

Evaluation of the arrangements for the assessment of
Group Discussion in SSLN 2014

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Report Index

Section		Page No.
	Executive Summary	p1
1.	Background and executive summary	p3
2.	Recruitment of Support Assessors	p5
3.	Training of Support Assessors	p6
4	Deployment of Support Assessors	p10
5.	Arranging visits	p11
6.	Arrangements for assessments	p14
7.	Performing assessments and making judgements	p17
8.	Recording assessments	p20
9.	Data Quality	p21
10.	Capacity Building in relation to Listening & Talking	p24
11.	Conclusions	p26
12	Possible next steps	p34
	Appendix A	p37

Executive Summary

The arrangements for the recruitment of Support Assessors had proved to be effective, mainly due to the work of the SSLN team in support for the Local Authority coordinators. The Group Discussion Advisory Team had collaborated well to further refine the criteria used to assess the listening and talking component of literacy.

The arrangements for training the Support Assessors had proved to be highly successful in preparing the Support Assessors for their role in schools and assessing to common standards. The Support Assessors reported high levels of satisfaction with the online and face-to-face aspects of the training, and with the resources provided to them. Almost all felt well prepared ahead of their task and confirmed this at the completion of their allocated schools.

The mechanisms to select suitable assessors, train and deploy them had worked very well, and schools appreciated the value of an external assessor to perform an assessment of the group discussion – an area in which many schools lacked confidence. Schools expressed considerable interest in the criteria for assessment and the rubrics, as well as the tasks themselves. However, many schools also commented on the suitability of certain tasks, as also did the Support Assessors themselves.

A significant proportion of the Support Assessors encountered difficulty with contacting one or more of their allocated schools. However, all had received excellent support from the SSLN team at SQA to resolve such situations. Almost all schools were well-enough prepared to facilitate the conduct of the assessment by making suitable accommodation available and organising pupil groups. In a few cases the role of the Support Assessor had not been properly understood, but was resolved on the day.

There was a high level of confidence among the Support Assessors that they had successfully conducted their group discussions and arrived at correct judgements about the sample pupils. The arrangements for recording information about each group discussions were much appreciated by the Support Assessors and they had not experienced any particular difficulties in submitting data online. In most schools there had been an opportunity to provide feedback to one or more members of staff and in only one case was there a report of a challenge. However, many schools did make comment about the artificial nature of the discussion and questioned whether it would produce a performance that was typical of the pupils.

From the SQA point of view, the new arrangements had posed several challenges for the team, but none that had not been successfully overcome. In particular, the allocation of Support Assessors to schools had required considerable effort and planning, and had resulted in a set of allocations that was both feasible and practicable. The SSLN team at SQA had provided high quality support to the Support Assessors both during training and in the execution of their fieldwork.

In respect of a key measure of the success of the revised arrangements – the quality and volume of data to inform subsequent analysis– the outcome was very positive. The number of unresolved

validation failures was low (2%) and there was sufficient data that had passed the exhaustive validation checks to guarantee reliable and accurate estimates for reporting on Scotland-wide performance.

1. Background and context

The SSLN

The Scottish Survey of Literacy and Numeracy (SSLN) is an annual sample survey which monitors national performance in literacy and numeracy in alternate years, for school children at P4, P7 and S2. The SSLN was developed to support assessment approaches for Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). Findings from the survey are used to inform resources for practitioners to facilitate improvements in learning, teaching and assessment at classroom level.

The SSLN is a joint venture in which the Scottish Government, Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority work together to design and deliver the survey. The Association of Directors of Education in Scotland (ADES) are also a partner, since the co-operation of local authorities and schools is essential for the survey to be successful. The survey consists of a set of written and practical assessments and questionnaires for both pupils and teachers. Approximately 12,000 pupils and 5,000 teachers participate in the SSLN from across the 3 stages being assessed (P4, P7 and S2).

Assessment of the Group Discussion

In 2014 the focus of the SSLN was on literacy. In order to address difficulties that had arisen in the assessment of listening and talking in the previous literacy survey, the SSLN partners had agreed to implement a new approach to assessing the group discussion in 2014. The decision taken was to appoint Support Assessors to visit sample schools and conduct the assessment of pupils. In order to ensure consistency of judgement across the national sample, these Support Assessors were provided with training and supplied with resources. The SSLN team at SQA set up online advice and support and operated telephone hotline support to address urgent questions as they arose in the actual fieldwork.

The Support Assessors were recruited by Local Authority SSLN coordinators so as to achieve regional coverage of Scottish schools. The training of Support Assessors involved both online and face-to-face elements. The deployment of the Support Assessors to schools took account of the availability of each Support Assessor, their home location and the locations of the sample schools.

A key element of the assessment of listening and talking was the development of criteria to support assessors in their judgements, based on the standards set out in the Curriculum for Excellence. These were originally developed for the group discussion task in SSLN 2012 and subsequently reviewed for use in 2014, at which point only a few changes were made. These criteria were complemented by a set of rubrics for each Level to be assessed. In addition the tasks to be given to the pupil group were carefully selected and trialled prior to their adoption for use in the 2014 survey. These tasks were randomised over the sample schools.

Two of the primary concerns of the key stakeholders in relation to the SSLN are: (i) to ensure that the standards applied in the assessments are in line with the standards set out in the Scottish

Government's various publications relating to its Curriculum for Excellence; and (ii) to identify and develop resources that exemplify those standards and can be used by teachers in their classroom practice. As a key stakeholder, Education Scotland supported the work of the Group Discussion Working Group and the Group Discussion Advisory Team by providing expert advice and resources. For example, Education Scotland chaired the group that developed the assessment criteria for the group discussion in SSLN 2012. Education Scotland has indicated that it is satisfied that the exemplar video clips, assessment criteria and methods of assessment are in line with the expectations of the Curriculum for Excellence at each of the levels.

Conduct of this study

This study was carried out in June 2014, shortly after the Support Assessors had completed their allocated assessments. The purpose of this study was to carry out a qualitative evaluation of the Listening and Talking component of the 2014 SSLN from the point of view of all involved parties. This involved the following activities:

1. Interviews (mostly telephone, but some face-to-face) with: Support Assessors; School SSLN coordinators; Local Authority SSLN coordinators; members of the Group Discussion Advisory Team; Education Scotland and members of the SSLN team at SQA.
2. Review of the data from the SSLN school evaluation online questionnaire, completed by school SSLN co-ordinators in June and analysed by Education Analytical Services (SG)
3. Analysis of the data from the Support Assessor evaluation online questionnaire

Some difficulty was experienced in accessing school SSLN coordinators for interview, particularly in primary schools. The Local Authority coordinators were also difficult to contact. Most of the Support Assessors in the sample responded well to the call on their time.

The evidence base for this evaluation consisted of:

- Survey responses from school coordinators (288 responses) - both quantitative and qualitative
- Survey responses from Support Assessors (88 responses) - both quantitative and qualitative
- Interviews with a sample of Support Assessors (22 interviews) – both quantitative and qualitative
- Interviews with a small sample of school coordinators (4 responses) and Local Authority coordinators (3 responses) – qualitative
- Interview with an Education Scotland appointee – both quantitative and qualitative
- Interview with members of the SQA SSLN team (2 staff) – both quantitative qualitative
- Interview with a member of Education Analytical Services - both quantitative and qualitative

2. Recruitment of Support Assessors

Local Authority

The process of recruiting Support Assessors (Support Assessors) began with a direct communication from the SSLN team at SQA to the SSLN coordinator in each Local Authority. The number of Support Assessors required to carry out the assessment of group discussion was calculated from the total number of school visits to be made (980) and an upper limit of 5 days of engagement in school visits per Support Assessor. Initially the Local Authorities were invited to recruit similar volumes of Support Assessors, but this was modified in practice to take account of practicalities and operational difficulties experienced by some Local Authorities.

The SSLN team worked flexibly with the Local Authority SSLN coordinators to secure the quota of Support Assessors while accommodating the circumstances of each Local Authority. For example, in some Local Authorities there was concern in relation to securing teaching cover to release Support Assessors, while smaller Local Authorities found it difficult to recruit more than a few Support Assessors. One solution to such problems was to make up the balance from Local Authorities where there was a surplus of recruits. In a few cases individuals were recruited who were already on secondment or had recently retired.

The requirements for the Support Assessor role was made known at a set of Local Authority information days for the 2014 SSLN survey. The small number of Local Authority coordinator interviewed concurred that this information was easy to understand and comprehensive enough to allow them to proceed with confidence in the recruitment of Support Assessors.

