some time apart and timings could delay individual progress, the member can opt for a new sample of cases to be reviewed by a different MCA QA assessor after four weeks. This may be the case in particular if accreditation is awaited. The reassessment process can be undertaken while the contested assessment is referred to the MCA QA standardisation meeting.

Actioning MCA QA assessments

- 5.21 The purpose of the MCA QA process is to contribute to the Parole Board's quality assurance programme by reviewing how well risk assessment and decision-making have been conducted in sampled MCA cases. On the individual level, its primary aim is to provide feedback to MCA panel members in ways designed to encourage improvement and best practice.
- 5.22 However, the MCA QA process also awards an overall grading to the general effectiveness of an MCA decision letter or set of directions. This overall grading may have consequences for the member in terms of gaining accreditation to undertake future MCA work. Wider consequences could include moving to more specialised roles in the Parole Board where accreditation and success in assessed casework must be taken into account by the secretariat.
- 5.23 An MCA member awarded an "ineffective" grading for one of the sampled cases will have additional MCA cases reviewed by a different MCA QA assessor around four weeks after the results of the initial QA have been agreed or resolved. The new MCA QA assessor will not know reassessment is under way. If an MCA panel is not suitably rostered at that stage, cases will be sampled the next available time the MCA member sits. This period between assessments is designed to be an opportunity to digest the assessment and feedback and to apply any improvements thought necessary to future MCA casework. The secretariat can offer support and developmental opportunities to encourage improvement, such as organising mentoring or coaching assistance.

- 5.24 Where both the freshly assessed cases are awarded “effective” or “adequate” grading, no exceptional action is taken by the secretariat and the outcomes of MCA QA are recorded as a successful assessment for the member. Reassessment will be undertaken periodically in future, as for any MCA member.
- 5.25 If, however, the new assessment results in another “ineffective” grading, the MCA member will be temporarily relieved from the MCA panel rota. The secretariat will offer support, training or coaching to the member who has not fully cleared the MCA QA process on reassessment. Various routes to improved practice are available:

Self-evaluation

- Receiving confirmed “ineffective” gradings is often enough to prompt an MCA member to revisit MCA guidance, review particular aspects of practice highlighted in MCA QA assessments, and participate again in MCA QA procedures. A further QA assessment of a mock panel (see below) resulting in “effective” or “adequate” gradings will be needed before the member can be listed again for MCA panels.

MCA casework workshops

- Occasional workshops are organised regionally for any Parole Board member to attend of their own volition.

Mock MCA panels

- Using cases from completed MCA panels, the member can be provided by the secretariat with a typical caseload to complete under standard timescales. Sampled cases are then issued anonymously to an MCA QA assessor. The assessor is asked to provide feedback and guidance in the usual way, unaware that the cases have been completed outside the listed panel rota as a mock MCA panel.
- As preparation, it is possible for the MCA member to receive coaching from another member. Both the MCA member and the coach will be issued with the same bundle of cases for a mock panel and will work through the cases together in a way which best works for them. This process will last until both the coach and MCA member agree that the MCA member is ready to complete a mock panel alone for assessment by a different QA assessor. If the cases assessed received at least two “adequate” gradings with no “ineffective” gradings, the member can then be listed on the rota for MCA panels in the usual way.

Two-member MCA panels

- A “live” MCA caseload is issued simultaneously to the MCA member and to a mentor to complete together under standard timescales, allowing them to compare and contrast resulting directions and decisions. It is the mentor’s directions and decisions which are formally issued from the first joint panel.
- Dialogue between the same two members, aimed at improving knowledge and understanding about the MCA process, is carried into a second panel. The MCA member drafts the directions and decisions which are checked by the mentor. Amendments are agreed before final versions are issued in the name of the MCA member.
- If further mentoring is agreed necessary, the two-member panel may continue for a number of iterations until the MCA member and mentor are satisfied with progress shown. Specific training or development needs can be identified in this way for the secretariat to progress with the MCA member.
- Once the member and the mentor agree no further two-member panels are needed, the member may re-enter the MCA QA procedure using a mock MCA panel for reassessment.

