

**KEY ACTIONS**  
for accrediting agencies  
and healthcare services

# Conducting virtual assessments to the National Safety and Quality Primary and Community Healthcare Standards

## Assessment to the National Safety and Quality Primary and Community Healthcare Standards

Assessment and the awarding of accreditation to the National Safety and Quality Primary and Community Healthcare Standards (Primary and Community Healthcare Standards) provide assurances to the community that a healthcare service has the systems and processes in place to meet expected patient safety and quality standards of health care.

There are four models of assessment available for healthcare services seeking accreditation to the Primary and Community Healthcare Standards (see [Table 1](#)).

This flexible approach recognises the varying stages of readiness and engagement across the sector. In most instances, a healthcare service may choose what model of assessment they undertake, dependent on their level of readiness.

In circumstances where a healthcare service is required to be accredited to the Primary and Community Healthcare Standards to satisfy regulator, contractual or licensing requirements, the relevant regulator must stipulate the model of assessment to be used.

**Table 1: Models of assessment**

Model of assessment	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Assessment method	Desktop assessment	Desktop assessment + virtual assessment comprising observations and interviews	Desktop assessment + on-site visit comprising observations and interviews	Regulator-stipulated short-notice assessment comprising of desktop assessment + on-site visit
Accreditation cycle	Two years	Three years	Three years	Three years
Number of cycles at this assessment level	Two assessment cycles*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ One assessment cycle for healthcare services involving physical examinations, therapies or procedures upon patients*</li> <li>■ Otherwise unlimited</li> </ul>	Unlimited	Unlimited
Public recognition	Certificate of Accreditation (Stage 1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Certificate of Accreditation (Stage 2)</li> <li>■ Registered on the Commission's website</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Certificate of Accreditation (Stage 3)</li> <li>■ Registered on the Commission's website</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Certificate of Accreditation (Stage 4)</li> <li>■ Registered on the Commission's website</li> </ul>
Certificate	Issued by the accrediting agency	Issued by the accrediting agency	Issued by the accrediting agency	Issued by the accrediting agency

\* Approval for an extension to use a certain model of assessment for more than the specified limit of assessment cycles in any particular case may be granted by the Commission in exceptional circumstances based on criteria that includes a risk assessment, the nature of the healthcare service's participation in the assessment process, its IT capacity, availability of other safety and quality data and evidence feedback on safety and quality performance against national or state-level agreed indicators.

## When can a virtual assessment be conducted?

Virtual assessments can be conducted in the following circumstances:

- As a component of the Stage 2 assessment model, comprising of a desktop assessment and virtual assessment
- In limited circumstances where the on-site component of a Stage 3 or Stage 4 assessment model is conducted as a hybrid assessment.

A hybrid assessment is a model of assessment where part of an accreditation assessment team is on site at a healthcare service, and part of an assessment team participates using virtual access digital technology. Hybrid assessments may be conducted in exceptional circumstances where:

- There is restricted access to all or part of a healthcare service due to public health orders or similar restrictions
- The safety of patients and assessors is affected because the healthcare service is considered high risk
- There are public health or border restrictions limiting movement of assessors across state and territory borders
- An on-site assessment has commenced but cannot be completed due to changes in public health or border restrictions. Delay of an on-site assessment would not allow sufficient time for a healthcare service's accreditation assessment to be completed prior to the current accreditation expiry date.

Hybrid assessment may also be considered for a healthcare service providing services over wide ranging, geographically remote locations. In some situations, hybrid assessments may assist to strengthen and make assessment processes more efficient. Accrediting agencies may apply to conduct hybrid assessments for these services where there is evidence of centralised, systematic clinical governance and management systems, policies and processes.

### Virtual assessments cannot be conducted where:

- There has been a report of significant risk
- Privacy, security, due process or impartiality cannot be guaranteed
- It is not feasible due to the limited availability, connectivity or performance of technology.

## Requirements for virtual and hybrid assessments

- ✓ Accrediting agencies must seek approval from the Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (the Commission) prior to conducting a hybrid assessment
- ✓ Accrediting agencies and assessors must comply with the requirements of the AHSSQA Scheme and ensure the assessment processes are rigorous, including use of the PICMoRS assessment methodology
- ✓ In the case of hybrid assessment, one member of the assessment team should be on site throughout the assessment
- ✓ Assessors must take all necessary steps to ensure that the integrity of the assessment is not compromised
- ✓ All relevant areas within the healthcare service must be **viewed** and **assessed**
- ✓ Assessors must clearly document in the healthcare service assessment report the reason that a virtual assessment was performed, the locations that were assessed virtually and note any barriers or technical difficulties encountered during the assessment
- ✓ Assessors are to keep records of the areas, actions or Standards that were assessed using virtual assessment.