These Local Authority coordinators commented that their role in relation to SSLN was only one of many responsibilities that they had. Their approach to recruiting Support Assessors was to enlist the support of schools by emailing all head teachers with the information and requesting them to submit names of individuals who might wish to contribute. From the Local Authority coordinator point of view it was then the responsibility of the school to ensure that cover could be arranged for any teachers that they might put forward. This process took some time as schools are not always prompt in responding to this type of request.

Where this process resulted in the quota being exceeded, the Local Authority coordinator provided the SSLN team at SQA with the names of applicants plus a reserve list. In one case a Local Authority coordinator had to look to other means of identifying individuals who might participate, such as persons already seconded to the Local Authority. As a result the group of Support Assessors included not only teachers but also individuals such as a literacy coordinator, a health & well-being coordinator and a cooperative learning coordinator. The SSLN team also used its knowledge of individuals in the sector to secure the quota of Support Assessors. For example, the team made good use of some who had been engaged in the planning and development of the Group Discussion materials and training, or in other initiatives related to literacy.

Support Assessors

Support Assessors were invited to respond to survey questions about the recruitment process. Of the 88 responses, 45% were informed of the opportunity by a school manager while 39% claimed to be informed by the Local Authority coordinator. The remaining 16% were either contacted directly by someone working in the Local Authority or by the SSLN team. Interviews with Support Assessors also confirmed that while most of this sample were informed via a school manager, a significant proportion was contacted directly because of their other involvement in literacy developments...

From comments recorded in the survey form and through the interview process, it is clear that all valued the opportunity to participate in the assessment of group discussion as part of SSLN 2014. Additionally, a number of Support Assessor responses indicated a desire to be part of any similar process in future years.

3. Training of Support Assessors

Planning and preparation

Prior to the commencement of training for the Support Assessors a considerable amount of work had gone in to planning and preparation. A Group Discussion Working Group had been established, comprising representatives from the key stakeholders (Scottish Government, SQA, Education Scotland and ADES). The responsibility of this Group was to identify a general approach to the assessment of Listening and Talking in SSLN 2014. In addition a Group Discussion Advisory Team was established, comprising experts in literacy, most of whom had been engaged in previous SSLN surveys and were mostly practitioners. This Advisory Team, working under the supervision of SQA, had key tasks to perform, including: revision of the CfE standards for listening and talking into a set of criteria that was straightforward to apply and would lead to consistent judgements of the standards on the part of the Support Assessors; identification of suitable video clips and other resource materials that would underpin the training for the Support Assessors; and helping to structure and deliver the training itself. The video clips were taken from recordings made in the previous SSLN literacy round (in 2012) and were carefully selected by SQA and the Advisory Team to ensure that standards were exemplified at a range of levels. This involved examining over one hundred video clips and then creating detailed commentaries and cross-marking for the selected clips – a considerable amount of effort, but one that successfully delivered an excellent set of training resources.

The SSLN team at SQA made a key early decision that the training of the Support Assessors should require interaction and discussion among peers, along with intervention and guidance from members of the Advisory Team and the SSLN team. This approach was implemented through the establishment of an online discussion forum, where Support Assessors could share their views on particular aspects of the criteria or the video clips that exemplified the standards. Through monitoring of this forum the SSLN team could identify generic issues and provide guidance through a set of

online FAQs. As will be seen later in this evaluation, this online preparation was much appreciated by the Support Assessors as a prelude to the actual face-to-face training. The face-to-face training continued this theme of discussion of standards and criteria and sharing judgements.

A further key component of the training was a quality assurance exercise in which every Support Assessor was required to make a set of judgements on the same video clip of a pupil discussion. This was then followed up with a set of webinars to provide opportunity for some further interaction and dialogue in respect of this reference video clip. Those teachers who were able to access the live webinar found it most helpful and ‘at the right time’ to prepare them for the live assessments. However, many teachers were unable to access the live webinar for either timing or technical reasons and did not judge that the recorded version offered them much beyond the actual training.

Another important aspect of the planning of this training was an agreement among the stakeholders that participation as a Support Assessor should be formally accredited as professional learning. To this end the SSLN team at SQA engaged with the General Teaching Council Scotland (GTCS) to ensure that participation in the training and the subsequent assessment activities would automatically satisfy the professional standards of GTCS. This collaboration resulted in an agreed route for Support Assessors to achieve this professional recognition. It is expected that more than 100 Support Assessors will achieve this award.

Support Assessor experience

Overall, this combination of online engagement as a prequel to the training, the interactive nature of the training day, and the follow-up webinar was deemed by almost all Support Assessors to provide an outstanding training experience. This is reflected in the expression of satisfaction in the survey responses, the comments made by survey respondents, and the Support Assessors interviewed as part of a further sample.

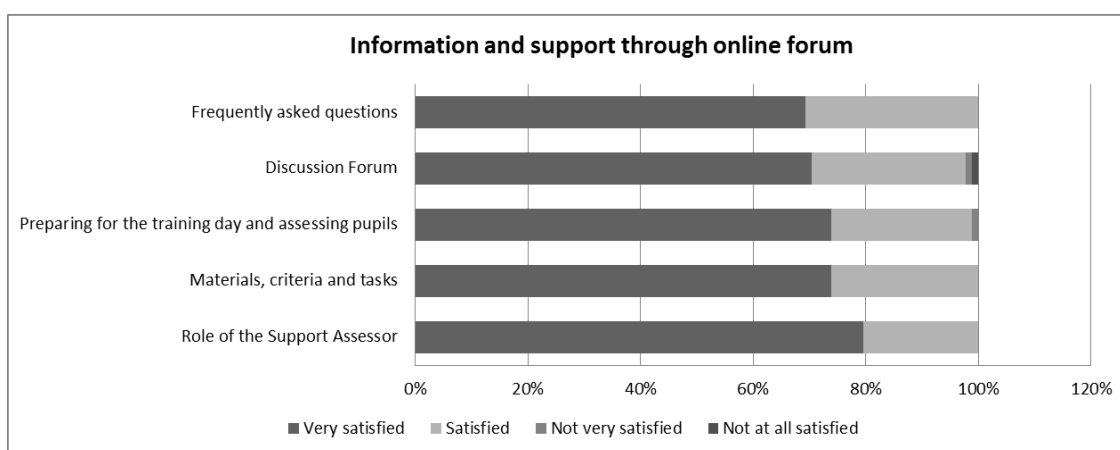


Fig 3:1 How satisfied were you with the information and support provided through the online training?

Figure 3.1 shows high levels of satisfaction with this aspect of the training. Respondents were asked to provide detail for any aspect of the online information and support with which they were not satisfied. There were 13 responses, but most were not related to the actual question (some offered praise rather than criticism). It would appear from some comments recorded in the interviews and on the survey form that not all individuals had high enough levels of ICT competence to take full advantage of the benefits offered by collaborative online working. Some commented that it was not part of their personal routines to go and check the website for new materials. However, there was a strong theme also in the responses that the SSLN team at SQA provided guidance and support for all queries – even down to the trivial.

The survey also sought the views of Support Assessors in relation to aspects of the face-to-face training day. The training days were offered in two locations on a number of dates, and all Support Assessors interviewed indicated that they had no difficulty in finding a training event to suit their personal circumstances.

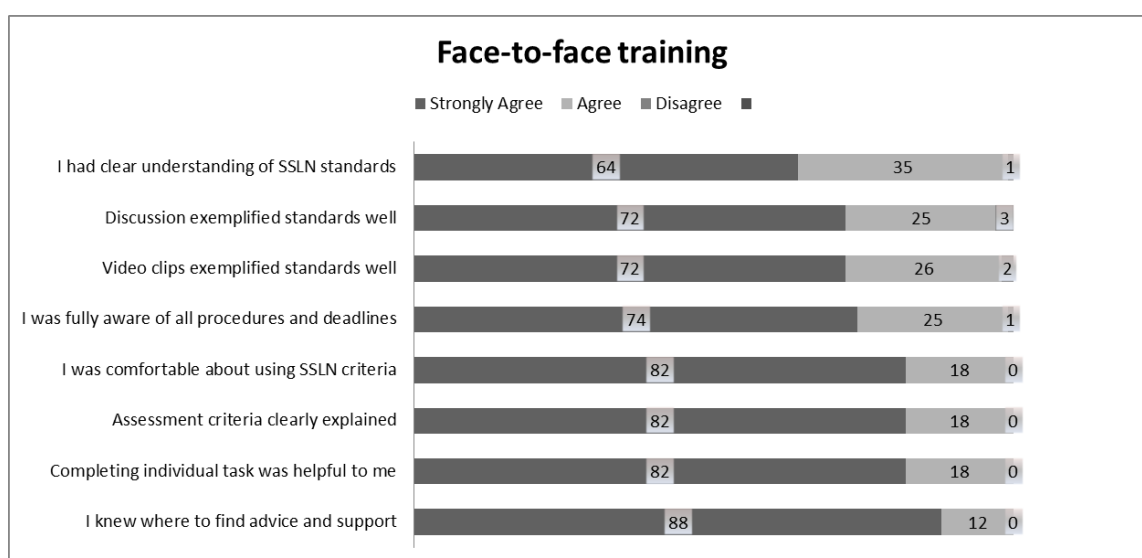


Fig 3.2 How much do you agree with the following statements relating to the face-to-face training day?

