INVITATION TO TENDER

Contract Title: Access Arrangements Regulations and Guidance Review
Reference: JCQ_AAO_0326
Contracting Authority: Joint Council for Qualifications (JCQ)
Publication Date: 12 March 2026
Response Deadline: 17:00 UK time, 2 April 2026 (3 weeks)

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1. Background and objectives

The Joint Council for Qualifications represents the seven leading providers of qualifications in the UK and is responsible for publishing common administration guidance, including the **Access Arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments (AARA)** document used by centres and awarding organisations across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The AARA regulations and related documentation and the associated learner evidence requirements together form the framework through which access arrangements are identified, evidenced, approved and applied for students.

Ofqual has set out a programme of work on access arrangements and reasonable adjustments and asked JCQ *to seek feedback from a range of users to inform a review of both the current process for access arrangements and the published requirements.* Ofqual has been clear that the scope of the review *should consider feedback relating to current evidence requirements and associated administration; the clarity and readability of the JCQ access arrangements and reasonable adjustments requirements document; and that the review should seek to balance protecting the integrity of the system with minimising administrative burden.*

JCQ seeks to appoint a suitably experienced supplier to design and deliver an end-to-end review of access arrangements requirements (for example, evidence thresholds, eligibility, and "normal way of working" expectations), guidance, evidence expectations and associated supporting documentation. The supplier will provide independent analysis and recommendations, drawing on evidence from users, relevant research on access arrangements and wider policy developments, with the review activities providing a robust evidence base for redrafting. The primary outcome of this work is the drafting of a clear, coherent and up-to-date version of the AARA guidance and associated materials. The review is expected to deliver:

- a concise, evidence-based assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the current requirements, guidance, associated documentation, processes and evidence expectations, showing how stakeholder and Ofqual feedback have been addressed and providing a clear basis for JCQ Board decision-making;
- practical, prioritised recommendations for improving clarity, coherence and usability of the AARA regulations and related guidance, including (where supported by evidence) proposals to clarify or adjust eligibility requirements and to reduce unnecessary administrative burden while preserving appropriate evidence standards;
- recommendations on how best to communicate requirements and support materials to different user groups (including parents and students) so that *all users can access the information they need on access arrangements without relying on paid for third-party training or unofficial summaries*;
- a full revised version of the AARA regulations, associated guidance and support materials, drafted on the basis of the evidence gathered and tested with key stakeholders (including

regulators, awarding organisations, centres and other stakeholders), ready for internal approval and any wider consultation.

The review must ensure that any proposed changes to access arrangements requirements and guidance are compatible with the Equality Act 2010, and other relevant equalities and disability legislation across the UK jurisdictions, including duties to make reasonable adjustments for disabled students, and that distinctions between reasonable adjustments and other arrangements are framed in a way that is legally robust and practically usable.

JCQ and its members will retain responsibility for any formal equalities and regulatory impact assessments and for final decisions on requirements and guidance, but the Supplier's analysis and recommendations must be presented in a way that supports those assessments and clearly flags any equality or regulatory implications.

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2. Project timeline

2.1 Overall timetable

A final version of the AARA regulations and all associated guidance and support materials will be confirmed and ready for publication by 1 September 2027, so that revised requirements can be published and implemented from the 2028/29 academic year, giving centres a full year to prepare for changes.

The work will proceed in phases: project inception and agreement of scope and methodology; completion of evidence gathering activities; submission of a draft report and recommendations; drafting and review of revised guidance and associated documentation; and submission of the final report and guidance for JCQ Board approval.

The detailed timetable between initial recommendations, committee consideration, drafting of revised public facing documents and final Board approval will be agreed at inception to ensure sufficient time for review and iteration within the overall milestones.

2.2 Key milestone dates

Milestones	Date
Review activities completed (focus groups, consultation with members and relevant representatives)	16 October 2026
Recommendations drafted and shared with the JCQ Board and relevant committees	15 January 2027
Revised version of the guidance drafted and reviewed by JCQ committees and staff	16 April 2027
Final version of the guidance submitted to the JCQ Board for approval	30 April 2027

Milestones	Date
Final version of the 2028-29 AARA regulations, guidance and associated materials published, incorporating house-style and editorial finalisation, ready for first use by centres from September 2028 (one year in advance).	1 September 2027

3. Scope of services and specification

This is the specification to which all bidders must respond.