Accrediting agencies and healthcare service should refer to the guidance provided in **Attachment 1** when proceeding with a virtual assessment.

## Questions?

For more information, please visit:  
[safetyandquality.gov.au/pchs](https://safetyandquality.gov.au/pchs).

You can also email the Safety and Quality Advice Centre at [AdviceCentre@safetyandquality.gov.au](mailto:AdviceCentre@safetyandquality.gov.au) or call 1800 304 056.

# Attachment 1: Guidance on conducting virtual assessments

## Prior to a virtual or hybrid assessment

### Administration

#### Accrediting agency

- Agree the format of reviews to be conducted, including
  - how consumers are to be involved
  - the need for a virtual tour of the healthcare service at the commencement of the assessment
  - asking for a map of the healthcare service so assessors can orientate themselves during the assessment (if necessary)
  - considering time zones for assessors and healthcare service when agreeing the schedule of events
  - agreeing on mechanisms of communication with healthcare service during the assessment
- Ensure all assessment team members
  - know and understand their role and responsibilities during the assessment, and ensure the tasks are well defined
  - have the skills and/or the support to use the ICT equipment
  - understand the risks and limitations of virtual assessments, particularly in relation to evidence gathering and the robustness of the assessment
- Ensure sufficient time is allocated to testing of ICT equipment prior to the virtual assessment, using the same equipment that will be used during the assessment, and in areas where the assessment will be conducted
- Identify the mechanism by which assessors will keep in contact during the assessment, individually and through group chat. Ensure this mechanism is secure at all times and that the record of the conversations can be fully deleted at the end of the assessment

- Develop a contingency plan, that includes actions and responsibilities for situations including when
  - video link is disconnected
  - voice link is unavailable
  - WiFi is unavailable
  - assessment has to be discontinued
  - healthcare service is unable or does not comply with the reasonable requests during the assessment
- Clearly articulate to the healthcare service, in writing if necessary
  - the contingency plan and process should the assessment not be able to proceed
  - the consequences of members of the healthcare service's workforce not following an assessor's reasonable direction, particularly in regard to the movement and placement of the camera, volume of the microphone, sharing of documents.

#### Healthcare service

- Provide assessors with a time limited clearance to the relevant programs and areas in the healthcare service's ICT systems
- Provide assessors with a security briefing or instructions, if required
- Ensure ICT devices are fully operational and charged
- Nominate an ICT support person to be responsible for the integrity of the ICT systems during the assessment
- Ensure the nominated ICT support person is available to the assessors throughout the assessment
- Exchange contact details with assessors for all key contacts in the healthcare service and members of the assessment team
- Agree to a contingency plan with the accrediting agency in the event the assessment cannot be finalised as scheduled.

## Information and communications technology systems

### Accrediting agency

- If the ICT program is specified by the healthcare service, test the ICT programs and equipment to be used at assessment to ensure the IT equipment has the functionality and flexibility required for a robust assessment
- If the ICT equipment is not specified by the healthcare service, determine which platform will be used by assessors after considering
  - capacity of the program to share screens for the review of documents
  - ability of the assessor to take control of the screen
  - availability of breakout rooms for different assessors to undertake review independently
  - capacity to view documents in real time, including clinical and personnel files, using high resolution camera/photography
  - mobility of ICT equipment, including stability of the network

### Healthcare service

- Confirm with the accrediting agency the videoconferencing software and ICT platform to be used during the virtual assessment
- Ensure there is sufficient appropriate ICT equipment available for the assessment to proceed. If the assessment includes multiple sites, ensure there is sufficient support and equipment at each site for the assessment to proceed
- Ensure documents to be presented as evidence can be made available securely to assessors, using for example drop box or other secure sites
- Test the IT equipment with those to be involved in the assessment. Ensure all of the workforce involved in the assessment have the IT skills and/or support to operate the IT equipment, including camera focus, volume and screen sharing
- Check all locations where the assessment will be conducted to identify areas where the WiFi signal may be weak or not accessible. Address any issues identified with the WiFi coverage

## Documentation

### Accrediting agency

- Develop a policy for recording and photographing during the assessment sessions conducted using virtual access digital technology and provide a copy to the healthcare service