These responses show a high level of agreement with the set of 8 positive statements about the face-to-face training. The slightly lower level of satisfaction with the exemplification of standards through discussion, and the consequential level of understanding of standards was elaborated by the interviews with Support Assessors and comments made in the survey response. A few expressed anxiety at being asked to put their assessment judgements ‘up there’ for consideration and critical comment from others, or were uncomfortable that in some cases no consensus was reached in relation to a training clip. However, the majority of Support Assessors positively embraced both of these circumstances as part of the learning process and many commented on the value of discussion in ‘fine tuning’ judgements as to standards.

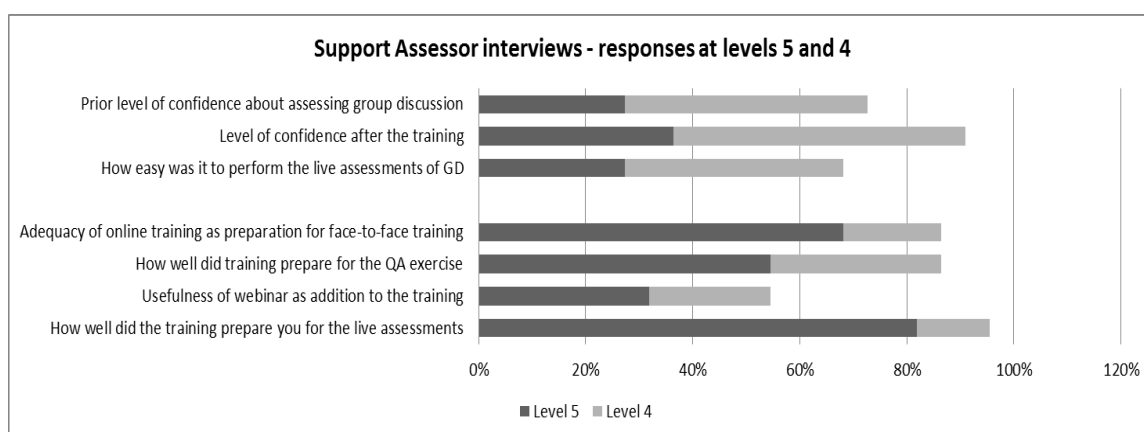


Fig 3.3 Responses at the highest level of satisfaction or agreement related to training (SA interview sample)

Almost all Support Assessors in the interview sample recorded that after the training they had an increased level of confidence in their competence to perform Group Discussion assessments using the provided criteria and standards. All but 3 of the 22 interviewees expressed high levels of satisfaction with the preparation afforded by the online training, and with the adequacy of the preparation for the QA exercise at the end of the face-to-face training day. Many commented that the online engagement with video clips and the standards enabled them and their group to 'hit the ground running' at the face-to-face training.

Support Assessors who successfully joined the webinar reported high levels of satisfaction with this activity. Those who were unable to access the live webinar but viewed the recorded session did not rate its usefulness as highly. Those who had technical issues with access to the webinar (or no time to access it) were among those most likely to downgrade its usefulness. The survey sought the views of Support Assessors about the webinar and other online materials posted after the training. The survey data in Figure 3.4 confirms the high level of satisfaction established in the interviews.

Survey respondents were also invited to comment on aspects of this further online support that had proved less than satisfactory. Comments included difficulties in accessing the live webinar, short notice of the webinar schedule and the lack of exemplification for pupils performing at the extremes of the scale (Level 1, Level 5). However a significant number of the respondents took the opportunity to comment positively on the usefulness and impact of this further resource in building confidence and helping them refine their understanding of the criteria and standards.

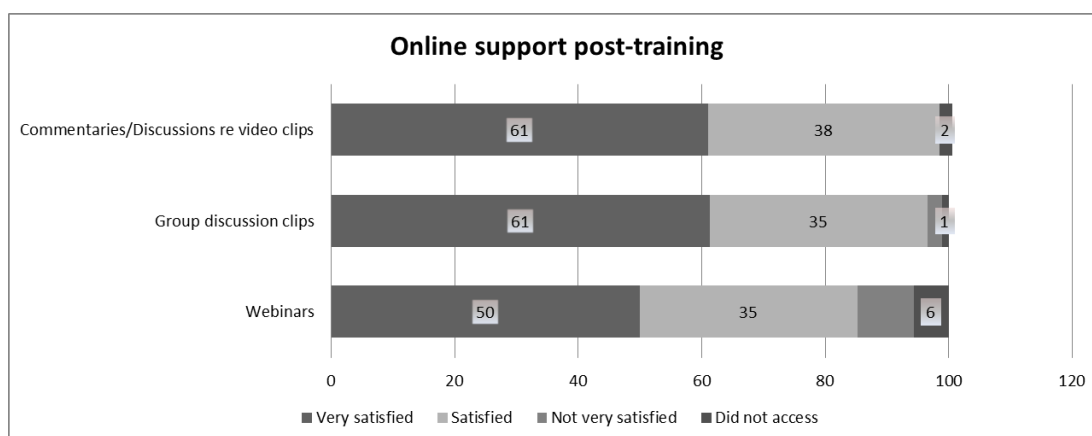


Fig 3.4 How satisfied were you with the information and support provided online after the face-to-face training?

A final question in the training section of the survey gave Support Assessors the opportunity to comment on the training overall. A total of 34 responses were recorded, of which 25 (74%) were very positive. As well as comments in relation to the professional nature and logical structure of the training, respondents were quite effusive in their language about the overall training experience. Some classed it as the ‘best CPD experience ever’ and described it as ‘fantastic’, ‘faultless’, ‘thorough’ and similar terms. Some suggestions for improvement were also recorded, such as the inclusion of strategies for using icebreaker activities with groups and the scheduling of the training to be closer to the actual survey dates.

Another common response related to the value to Support Assessors of the professional conversations that took place – both online and in the face-to-face training.

4. Deployment of Support Assessors

SSLN team

The deployment of the cadre of Support Assessors presented a set of logistical challenges for the SQA’s SSLN team. Given that the sample of schools being assessed for listening and talking was fixed, consideration had to be given to the home location of each Support Assessor, their capacity in terms of days, their parent Local Authority and the locations of the sampled schools. It was also decided that a Support Assessor should not be asked to assess in a school that was neighbour to their own, or in a school that their own children attended.

The task of allocating Support Assessors to schools was carried out by the SSLN team at SQA. This involved manual methods and was labour-intensive for the team. Once the allocations had been made and Support Assessors informed, there was a further round of adjustment to accommodate non-availability of some Support Assessors, the withdrawal of some schools and requests for change from individual Support Assessors.

Support Assessors

The survey did not seek responses from Support Assessors on their views about deployment. However, a frequent comment in the survey responses related to the value to Support Assessors of encountering varied practices in other schools and other Local Authorities. Several noted that they had been able to take practice observed elsewhere back into their own school. Those Support Assessors who were deployed to a Local Authority other than their own found it instructive and helpful to encounter a different approach to literacy development than their own.

School coordinators

From the school coordinator survey, 93% of the responses indicated strong agreement or agreement that they considered it helpful to have an external assessor to carry out the group discussion assessment.

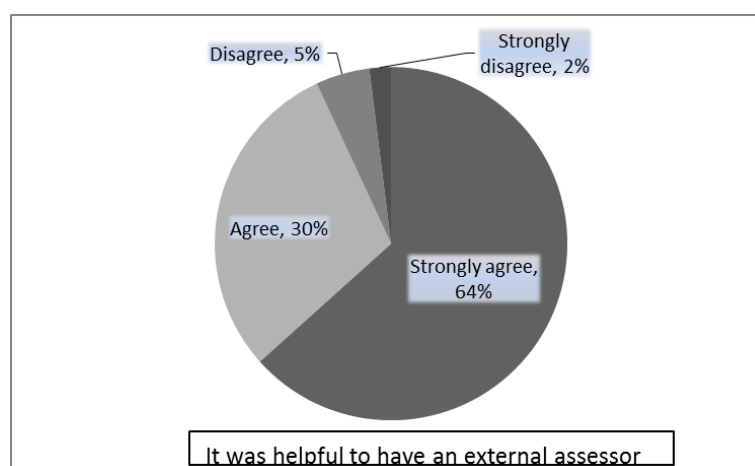


Fig 4.1: School coordinator responses (288 in total)

5. Arranging visits to schools

Support Assessors

Support Assessors were provided with email templates to be adapted and sent out to their allocated schools. Further guidance was provided on the SSLN website pages for Support Assessors, along with a copy of the information that had been sent to each participating school. This aspect of the arrangements for the SSLN 2014 Group Discussion proved to be the most troublesome to Support Assessors and consequently the issue for which guidance and support was most sought from the SSLN team. The main difficulties centred on making contact with an appropriate decision maker in the school to be visited. Once that had been achieved, agreeing the detailed arrangements was relatively straightforward. A significant number of Support Assessor comments expressed the view that the SSLN team had perhaps underestimated the amount of administration time that would be required to arrange visits.