3.1 Overview and core components

The Supplier will design and deliver an end-to-end review of JCQ's access arrangements requirements, guidance and supporting documentation, evidence expectations, and associated resources. The core components are:

- designing and delivering evidence-gathering activities (including focus groups and other engagement activities) to *seek feedback from a range of users of the access arrangements system and understand how requirements and guidance are used and understood in practice*;
- reviewing and analysing the AARA and related guidance, current evidence requirements and associated administration, and *assessing the clarity, readability and coherence* of these materials;
- reviewing relevant research and evidence on the effectiveness and impact of different access arrangements (for example, extra time and other commonly used arrangements) to inform evidence-based recommendations on eligibility requirements and evidence expectations;
- *examining where the current approach risks students not receiving appropriate access arrangements, including borderline or inconsistent cases,* and where it may lead to inappropriate or overgenerous arrangements (for example where particular arrangements could unfairly advantage students), and undertaking a focused review of *evidence requirements and associated administration, including how far current expectations drive unnecessary burden in centres*;
- developing clear, evidence based recommendations for access arrangements requirements, guidance and supporting documentation, directly addressing the review objectives and specific scope topics set out in Sections 3.4 to 3.6;
- drafting a revised version of the AARA regulations, guidance and associated supporting documentation, tested with key stakeholders (including regulators, centres, awarding organisations and other stakeholders);
- providing written reports and presentations required to support JCQ's internal decision making and approval.

3.2 Service delivery locations and standards

Services will be delivered:

- remotely with virtual meetings and focus groups involving representatives from across the UK unless otherwise agreed;
- in line with the timetable and milestones in Section 2;

- to quality, clarity and completeness standards described here, including responsiveness to JCQ feedback.

3.3 Dependencies and assumptions

Delivery depends on:

- the Supplier developing strong familiarity with relevant JCQ documentation (including AARA regulations and related guidance), Ofqual's published research, wider research on access arrangements, relevant regulatory conditions and guidance (for example Ofqual's General Conditions of Recognition including Condition G6 on reasonable adjustments and equivalents), equalities and disability legislation across the UK jurisdictions, publicly available data and other evidence relevant to the review;
- JCQ support in arranging focus group meetings and note-taking to record feedback;
- availability of JCQ-nominated SENCos, Exams Officers, SLT, awarding organisation staff and other stakeholders to participate in focus groups and interviews;
- JCQ committees providing prompt feedback on draft deliverables to enable completion within agreed timescales.

3.4 Review objectives
The review will *seek feedback from a range of users to inform an evaluation of both the current system for access arrangements and the published requirements.*

The review will address:

- *Where the current approach risks students not receiving appropriate access arrangements, including borderline or inconsistent cases.*
- *Current evidence requirements and associated administration, including how far expectations may drive unnecessary burden in schools and colleges.*
- *The clarity, readability and coherence of the Access Arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments (AARA) document and related guidance, including any sections that are ambiguous, repetitive or open to conflicting interpretations.*
- *How requirements and guidance are communicated to, and understood by, key user groups, including SENCos with different levels of experience, Exams Officers, senior leaders, distance learning providers, awarding organisations*, parents, carers and students.

3.5 Evidence-gathering activities

The appointed supplier, with support from JCQ staff and members, will:

- lead a programme of evidence-gathering activities, which will include focus groups, interviews and/or surveys delivered remotely where appropriate.
  These activities must involve centre staff (including Exams Officers, SENCos and SLT) from a broad range of settings (for example maintained schools, academies, independent schools, FE and sixth-form colleges and other relevant providers). The programme must also involve specialist stakeholder groups, awarding organisation staff (including access arrangements and compliance teams), and representatives of parents, carers, students and private-candidate groups. The programme of focus groups and other engagement activities must be sufficient to secure meaningful representation from each of the key audience groups identified in Section 3.5, across England, Wales and Northern Ireland and to enable

the supplier to *understand in depth how requirements and guidance are used and understood in practice;*

- document recommendations for improvements to access arrangements guidance, associated documentation and related communications.
- create a new version of the Access Arrangements and Reasonable Adjustments document based on feedback received from stakeholders and the evidence gathered, with accompanying documentation explaining the rationale for key changes and, where relevant, why some suggested changes have not been adopted.