5.26 All stages of MCA QA are conducted in confidence, consistent with the aims of encouraging Parole Board members to reinforce good practice, increase self-confidence, and improve future performance. Cases are always sent anonymously to an MCA QA assessor. The history of a member’s assessment is never divulged by the secretariat. Members’ confidentiality is strictly observed. MCA QA standardisation meetings are conducted on the basis of cases and assessments having been anonymised for both members and assessors. Only the MCA member can choose to waive anonymity in order to discuss outcomes with the MCA QA assessor, undertake two-member panels or other forms of mentoring and development.

Practice observation Procedures

Overview of practice observation procedures

6.1 Practice observations are a quality assurance method used to assess members’ competencies exhibited during the oral hearing process and to provide the panel chair or co-panellist with practice feedback. Practice observers receive detailed training and guidance about the role before they are deployed. For a particular assessment, the practice observer attends an oral hearing to assess the effectiveness of a panel member’s practice against agreed standards. Members are offered feedback by the practice observer in the form of a brief discussion immediately after the hearing and

subsequently in a draft assessment report. Practice observation procedures differ from MCA QA methods, but both are forms of assessment which address how well risk assessment and decision-making are conducted and recorded. Both are based on standards taken from the members' core competency framework.

- 6.2 All Parole Board members undergo observation to assure good practice and provide opportunity for individual improvement. After a panel chair or a co-panellist has been trained, undertaken mentoring and worked independently on a number of oral hearings, practice observation is arranged to assess competence in the role. For panel chairs, a successful outcome leads to preliminary accreditation. Further practice observation follows with the aim of ratifying final accreditation as panel chair. Target stages for practice observation are 4-6 months (for co-panellist accreditation) and 9-10 months (to identify any further support needed) during a member's first year at the Board. Where an observation is for accreditation purposes, a balanced overview of performance might best be achieved by observing two hearings (two cases on the same day). Where one of the day's hearings is cancelled or deferred, an additional practice observation may need to be re-arranged.
- 6.3 Members established in the role of panel chair or co-panellist have periodic reassessment to assure continuing good practice. Members are practice observed for accreditation purposes and thereafter on a rolling basis. Observations can also be held to equip members to progress to more specialised roles in the Parole Board.
- 6.4 Using the core competencies as standards, a panel member's behaviour is observed, recorded, classified and evaluated to produce a grading of effectiveness and to generate personal feedback about observed practice. The exercise must not interfere with the independent decision-making of the panel. All observations must be conducted fairly and consistently. The practice observer must maintain strict confidentiality concerning findings and interaction with the member.
- 6.5 The primary aim of practice observation is to reinforce good practice, increase self-confidence, and improve future performance of the panel member. To support this aim, effective peer-to-peer feedback is essential. In the case of practice observation procedures, the member is actively involved throughout the process. The member and practice observer share views and resolve any disagreements about the observation, its implications and its relevance to future practice. Once these have been agreed, or otherwise raised with the secretariat, a final assessment report submitted to the secretariat.
- 6.6 A practice observer once trained for the role may assess the performance of *any* colleague. Whether or not accredited as panel chair, the observer may scrutinise the practice of a panel chair. Whether or not a specialist

Parole Board member, the observer may scrutinise the practice of a psychologist or psychiatrist member. This is because standards for assessment are clear and explicit in all roles. There are also advantages in sharing practice pointers between members with different backgrounds or experiences. Allocations are made whether or not the practice observer has previously sat with the panel member who is undergoing assessment.