Data from the Support Assessor survey (Figure 5.1) shows that around 70% indicated that they had encountered difficulties in organising the visit with one or more of their schools. This contrasted with their expectations following the training, with 90% agreeing that the training had provided clear guidance on how to arrange visits.

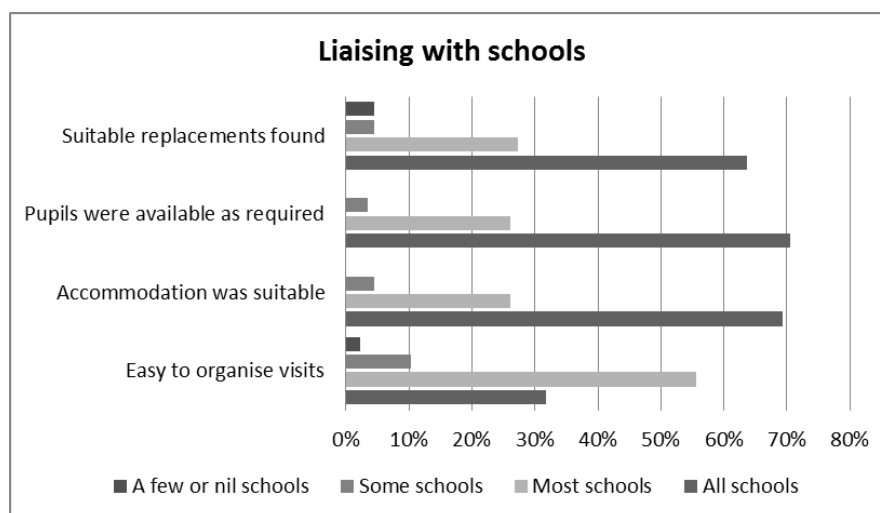


Fig 5.1 Support Assessor survey responses in relation to liaising with schools (percent expressing agreement at the several levels)

School coordinators

In the school coordinator survey (288 responses) almost all indicated strong agreement or agreement that it was easy to organise a suitable time for the visit and suitable accommodation for the assessments. A possible explanation for this discrepancy of opinion between Support Assessors and school co-ordinators is that the Support Assessors have reported on difficulties in actually making contact with an appropriate person in a school. But once a school had made contact with a Support Assessor, the process appeared to be fairly smooth.

The small sample of school coordinators interviewed all agreed that they had not encountered any difficulties in making arrangements for timing of the visit and securing appropriate accommodation. They all noted that the option of having a teacher present was difficult to manage.

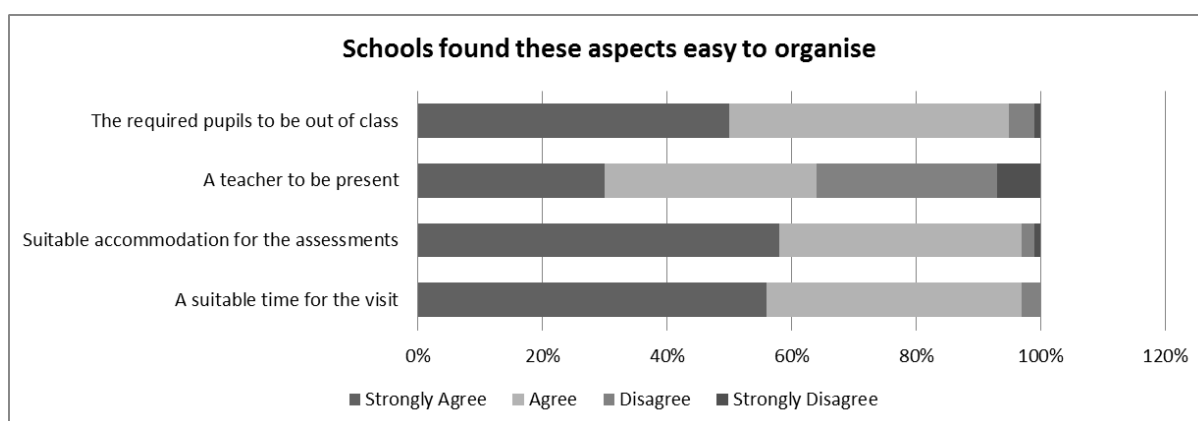


Fig 5.2 School coordinator survey responses in relation to the ease of organising the assessment visit

Returning to the issue of making contact with schools, comments from Support Assessors indicate that there were a few schools that were unwilling to participate in the process. Some of the difficulties related to out-of-date information about the school coordinator or their unavailability. There were many comments from Support Assessors relating to multiple emails and/or phone calls to schools that were not responded to. In those cases where the Support Assessor felt unable to resolve non-response from a school they turned to SQA’s SSLN team for support. 27% of Support Assessors reported that they sought support from the SSLN team for this purpose. The SSLN team at SQA was highly praised by Support Assessors for its effectiveness in brokering the link between the Support Assessor and the reluctant school. Anecdotal evidence suggests that secondary schools were most likely to be slow responders.

Around 95% of Support Assessors reported that in all or most of their schools there were no difficulties with pupils being unavailable or accommodation being unsuitable. This is confirmed by the responses from school coordinators in Figure 5.2. They also reported that where pupils were absent or had been withdrawn, 90% of Support Assessors experienced no difficulty in finding a replacement in all or most of their schools.

Figure 5.2 indicates that around a third of schools found it difficult to release class teachers to be present during the assessment of group discussion. This was not a requirement on participating schools, but was suggested as an option should they so desire. A significant number of school coordinators commented on the difficulty of releasing teachers, particularly in smaller primary schools. Some schools commented that they did not judge it necessary or helpful to have teachers present. In contrast, others noted the value to pupils (especially younger pupils) of having a familiar face in the room while the assessment was being carried out.

An analysis of the responses from school coordinators revealed that secondary schools were more likely to experience difficulties in releasing pupils from class for the group discussion.

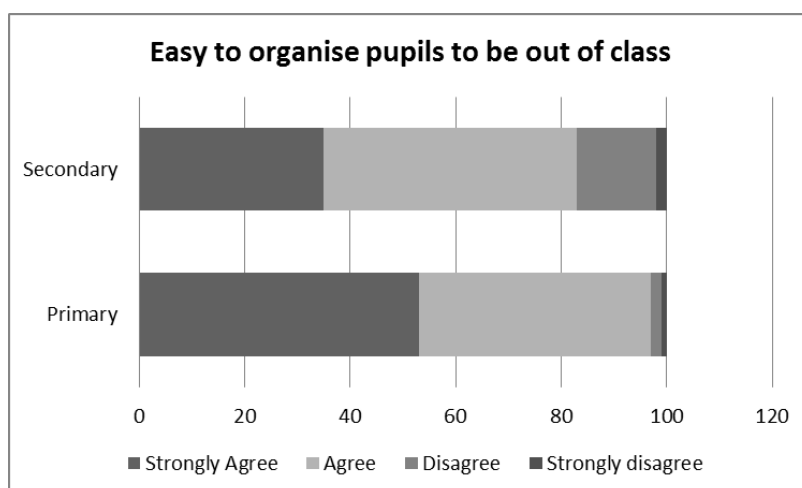


Fig 5.3 School coordinator survey responses on ease of organising pupils to be out of class

There is a complementary issue relating to the constitution of the pupil groups for the secondary group discussion, which is dealt with elsewhere in this report. In a secondary school the pupils selected for any particular assessment session can be located in different parts of the campus, requiring more time and effort to bring them together and then return them to their class. This was confirmed in the school coordinator interviews.