### Healthcare service

Nil

## During a virtual or hybrid assessment

### Administration

#### Accrediting agency

- Limit the length of each session to ensure the virtual assessments are manageable for assessors
- At the commencement of each interview or assessment session, clarify for participants
  - if the meeting is being recorded
  - how and what documents will be accessed for review during the session
  - how security of data will be maintained
  - that the assessor will have control of the camera direction, placement and movement at all times
- Assessors should
  - ensure their camera is positioned so the assessor's full head and shoulders are visible to those in the healthcare service
  - be located in a private, quiet environment to avoid interference, background distractions and noise
  - be mindful of the background view of their location, and ensure it is appropriate
  - use headphones or other equipment to maximise the capacity to hear and focus their attention, for example, headsets with a microphone or noise cancelling headphones
  - remain in control of the camera viewing the healthcare service at all times
  - issue clear and direct instructions to members of the healthcare service's workforce if they are physically responsible for moving and positioning the camera

- use check-back techniques to ensure what has been said is clearly heard and understood, particularly where there are poor or unstable IT connections
- terminate the interview, observation, or the assessment if there is continued poor connections or inability to retain a connection, or where the healthcare service fails to comply with reasonable directions from the assessor
- implement the contingency plan if the assessment is terminated
- Where virtual breakout rooms are used, ensure privacy is maintained by inviting participants, nominating rooms and virtually locking the room once a meeting has commenced
- Where meetings are recorded, assessors are to seek agreement from all participants before the meeting commences and provide a clear statement on how the recording will be used and if/when it will be deleted
- For hybrid assessments, ensure that communication between assessors that are on-site and assessors that are present using virtual access digital technology occurs regularly to share findings
- For hybrid assessments, direct assessors that are on-site to follow up issues that have been identified by assessors using virtual access digital technology

#### **Healthcare service**

- Obtain permission from consumers involved in the assessment and provide them with information on the virtual assessment processes
- Recognise that a general wide sweep of the camera does not need permission and is similar to an assessor being on-site

### **Information and communications technology systems**

#### **Accrediting agency**

Nil

#### **Healthcare service**

- Ensure the ICT equipment being used during the assessments
  - can be moved on a stable surface, such as a trolley to all locations where the assessment is to occur
  - when being moved through a facility, the camera is facing forward

- complies with infection prevention and control requirements for equipment being moved between clinical areas
- is fully charged and includes backup power supply, if required
- Do not use virtual backgrounds during assessments. These reduce the likelihood of opportunistic observation of practice and environment

### **Documentation**

#### **Accrediting agency**

- Document in the final assessment report to the healthcare service
  - the reason a virtual or hybrid assessment was conducted
  - actions that could not be evidenced or not fully evidenced by virtual assessment
  - barriers, technical difficulties or enablers during the assessment
  - for hybrid assessments, the sessions of the assessment conducted using virtual access digital technology
- Where an assessment is prematurely terminated and does not recommence document
  - the actions still to be assessed
  - the plan and timelines for the assessment to be finalised
  - reasons for changes to assessment schedule
  - areas not yet reviewed or not fully reviewed by the assessment process
  - other options, including ICT systems considered or used to complete the assessment
  - the proposed action for the completion of the assessment, including
    - ▶ date for the completion of the assessment
    - ▶ format for the completion of the assessment
    - ▶ additional costs, if any
    - ▶ implication and/or consequences of the delay

#### **Healthcare service**

At assessment:

- Ensure all relevant documents are readily available or easily accessible so meetings are not delayed waiting for documents to display
- Ensure ICT system has the functionality to enlarge documents if necessary so they can be read by assessors.

## After a virtual or hybrid assessment

### Administration

#### Accrediting agency

- Remove and delete any documents, images, or recordings accessed through the ICT system at the conclusion of the assessment
- Use the agency's monitoring systems to evaluate the effectiveness of the sessions of the assessment conducted using virtual access digital technology and ways to improve its effectiveness, including but not limited to
  - understanding and use of technology
  - training of assessors
  - information and instructions provided to healthcare service
  - design of the assessment schedule
  - mix of on-site assessors and those present via virtual access digital technology
  - role of assessors present via virtual access digital technology compared with role of assessors on-site
  - planning processes
  - contingency planning

#### Healthcare service

- Revoke assessors ICT and security access
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the virtual assessment and provide feedback to the accrediting agency and the Commission

### Documentation

#### Accrediting agency

- Assessment reports and testimonials are to state the assessment was a virtual or hybrid assessment and include a virtual assessment component

#### Healthcare service

Nil