- 6.7 Psychiatrist and psychologist members are observed and assessed on the basis of standards specific to their role in addition to the competencies relevant to all members, depending if they are deployed as panel chair or co-panellist. Psychiatrist and psychologist members will not be assessed on their specialist knowledge but rather on their contribution to the hearing and performance as an oral hearing panel member.
- 6.8 The exercise is called "practice observation" to distinguish it from *appraisal* which is a performance review procedure found in many organisations. Appraisal is commonly a line manager's evaluation or 360° assessment of an employee's performance across a set period against agreed standards, noting progress made in delivering assigned performance targets. By contrast, these features do *not* characterise the role and status of Parole Board members although other forms of regular performance review are possible. Instead, a practice observation is a one-off snapshot of performance at an oral hearing, taken by a peer as a contribution to the Board's quality assurance framework.
- 6.9 The practice observation exercise has limitations: being pre-announced, infrequent, restricted to the handling of one or two cases, and allowing members to put on their best show for an assessment. Despite these constraints, it has proved effective in identifying performance that is below the expected standard and unhelpful habits in practice, in reinforcing good performances and self-confidence, and in promoting individual improvement.

Assessment methodology for practice observation

- 6.10 The secretariat identifies the panel chair or co-panellist whose participation in oral hearings is due for assessment. Convenient dates are matched for the panel member due to sit and availability of a practice observer. Beforehand, practice observers have indicated possible dates in the monthly availability exercise. With as much notice as possible, the member and the observer are advised about the forthcoming observation exercise. The practice observer has no prior knowledge of the member's assessment history (unless they have together completed an earlier practice observation) but may be informed whether the practice observation will contribute to an accreditation process.
- 6.11 The secretariat's advisory email is accompanied by the members' core competency framework and a blank copy of the assessment form which the

named practice observer will use. The email is copied to the designated observer, the panel chair and the relevant Parole Board case manager. It reminds them that all future correspondence about cases assigned to the selected oral hearing must be copied simultaneously to the practice observer.

- 6.12 The practice observer must be party to all correspondence, pre- and post-hearing. This is because practice observation involves scrutiny of a panel in operation, including consideration of a member's performance throughout the history of the case once it is listed – from planning to final agreement of the panel decision letter. In the case of a panel chair in particular, observation includes quality and timeliness of panel chair directions, the handling of the case before and during the hearing, oversight of the panel, and drafting and editing of the panel decision letter.
- 6.13 In the case of a co-panellist, assessment extends to hearing planning, advice offered to the panel chair, performance on the day, and involvement in decision making including contribution to the panel decision letter. All these stages are described in the members' core competency framework. The aim is to provide the practice observer with a full and rounded view of a member's competence at oral hearing.
- 6.14 Once designated, the practice observer is expected to contact the member, usually by email, as soon as possible after the secretariat has announced the date and venue. This email will confirm the arrangements, reassure the member that the exercise is strictly confidential, reinforce the value of refreshing familiarity with the competency framework and the report form ahead of the hearing, and offer contact details. It suggests a very brief pre-hearing conversation at the start of the day and the desirability of a short post-hearing discussion before practice observation participants disperse.
- 6.15 Usually, the practice of two panel members' is observed on one day. They may be an established panel chair and a co-panellist or may be two co-panellists. The exception is a panel chair seeking accreditation who is observed alone. There may be other situations where only one member is observed because other arrangements cannot be made practice observers' fee levels are set out at paragraph 4.19. Occasionally, when one case for the day is postponed or cancelled, an additional practice observation may be set up to allow two hearings to be observed by the practice observer.
- 6.16 Prior to the oral hearing starting, the practice observer checks with the member the practical arrangements for the day, whether any exceptional circumstances have arisen that may affect performance, and how an assessment report will be submitted to the secretariat following consultation on the content.
- 6.17 With the panel chair, the practice observer agrees the best place to sit during video and face to face hearings to remain discrete but be able to

hear and observe the practice of the one or two members being assessed. The practice observer is introduced at the start of the hearing as a named Parole Board member who is present to observe the hearing and who will take no part in the decision making. At no point during the hearing or in pre- and post-hearing panel deliberations must the practice observer make any contribution or seek to influence discussions.