6. Arrangements for assessment

Support Assessors

We have noted in the previous section that around a third of the school coordinators indicated that they were unable to take up the option of having a teacher present during a group discussion assessment. From interviews with the sample of Support Assessors, the lack of a member of school staff to be present during the assessment was more pronounced in small primary schools and in secondary schools. These interviews provided some further information on this aspect of the arrangements, with some 40% of the assessments carried out with no member of school staff present. Where a member of staff was present, only 32% were the classroom teacher. It was most likely that the school HT or DHT would be present (in 43% of cases), with the remainder being either Principal Teachers (in Secondary) or Classroom Assistants.

School coordinators

Based on the survey data, 35% of school coordinators did not respond to the question of whether having a teacher present was a worthwhile experience, a percentage that corresponds with the number of schools that had difficulty in providing a teacher. Of those who did respond, 94% agreed or strongly agreed that it was a worthwhile experience (*Table 6.1*). The school coordinator interviews confirmed that this was the only part of the arrangements that presented them with challenges.

No Response	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
101 (35.3%)	74 (25.9%)	100 (35.0%)	10 (3.5%)	1 (0.4%)

Table 6.1 In cases where a teacher was present, school coordinators felt that the observation of the group discussion assessments was a worthwhile experience (school coordinator survey)

Arrangements for assessment

We have already noted that there were very few difficulties encountered with the accommodation and setup for the group discussion. There were, however, a few schools that appeared to have misunderstood the nature or purpose of the assessor visit to the school – but these misapprehensions were quickly remedied where they occurred. A more problematic issue for Support Assessors arose from the reaction of some pupil groups to the requirement for them to interact with an adult who was a stranger to them.

A majority of the Support Assessors interviewed noted that they had to create strategies to overcome reluctance or shyness on the part of the pupil group. They felt that the training had not prepared them for this particular aspect of carrying out the assessment, but as professional teachers they had been able to adopt strategies such as icebreaker activities to help pupil groups to be comfortable in their presence. This discomfort was not confined to the younger pupils, with S2 pupils groups sometimes proving to be particularly reticent to participate in discussion.

This aspect in relation to S2 pupils has featured prominently in expressions of concern from school coordinators and Support Assessors alike. In most cases the group of S2 pupils will not have worked with each other in a class setting. In a large school they may be unfamiliar with each other. This is an awkward age for these pupils and is also often reflected in their body language – one of the important indicators in judging engagement in discussion. A few of the school coordinator responses were strongly worded, asserting that this arrangement produced a context that was ‘contrived’ or ‘stilted, unnatural’ and thus ‘did not allow a fair and true reflection of the pupils’ ability’.. A few Support Assessors were also unconvinced of the value to the SSLN, suggesting that it inhibited pupils from performing to their true level.

However, in spite of the misgivings of the few, the overall consensus of the school coordinators and the Support Assessors was that the arrangements for the assessment had worked well. The school coordinators appreciated the benefits that came from having an external assessor – such as less teacher intervention in the process, and a methodology that was likely to produce consistency of judgement across the country. A good number of their comments noted that pupils found the experience enjoyable, with Support Assessors succeeding in establishing rapport with the pupils and putting them at their ease.

Dealing with exceptions

Another aspect in which there was significant difference across schools was the treatment of sample pupils who had additional support needs or whose primary language was not English (ASN and EAL). It would appear from Support Assessor comments on the survey form and the interviews that some schools were withdrawing such pupils on the day of the visit, while others allowed them to participate. In this context there were also comments from a few schools that the approach to assessment had not been 'adjusted' to take account of the presence of such pupils (e.g. by allowing longer time for discussion). Schools had been issued with clear guidance regarding the participation and support for ASN pupils. This variation in approach indicated that not all school coordinators had followed this advice from SQA.

The names of the pupils who were to participate in the assessment tasks were not known in advance by Support Assessors. In more than a few cases the school did not have this information to hand, either because insufficient attention had been paid to the communication from SSLN about their role in the process or because a key individual was not in school at the time of the assessment visit. In these cases there was always a delay and disruption to planned timings for the assessment while the school located the information (and the pupils) or SQA's SSLN team provided the school with another copy of the relevant pupil identities. In the latter case SQA always responded immediately to such requests. In a few cases the Local Authority coordinator had been asked by some of their schools to provide them with a copy of information about their sample pupils.

A more general point recorded by Support Assessors and by school coordinators related to the timing of the assessment visits. The timing was unpopular with primary schools as it coincided with a period when P7 pupils were making preparations for transition and participating in school trips. In some Local Authorities this was also a period when standardised testing was carried out for P4 and P7 pupils. In secondary schools this period was also very busy, with S2 pupils completing personal profiles and the school generally gearing up for SQA exam diets for pupils in the senior phase.

7. Carrying out the assessment and making judgements

Along with the development of the criteria for making judgements of level in relation to listening and talking, the GD Working Team were also tasked with amending a recording system (developed by SQA) for the assessments. Several formats were tested by members of the Advisory Team to determine the optimum layout for ease of recording in a live assessment. Support Assessors found this recording form easy to use, enabling them to capture information about pupil performance against the standards as a discussion progressed.

The Support Assessor survey responses confirmed that Support Assessors felt well prepared for making judgements using the tasks, criteria and standards. 98% affirmed that the training had prepared them well for the live assessments. Figure 7.1 below shows how Support Assessors in the interview sample scored their confidence in assessing at the *two highest levels of satisfaction* (Levels 5 and 4).

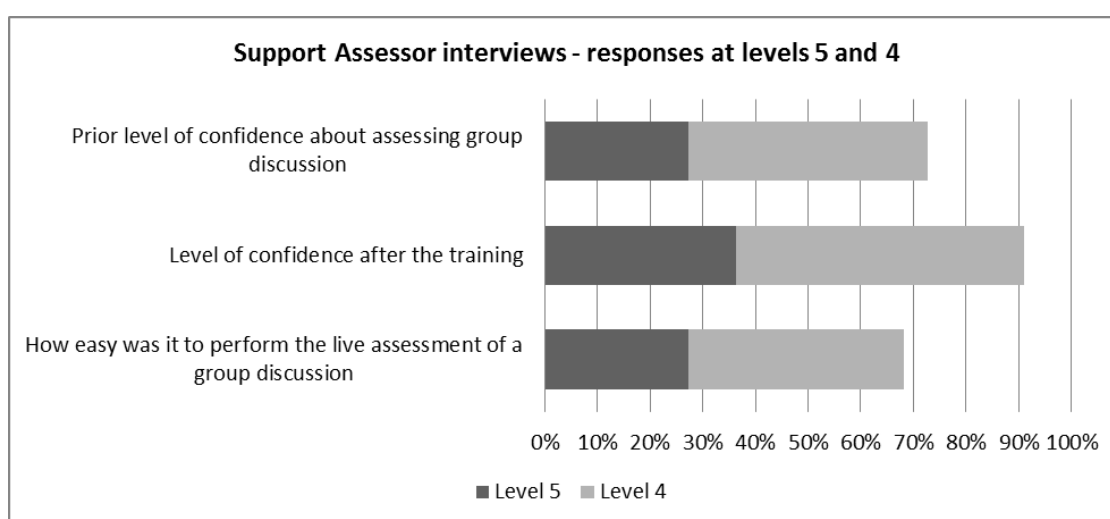


Fig 7.1 Support Assessor rating of their agreement or satisfaction with aspects of their performance

The lower level of rating for ease of performing the live assessment can be explained in terms of the practical 'glitches' that occurred – such as pupils being withdrawn, replacement pupils requiring to be found, and tasks that were in an unfamiliar context to a pupil group. As will be seen below, the actual forming of judgements was not seen to be an issue.

The interviews with the sample of Support Assessors revealed a high level of consistency in the approach to the assessment, covering such aspects as familiarising the pupils with the discussion task, reminding them of the behaviours that would constitute good performance and deploying the prompt cards in a judicious manner when required. One aspect of the assessment for which the training did not fully prepare the Support Assessors was the extent to which they should or could intervene to restart a 'stuck' discussion. Some Support Assessors were reluctant to go beyond the use of the prompt cards, while others professed to be more pragmatic in ensuring that there was enough discussion to make their judgements valid.

In terms of applying the criteria and standards to arrive at a judgement, there was a strong consensus among the interviewed Support Assessors that they had very little difficulty in arriving at judgements. Almost all commented on the importance of ‘internalising’ the rubrics beforehand, so that they could focus on observing the discussion and recording the behaviours and their frequency for the pupils to be assessed. This allowed them at the end of the discussion to progress quickly to an overall judgement that was firmly based on the recorded evidence and the standards. The Support Assessor survey data in Figure 7.2 confirms the high level of completion of judgements.

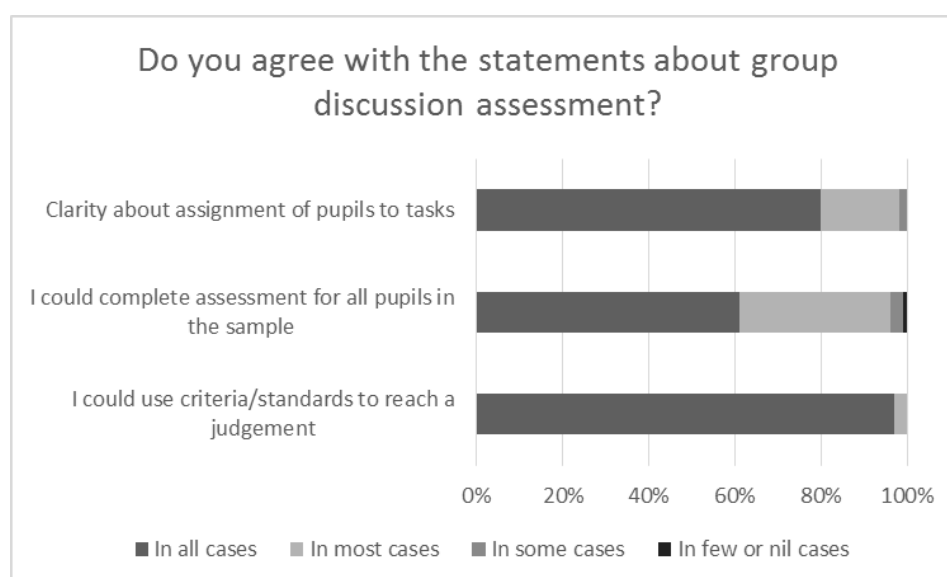


Fig 7.2 Support Assessor survey: Statements about the group discussion assessment itself

Around a third of Support Assessors reported that they had not been able to complete assessments for all the pupils in their sample group in all cases. The reasons not being able to do this for all cases were mainly to do with pupil absence or pupil unavailability due to competing activities (e.g. school trip, other school commitments) and in a few cases because the sample pupil had been withdrawn, either by the school or by parental request. In general, Support Assessors found that carrying out 3 or 4 group discussions in a row in a secondary school was quite a demanding exercise.

The prepared discussions tasks, support materials and prompt cards formed the core of the assessment experience and proved crucial to the quality of the discussion itself and the ease with which the assessor could form his/her judgement. The Support Assessor survey invited comments on the overall experience of carrying out the assessment and some 39 responses were recorded. Of these, 26 were about the tasks themselves and their usefulness and/or appropriateness for their purpose. Most of the remainder were concerned with the administration of the task.

Some Support Assessors provided feedback on specific tasks, based on their experience with their various pupil groups. Not surprisingly, some tasks worked better than others for particular groups. This led some Support Assessors to note that they would have preferred a system where they were able to select a task that best suited the stage and context of a particular group. In general, Support Assessors liked the ‘Diamond 9’ tasks as they provided a starting point and scaffolding for the pupils

in their discussion. However, a few noted that the Diamond 9 scaffolded structure could also limit discussion by putting the focus on sorting, and did not help pupils to summarise. The most common comment from Support Assessors and schools was that some combinations of tasks and pupil groups led to a lower than expected performance by the discussion group. The detailed comments on tasks are located in the survey responses from the Support Assessors and the school SSLN coordinators and also in the records of interviews with Support Assessors. These comments should be considered by SQA to inform future task deployment and development.

The final part of making judgements was to provide feedback to the school (where possible) on the assessed levels for the sample pupils. All of the interviewed Support Assessors had given feedback to the schools they had visited – with only a single exception of a secondary school. They reported that almost all of their feedback sessions were well received and led to professional dialogue about the assessment. A range of school staff attended these feedback sessions – including class teachers, head teachers, depute head teachers, school literacy coordinators and SSLN coordinators. In secondary schools the PT English often attended. Most showed a keen interest in the recording sheets and criteria, but the Support Assessors exercised caution in ‘showing but not sharing’ as they had been instructed.

Over the schools visited (roughly 150) by the interview sample of Support Assessors, there was only one challenge to an assessment judgement, relating to pupil underperformance. However, around half of the interviewed Support Assessors had received one or more comments on the assessment process. These comments expressed concerns about the artificial nature of the process, perceived inappropriate grouping of pupils and the selection of ‘weak’ pupils by the sampling process. In some of the feedback conversations the Support Assessors had to correct misunderstandings on the part of the school about the purpose of the SSLN. They had to explain that the assessment visit was neither a test result to be fed back to the pupil, nor an evaluation of the school performance, as well as the nature of random sampling.

8. Reporting judgements to SQA

Support Assessors were required to access online resources, engage in online conversations and submit data online to SQA. From the Support Assessor interviews almost all carried out these online engagements from home, often citing poor IT equipment or internet connections from their school as their reason for preferring to do this from home.

The initial submission of data to the SSLN team at SQA related to the setting up of school visits, so that the team could monitor progress towards all schools being visited in the assessment window. Some Support Assessors reported that they found this aspect of data submission to be somewhat unintuitive and awkward.

The main requirement for submitting data related to the assessment judgements made by the Support Assessors, along with any comments that the Support Assessors wished to be recorded. Of the interviewed Support Assessors, more than half experienced no difficulties in using the online system to submit their assessment judgements. The remainder had encountered some difficulties, including aspects such as access, data formats or apparent loss of previously entered information (sometimes resulting in a Support Assessor entering a set of school data twice) - but none that were not resolved by SQA's SSLN team or that prevented the eventual upload of their data. There were known issues about the response rate of the website at particularly busy times and steps were taken to indicate to users the level of demand on the site at any time.

Support Assessors submitted online data for around 2800 pupils at the Primary stages and 1800 pupils at the S2 stage. They also submitted the paper records that they compiled while assessing the pupils. These paper records formed a key part of the accuracy checks that the SSLN team carried out on the online data. In cases where there was an anomaly in the online data (e.g. incorrect task identifier) then the paper record could be accessed to obtain the correct value. Around 900 entries were queried by the SSLN team at this stage, with most being resolved prior to the data being released to the Scottish Government's Educational Analytical Services (EAS)... The data validation process is covered in more detail in Section 9.

The data validation exercise carried out by EAS identified further errors made by Support Assessors when reporting judgements via the online reporting tool. Again, some of these could be resolved by reference to the paper record, but others remained unresolved and led to the individual records being excluded from the analysis. The table below shows the volume of entries in this latter category.

<i>Validation Rule</i>	<i>Number</i>
Incorrect gender	104
Incorrect task for stage	26
Pupil marked absent but assigned criteria judgement	41
Task number not recognised	5
Invalid value provided for criteria	6
Total	182

Table 8.1 Number of data entries invalidated for use in analysis

However, the bulk of the entries flagged up in the first validation check were subsequently judged to be suitable for inclusion in the analysis. These included entries where the task identifier did not match the allocated task, but the task used was consistent with the stage. The table below shows the volume of entries in this category.

<i>Validation Rule</i>	<i>Number</i>
Performed wrong task within P4 range (and not opted for Gaelic):	26
Performed wrong task within P7 range (and not opted for Gaelic):	24
Performed wrong task within S2 range (and not opted for Gaelic):	418
Inconsistencies between overall judgement and detailed criteria	44
Total	512

Table 8.2 Number of data entries deemed fit for use after failing a validity check

The large number of data values flagged up as ‘performing wrong task’ at the S2 stage is an artefact of the way in which secondary schools managed the process of providing pupils for the Group Discussion. It was not always possible for the school to provide the pupils in the groupings that were planned, and this led to pupils engaging in a GD task that was not the one for which they were scheduled.

9. Quality of data

Pupil task performance data

From the outset of the planning for the SSLN 2014 Group Discussion task, SQA’s SSLN team worked closely with the Learning Analysis Unit in the Scottish Government’s Education Analytical Services (EAS) to minimise the risk of invalid data being entered by Support Assessors. This collaboration led to the joint production of a data specification and an agreed validation platform for the detailed checking of the entered data. For example, the choice of coding scheme for the tasks helped minimise the risk of misidentification of tasks at the data entry stage. Both SQA’s SSLN team and EAS performed complementary roles in respect of data validation. Less than 130 of the 5000 records were deemed unavailable for analysis because of errors detected through the validation checks.

The procedures adopted for the Group Discussion in SSLN 2012 had resulted in issues with data quality that led to only 38% of the sampled pupils being included in the analysis of performance. For

the numeracy survey that formed part of SSLN 2013 the participation rate was 86%, while the rate for the SSLN 2012 Reading/Writing task was 88%. The participation rate for the SSLN 2014 Group Discussion tasks has turned out to be 81%, a huge improvement on SSLN 2012. The view of the EAS team is that good quality estimates of performance across the various categories of stage, gender and task can be derived from this data set.