- 6.18 During the panel discussions and oral hearings, the practice observer observes proceedings and makes detailed notes. Checklists are available for the practice observer as prompt-sheets of relevant competencies to aid the observer's capture, classification and later reporting of evidence when observing a panel chair or co-panellist. The practice observer is free to adapt these checklists or keep alternative forms of record as long as observations are evidence-based, relate to the core competencies, and capture verbatim phrases or questions which may help illustrate points of feedback.
- 6.19 Towards the end of the hearing, the practice observer might briefly check through the notes in order to identify essential points of feedback (positive and negative). These are offered in a short confidential discussion with each member at the end of the day, if practicalities permit. The aims are to check the member's perceptions, to reassure, to raise only the most important issues, and to reinforce the next steps in collaborating together on an assessment report. Where it is not possible to stage a short post-hearing conversation in private, a discussion by Skype or telephone (if necessary, by email) should be undertaken as soon as possible after the hearing.
- 6.20 As soon as possible after the oral hearing has concluded, the practice observer drafts an assessment report and shares it with the member by email. There is an assessment report form for a panel chair and another for a co-panellist. In Word format, the boxes in the documents expand to accommodate text. In addition to contextual information, the report offers commentary about:
- good practice and positive evidence of relevant competencies demonstrated
 - competency areas that might have been better demonstrated.
- 6.21 To emphasise the relationship of assessment to required standards, the relevant core competencies are summarised as part of the report form. It is essential that the principles of effective feedback are followed by the practice observer in drafting the assessment report.
- 6.22 A draft outline report can be shared between practice observer and member before the decision letter has been circulated and agreed by the panel: immediacy of recall will be greatest for both the assessor and member shortly after the hearing. The member's comments are welcomed by the

practice observer. Contentious or sensitive points can be resolved by email, Skype or some other form of discussion. The report is updated by the practice observer once the member's contribution to decision-making and writing/agreeing the panel decision letter has been observed. This version of the report is also shared for the member to review and make any additional comments.

- 6.23 Only when the contents of the report form have been agreed and finalised, (or an irreconcilable difference of opinion notified to the secretariat), is it signed electronically by both parties and submitted to the secretariat. The member has opportunity to send observations to the secretariat in the form's comments box and is advised to keep a copy of the finalised assessment report and the feedback it offers. Commonly, any disagreements between the observer and member have been resolved satisfactorily between them: should disagreement remain, the Parole Board Secretariat will take appropriate action in the circumstances.
- 6.24 The practice observer and the secretariat have a duty of confidentiality regarding the assessment and its findings. With the member's agreement, the team may extend the circle of confidentiality to colleagues who might assist in any follow-up professional development. Some other Parole Board staff members may also have access to the practice observation and its outcomes, with or without the member's agreement, if necessary, including senior managers and the Parole Board Chair.

Actioning a practice observation report

- 6.25 Every practice observation report concludes the assessment with the observer answering Yes/No to two questions:
- On the basis of this observation, has the member sufficiently demonstrated the core competencies to chair/to sit as a co-panellist [*whichever is relevant*]?
 - Is training, coaching or mentoring support needed or requested?
- 6.26 Depending on the responses, which will have been discussed between the practice observer and member, the secretariat may follow up the practice observation. The primary emphasis of practice observation is support and guidance to make improvements and strengthen good practice, not fault-finding. So, when an observation raises cause for concern, the secretariat must support the member in improving performance. Where the practice observer and member have agreed appropriate further action, the secretariat pursues this as a personal development plan. The plan might suggest further practice observation in the near future, mentoring, coaching, shadowing a colleague's work, or further training.

- 6.27 If there remains disagreement between the member and the practice observer concerning the assessment or the evidence on which it was based, the member should contact the secretariat within seven working days from the assessment form being submitted. The case will be referred to a senior staff member to determine the best way forward.
- 6.28 If there are concerns about a practice observer's conduct in that role, these may be raised in the comments box of the assessment report which is shared with the secretariat. Ideally, the member will have voiced personal concerns directly with the practice observer if possible, citing the evidence and working to resolve issues. Where this has not been possible, the person being assessed may discuss concerns with a member of the secretariat.