The first level of data checking was carried out by the SQA SSLN team, to ensure that all Support Assessors had recorded results for each school visit they made, and that valid entries had been made for the data fields (such as School ID, Task ID, Pupil ID etc.). This data was then compared with the original database of School ID, Pupil ID, Pupil gender and Task ID for each pupil to be sampled for the Group Discussion assessment. The SSLN team investigated discrepancies and resolved differences where possible by reference to the Support Assessor written reporting forms.

Of the original online data entries made by Support Assessors (approximately 4600), the SSLN team were able to identify around 900 (19%) where one or more data entry errors were detected through a data validation exercise. One of the validation checks carried out by the SSLN team was to re-key data from around 20% of the paper records and check these against the data entered online by the Support Assessors. The most common errors related to the mis-keying of data items such as: School identifier, pupil identifier, task identifier. Sometimes the data entered for the judgement was invalid. Through interrogation of the Support Assessor paper records and/or cross-references to other data sources (such as the Pupil Record completed by the school coordinator), SQA's SSLN team resolved almost all of these errors.

This exercise, while involving manual examination of records, has required significantly less effort and time than the similar data validation exercise in 2012. It has also provided SQA's SSLN team with further insight into areas where Support Assessors are liable to make mistakes and to plan to address these in future surveys through re-design and training.

The next stage of data validation was carried out by EAS, involving a more detailed set of checks for internal consistency in the data records.

A total of 46 schools (248 pupil data values) were unable to provide data for the survey. The reasons for this were classified as set out in Table 9.1 below.

Reason	P4	P7	S2
Unable to assign an assessor	13 schools (26 pupils)	13 schools (26 pupils)	none
Withdrawn schools	8 schools (16 pupils)	8 schools (16 pupils)	3 schools (36 pupils)
Issues with assessor's visits	19 schools (38 pupils)	15 schools (30 pupils)	5 schools (60 pupils)

Table 9.1 Volume of school non-responses classified by reason for non-response

As described elsewhere it was also not uncommon to find that on the day of the assessment task individual pupils could be absent, or withdrawn from the assessment at the request of the school or the parent. In around 50% of these cases the Support Assessor provided a reason for withdrawal, such as: pupil had additional support needs, or pupil became distressed. There was insufficient data to provide a reliable estimate of the main reasons for withdrawal.

The data shows that across the P4 and P7 stages around 10% of pupils were either absent or withdrawn. At the S2 stage this was even higher, at 15%.

The dataset passed by SQA's SSLN team to EAS was then subjected to a battery of 28 different checks for validity. This exercise identified around 700 entries that failed one or more of these checks. Around 60% of these arose from a discrepancy at the S2 stage between the group discussion task recorded and the task that was allocated. These entries were considered by SQA's SSLN team and it was determined that 75% of these could be retained for the analysis.

Further iterations of the validity checks were performed, leading to the outcome already stated above – namely, that of the 5,100 or so records expected, some 16% were not available because of school non-response or pupil non-response while only 2% were excluded by the data validation checks.

10. Capacity Building in relation to Listening and Talking

Support Assessor participation in the survey and the interviews for the study provided information on their initial motivation for participation in SSLN 2014, and their reflective considerations of its impact on their own practice and that of their school and Local Authority.

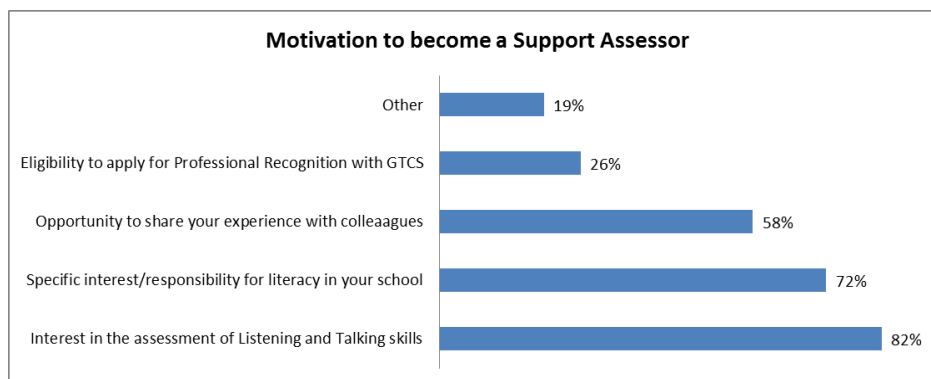


Fig 10.1 Reasons for applying to become a Support Assessor (multiple responses allowed)

A range of reasons was provided by those who selected 'Other'. The main reasons included previous experience as a field officer and a desire for personal professional development. The interviews with Support Assessors revealed that the information in relation to the GTCS Professional Recognition was provided after they had agreed to take on the role, so was not a factor in their motivation to participate.

The Support Assessor survey also gave an insight into the ways in which Support Assessors might use their experiences in the future. Some 78% of respondents expressed a desire to apply for the Professional Registration with GTCS. In fact, just over 100 participants have gone on to complete the final reflective exercise that qualifies them for this recognition of their professional learning.

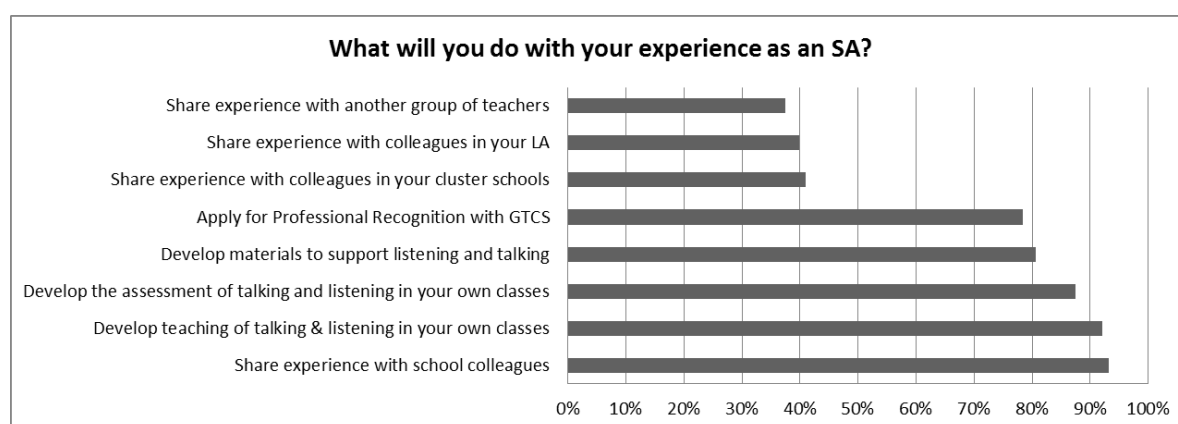


Fig 10.2 Survey responses to: Which of the following do you intend to take part in as a result of working as a Support Assessor?

It will be noted that most were confident about the role that they would play in their schools, but generally unsure about what, if any, use would be made of their new skills beyond the school – such as by their Local Authority. The few Local Authority coordinators interviewed also confirmed that they had no clear view of how this additional expertise might be harnessed within their Local Authority.

There was a unanimous view expressed in the survey results in relation to the usefulness to professional development of the experiences of being a Support Assessor. All respondents rated it Very Useful (87%) or Useful (13%).

Support Assessors also expressed their views about their own professional development in their responses to some open questions in the survey, and in response to interview questions. These indicated a very high level of satisfaction with the experiences and their contribution to personal and professional development. Aspects worthy of mention include: Understanding of literacy skills development from P4 to S2; Opportunity for professional dialogue with teachers from other schools; Experience of a range of pupils and schools; taking on a leadership role in my school.

Support Assessors also used the online forum to share some of their views at the end of their engagement with schools, and to thank SQA's SSLN team for their support. The language employed in these communications was effusive, with expressions of enjoyment. Some commented that this had been the best professional development that they had ever received.

11. Conclusions

Recruitment, Training and Deployment of Support Assessors

The recruitment process involved staff from several layers across the sector. As well as the Local Authority SSLN coordinators (mostly Quality Improvement Officers or Development Officers in the Local Authority) the process has involved Local Authority literacy coordinators, school head teachers, school faculty heads and a few secondees. It has required SQA's SSLN team to take a proactive role to ensure that shortfalls were identified and arrangements made to recruit from other sources. This has been successfully achieved through a combination of flexibility in dealing with Local Authorities and negotiation with individuals. From the responses of Support Assessors we can see that most recruits were either teachers of English or teachers who had a role in promoting literacy in their school or cluster.

The Group Discussion Advisory Team and SQA are to be commended for devising an engaging and effective training experience for the Support Assessors. The online elements have worked in synergy with the face-to-face training, firstly to prepare Support Assessors for collaborating in their group on the training day, and then providing further support and information to build confidence prior to 'going live'. The coherent and logical design of this training has been complemented by high quality training materials (video clips and detailed commentaries) and by enthusiastic and committed trainers. The Support Assessor responses confirm the success of this approach and the positive outcome of a well-prepared set of assessors. An additional benefit, taken up by over 100 Support Assessors, was the opportunity to gain recognition from GTCS for their professional development through their engagement in training and assessing.

The deployment of Support Assessors involved careful consideration of a number of factors which make it difficult to achieve an optimum set of deployments or deploy software to generate a solution. The approach taken by SQA's SSLN team, while labour intensive, resulted in deployments that were workable and could be achieved within the total quantum of Support Assessor resource available. In only a very few cases were there any Support Assessor expressions of dissatisfaction relating to their deployment.

Arrangements of visits to schools and of the assessment process

The response from most schools was positive, allowing the Support Assessors to formalise visit arrangements that suited the school and their own availability. The provision of email templates for this purpose was much appreciated by the Support Assessors and worked well in almost all cases. A significant number of schools were slow in responding and required persistence from the Support Assessors, or in some cases a direct intervention from SQA's SSLN team. SQA interventions always led to a resolution, although in a few cases a school had to be withdrawn from the sample. Once contact had been made with a school the process of arranging a visit appeared to be relatively smooth, with schools providing suitable accommodation and making pupils available as required. Not all schools were able to provide a member of school staff to be present for group discussions.

Although it was only presented as an option for schools to have a member of staff observe the assessment process, it was disappointing that as many as 40% of the school visited were unable to do so. Of those who did, 94% judged it to be a worthwhile experience. Some school coordinators highlighted the value of the experience for improving the school's understanding of the CfE standards for listening and talking. It is regrettable that not all schools take this view and the planning team might consider how best to promote this aspect of a Support Assessor visit to a school. There were challenges for secondary schools in organising pupil release from several classes and for primary schools in finding a time when pupils could be free to participate. There is a need to review the means by which schools are made aware of the existing guidance regarding the participation of pupils in the categories of ASN and/or EAL and their responsibility in identifying sample pupils beforehand.

Carrying out the assessment and making judgements

Support Assessors appreciated the provision of the assessment pack for each school and the straightforward means of recording their evidence and judgements. They were disappointed that where a task did not fit well with the context and stage of a pupil group then they were unable to offer an alternative that might have promoted better quality of discussion in the group. However, it would appear that the tasks, prompt cards and recording sheets worked well enough overall to allow assessors to reach judgements in which they could have confidence. Support Assessors reported that schools had appreciated the feedback given on their assessment judgements and on the methodology of the group discussion.

Reporting judgements and quality of data

Overall, the entry of data by Support Assessors has resulted in data of good quality, with around 80% passing the EAS first-pass validity checks. However, SQA's SSLN team should consider the incorporation of more specific training relating to data entry in the training arrangements in the future

With 81% of the expected data values being deemed suitable for inclusion in the analysis phase, there is sufficient data to allow reliable and accurate statistical estimates for the several categories and sub-categories to be reported on in the SSLN 2014 Group Discussion outcomes

The revised arrangements for 2014 have significantly improved the quality of the data over that produced in the 2012 arrangements (from 38% data availability to 81%).

Building capacity in the assessment of Listening and Talking

The work of SQA and the Group Discussion Advisory Team resulted in a set of resources that were well-received by almost all Support Assessors and in most schools where they were deployed. It was recognised by almost all participants in SSLN 2014 that the criteria and rubrics developed made a significant contribution to a better understanding of the standards set out for Listening and Talking in the Curriculum for Excellence Experiences and Outcomes. In addition, the stimulus materials for the discussion Tasks themselves were noted to be of high quality and attractive for pupils to use. There was an often-expressed desire that these materials should be released to develop capacity in schools

for more effective teaching of Listening and Talking. For the Support Assessors, participation in the training and the fieldwork had developed their own expertise in relation to the assessment of Listening and talking and had yielded them some very enjoyable experiences through professional discussions with teachers in other schools and Local Authorities

12. What changes might be considered for 2016?

One clear message from interviews with Support Assessors was that the arrangements for the SSLN 2016 Group Discussion ought to capitalise on the existing cohort of professionals experienced in applying the relevant criteria and standards. There has been a significant investment in their training for this role and most expressed a desire to be involved in future arrangements.

One area where improvements could be made is in the preparedness of schools to participate effectively and efficiently in the processes for SSLN. This would involve consideration of the ways in which school SSLN coordinators are provided with guidance on the expectations and requirements, including the explicit guidance on the inclusion of pupils with ASN or EAL in the sample. Furthermore, school class teachers could be made more aware of the resources already available to them on the Education Scotland website – such as the published criteria for assessment of the Group Discussion.

The SQA process for allocating Support Assessors to schools, while effective, was labour-intensive. SQA could explore with EAS other means of allocating assessors to schools, perhaps through the use of appropriate software.

The timing of the SSLN survey was the subject of much comment. Most took the view that it should occur earlier in the term and avoid the difficulties of timetabling around the myriad end-of-year activities that take place in schools. However, this must be balanced against the intention of measuring pupil attainment as close to the 'end of a level' as possible.

Consider whether more productive use could be made of the Support Assessor presence in a school. This could include professional development input relating to listening and talking, or even more general support relating to the SSLN and its online elements.

From the study it would appear that minor improvements could be made in the following:

- The use of 'icebreaker' activities should be considered for inclusion in the processes for the conduct of a group discussion task.
- Formally recognise the practice of secondary schools in modifying the groupings of pupils to accommodate timetabling and availability issues.
- Reconsider the advice on the interpretation of 'appropriate body language'. There were significant differences between boys and girls in this respect, particularly in the S2 groups.

In summary therefore the potential improvements are:

1. Make comprehensive use of the current cohort of Support Assessors when planning for 2016
2. Raise the awareness of School Coordinators to the processes for conduct of the Group Discussion, including the treatment of pupils with ASN or EAL concerns
3. Develop a strategy to maximise the CPD benefits for teachers, utilising the experience of Support Assessors to build capacity in the system and making available materials to support them and teachers generally to strengthen their practice in assessment of listening and talking.
4. Consider measures that might produce a more efficient travel plan for individual Support Assessors – such as using software to plan the deployment of the Support Assessors.
5. Reconsider the timing of the SSLN survey to take into account the cycle of demands on school time, balanced with the requirement to assess towards the end of the stage.
6. Consider how to take more advantage of Support Assessor expertise and training when they are present in a school.
7. Make minor improvements to a few key processes

Are schools ready to carry out their own assessment of Group Discussion?

One of the more obvious questions arising from this study is whether in the future the assessment of the group discussion could be carried out by staff in the school. This question was considered by the Group Discussion Working Group in its preparations for SSLN 2014.

This study has provided evidence from Support Assessors that in many schools there was a lack of confidence on the part of teachers to apply the Experiences and Outcomes in relation to Listening and Talking. The evidence also suggests that while some schools expressed a considerable appetite to learn further about the criteria and rubrics in use for the assessment of the group discussion, in others there were no definite expressions of interest in the process or the application of the criteria.

The interviews with Support Assessors revealed that where a teacher was present for the group discussion the teachers subsequently indicated that they would have intervened more readily and provided more direction and support for the pupils engaged in discussion. Some teachers also expressed disappointment that they could not put their 'best' pupils forward for the survey assessment. This suggests that many teachers are not yet ready to assess to the required standards with sufficient rigour.

The survey responses from school coordinators also show that almost 93% responded 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' to the statement that it was helpful to have an external assessor to carry out the group discussion assessments.

Possible ways forward for SSLN 2016 could include:

- Continuing with the 2014 arrangements as they are.
- Assessment of the Group Discussion performed jointly by a Support Assessor and teacher(s) from the school. This would require the provision of online training for teacher(s) prior to the assessment event. It would also require the school to make arrangements for the release of teacher(s) for the assessment itself and the subsequent debrief and discussion.
- Assessment of the Group Discussion performed by the school, using materials specially designed for this purpose. Sample moderation to be carried by SQA to provide assurance that standards have been properly applied. Again, online training materials would be required for the school staff.

Footnote:

It is perhaps worthy of note that OfQual has recently stated that "Exam boards (in England and Wales) cannot be sure that speaking and listening assessments are being carried out and marked consistently across all schools. We have evidence that they are not. That creates unfairness, and that is unacceptable."