The future of Quality Assurance at the Parole Board

- 7.1 The Parole Board's quality assurance framework gives future scope for reviewing additional member activities. Firstly, additional QA procedures could be applied to discrete areas such as the decision letters produced by oral hearing panels. We could also look at widening QA to look at members' work across the year with a more light touch approach. In both cases, the overriding aim would be to promote opportunities for member development and consolidation of good practice. Secondly, all the quality assurance information about members could be combined to form an overall view of their work, preferences and performance.
- 7.2 Such material would be amalgamated confidentially by the secretariat as well as being available to the member. Outcomes of peer reviews (MCA QA and practice observations) might fit alongside outcomes of the complaints procedure, reported work rates, developmental activities undertaken, progression to specialised roles, personal aspirations, Review Committee outcomes, and other reliable feedback to give a more rounded picture. Linking these materials into member activity reviews would provide systematic feedback to members and hence contribute to their ongoing practice improvement.

What do I do if...?

- 8.1 Parole Board members undergoing assessment by MCA QA or practice observation may be confronted with queries or difficulties. They may raise these with the secretariat, a mentor or former mentor, or (in the case of practice observation) the colleague making the practice observation. Otherwise, advice can be found in this guidance (cross-referred below) or through other sources.

Topic	Advice
If I am not sure of the standards used in peer reviews?	Both MCA QA and practice observations refer directly to the members' competency framework ¹ . Member guidance is available for MCA work and oral hearings. Checklists offer prompts to good practice in MCA work. All assessment report forms show which competencies are relevant to your particular form of MCA QA and practice observation.
If I am not sure why I am being assessed?	You are rostered for MCA QA if you are awaiting accreditation or it is your turn to be reassessed as an established MCA member. You are listed for a practice observation if you await accreditation as panellist or panel chair. There are target stages for such accreditations. You can also expect to be periodically practice observed once you are established in the role. It is always helpful to defend against unhelpful habits which can develop in anyone's performance and to receive feedback about areas of good practice.
If my practice is about to be reviewed?	The secretariat will let you know when cases have been sampled from a recent MCA panel for QA assessment. You will receive an email with details of a forthcoming practice observation. You then get an email from your practice observer. There may be another colleague being practice observed at the same oral hearing panel but you may not know until you arrive (unless you are the panel chair). However, the practice observer might let you know in advance that two people are being observed because this could impact on logistics for pre- and post-hearing discussions.
If I don't know who our assessors are?	Assessors review colleagues' work practices in order to maintain standards and help peers to improve performance. They have been prepared through attending a workshop and receiving advice and support. They get paid fees for undertaking the role. You will know who your practice observer is when your observation is announced. You will know your MCA QA assessor's identity when you receive the report form. You can also see a list of active MCA QA assessors in the minutes of MCA QA standardisation meetings.
If I am not sure who can assess/observe whom?	A trained and accredited MCA QA assessor is asked to review the practice of any MCA member. A trained and accredited practice observer can observe any oral hearing panellist: chair, co-panellist, or specialist Parole Board member. The standards of performance for any member are clearly set out. Specialist Parole Board member are observed for their contribution as panellist and not assessed on their specialised knowledge.

¹ The members' competency framework is contained within section 5 of the Member Administrative Policies and Processes ('MAPP') Guidance.

<p>If I am not sure whether my work is being assessed anonymously?</p>	<p>Cases sampled from your MCA panel are sent to an assessor with your name erased. There is a duty of confidentiality on your MCA assessor or practice observer and by the secretariat. You can waive your right to anonymity after the MCA QA assessment has been completed if you want to discuss it with your assessor (see below). If in doubt, contact the secretariat.</p>
<p>If I agree my assessment and overall grading?</p>	<p>In MCA QA, you have the opportunity to make observations in the comments box of the report form. That completes the process, short of implementing any feedback which has been offered to improve your future performance. You do not have to make comments: if you have not replied within a reasonable time, the QA assessment will be treated as completed. In practice observation, you get to discuss your assessment directly with your observer and then sign off the report form when it has been agreed and before submission to the secretariat. You will then want to implement the feedback or any developmental plan.</p>
<p>If I want to approach my MCA QA assessor?</p>	<p>MCA QA assessors respect members' anonymity and work in strict confidence (see above). If you are not happy with your MCA QA assessment and have submitted adverse comments to the secretariat, you may waive your anonymity to discuss directly findings with your assessor.</p>
<p>If I disagree with the MCA QA assessment or overall grading?</p>	<p>You get a chance to make observations in the comments box of the report form and can tell the secretariat you want to challenge findings and resolve disagreement. In this case, you may waive your anonymity and discuss outcomes direct with your assessor or retain anonymity and ask the secretariat to refer the matter to an MCA QA standardisation meeting for resolution. In practice observation, you can talk directly to your assessor to resolve any disagreements and can discuss concerns with the secretariat if matters are not settled.</p>
<p>If I face MCA QA reassessment?</p>	<p>The secretariat will let you know if an <i>ineffective</i> grading means another sample of cases needs to go to a new MCA QA assessor from your next MCA panel in about four weeks' time. If you record another "ineffective" grading in a further QA assessment, you can undertake a mock panel or work with a peer mentor or coach on joint MCA panels.</p>
<p>If I am not sure what areas are included in a practice observation?</p>	<p>The core competencies for oral hearings are set out explicitly for different roles in the members' competency framework. Every stage of your participation in an oral hearing can be observed and assessed, from the point the cases are listed to the panel's decision letter being agreed and submitted.</p>
<p>If I disagree with my assessment or</p>	<p>You get full opportunity to work with your practice observer to discuss the process and its findings and implications. You can make observations in the</p>

grading in practice observation?	comments box in the report form. If disagreements are not resolved, you can let the secretariat know and can appeal the findings or complain about your observer's practice.
If I am not sure how to implement assessment feedback?	To be effective, feedback should be accessible, supportive, evidence-based, and based on known expected standards. Feedback is not the same thing as peer advice. The MCA QA assessment report is shared with you in full. If you are not sure what it means or how to use the information, contact the secretariat. If you do not attain the required grading in an MCA QA reassessment, you can try mock panels, work with a coach, or complete a joint MCA panel with a peer mentor. You get the chance to discuss findings with your assessor and to comment on the draft report form, but you can talk to the secretariat if there remain unclear or contested points.
If I am not sure how MCA QA and practice observation overall gradings are used in accreditation?	Section 5 outlines the use of overall assessment gradings in Parole Board accreditation processes. MCA QA assessors award an overall grading for effectiveness of panel decisions and directions. The standard is reached at MCA QA by achieving effective and/or adequate gradings. Some specialised roles demand higher standards for purposes of accreditation. Practice observation is an assessment of your overall competence to sit effectively on oral hearings and whether further training or development is needed. There are target points for staging oral hearing accreditations.
If I am not happy with the practice observer chosen?	Assessors, like all Parole Board members, are bound by the Board's professional values. Assessors undertake the role to help colleagues to improve and maintain good practice. It is not generally expected that members will seek to change the person allocated to carry out their practice observation: but, if you need to explore the appropriateness of your designated practice observer, contact the secretariat.
I have heard a member refer to practice observations as an 'appraisal', is that correct?	Practice observation is a snapshot of your practice before, during and after an oral hearing. This exercise has limitations and cannot provide a comprehensive appraisal of your knowledge, values and skills. But it is one contributor to the Board's quality assurance framework and can offer benefits in your cycle of practice and performance improvement.
If, as an assessor, I am not sure about fee levels?	Fee levels are shown in Section 4.20 for different types of assignment.
If I need additional support or advice?	The place to start is the secretariat. If you have not waived anonymity and spoken direct to your MCA QA assessor or need to discuss things with someone other than your practice observer, there are other avenues which the secretariat can advise you on.