3.6 Review topics (order of coverage)

The review, associated reports and recommendations will:

1. *Examine where the current rules and processes risk students not receiving appropriate access arrangements (including borderline or inconsistent cases).*
2. *Review evidence requirements and associated administration, including how far current expectations drive burden in centres.*
3. *Clarify the distinction between reasonable adjustments available to disabled students* (within the meaning of the Equality Act 2010, and other relevant equalities and disability legislation across UK jurisdictions) *and* other *arrangements available to non-disabled students*, ensuring that these distinctions are framed in a way that is legally compliant and reduces the risk of legal challenge, including in complex or borderline cases.
4. *Assess the clarity, readability and coherence of the AARA and related guidance, identifying sections that are ambiguous, repetitive or open to conflicting interpretations.*
5. *Consider how information and support on access arrangements are communicated to all key user groups, including SENCos at different experience levels, Exams Officers, SLT,* maintained and independent schools, FE and sixth form colleges, *distance learning providers, awarding organisations,* and parents and carers, and whether each group can readily find and understand the information they need.
6. *Evaluate whether all users can access the information they need on access arrangements without relying on paid for third-party training or unofficial summaries.*
7. Review the level and type of information about access arrangements and reasonable adjustments made available to students and parents/carers (for example what is published on public websites or in candidate-facing materials), and consider whether this is clear, proportionate and aligned with regulatory and policy expectations.
8. Review the current process, *and how this impacts workload and the risk of over- or under-application of access arrangements in centres. The review should ensure that any proposed changes balance protecting the integrity of the system with minimising unnecessary administrative burden on schools and colleges.*
9. Take account of any current or recent government consultations and policy developments relating to SEND and inclusion across the UK jurisdictions, where these have implications for access arrangements requirements and guidance.

3.7 Testing drafting and stakeholder feedback

The new version of the guidance will set out clear expectations and address issues identified with the current document, related regulatory feedback, and evidence gathered from stakeholders through this process*. Proposed drafting and structures will be tested with key stakeholders including regulators, awarding organisations, centres, and other relevant stakeholders, while JCQ retains responsibility for any wider consultation.

3.8 Deliverables

The Supplier will provide, as a minimum:

- an inception note setting out the agreed methodology, stakeholder engagement plan and detailed timetable;
- all preparation materials and fully facilitate online focus groups and other engagement activities with SENCos, Exams Officers, SLT, awarding organisation staff, and other relevant stakeholder groups;
- structured summary notes of all focus groups and engagement activities, setting out key themes by audience group;
- a draft written report and slide deck setting out findings, analysis and prioritised recommendations for access arrangements requirements and related guidance;
- a full draft of the revised AARA regulations, guidance and associated materials, developed in line with the findings and recommendations and suitable for testing with key stakeholders;
- a version of the revised AARA regulations, guidance and associated materials that can be readily brought into line with JCQ's agreed editorial and house-style standards (for example by JCQ's appointed proof-reading and editing provider), including consistent structure, terminology and signposting across JCQ documents;
- documentation of the rationale for key recommended changes to, or decisions to retain, existing requirements and guidance (for example explaining the evidence and considerations behind proposed eligibility criteria), together with a risk log setting out key residual risks, trade-offs and areas of uncertainty (including where particular stakeholder views could not be fully reconciled), to support future decision-making and challenge handling;
- a final written report and Board-level presentation incorporating JCQ and, where appropriate, awarding-organisation feedback and providing clear options and recommendations for next steps;
- a summary of all proposed changes to the AARA guidance and related materials, to support JCQ's equality screening of the revised requirements;
- where requested, tailored presentations of the findings for other JCQ audiences (for example JCQ committees or working groups).

3.9 Performance standards

The Supplier will:

- deliver all agreed milestones by the dates set out in the contract and in Section 2;
- ensure that all reports and presentations are accurate, evidence-based, written in clear plain English and suitable for Board level consideration;
- design and run engagement activities in a way that secures good representation across centre types and roles and enables candid feedback;
- respond to JCQ comments on draft outputs within agreed timescales and incorporate reasonable changes;
- be prepared to present findings and recommendations clearly and confidently to different JCQ audiences, including the JCQ Board.

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4. Commercial and contractual requirements

The Supplier must deliver the services on the following commercial and contractual basis:

- Services delivered in line with agreed timetable and milestones.
- Outputs meeting quality, clarity and completeness requirements, including responsiveness to JCQ feedback.
- Contract term aligned to the key milestone dates in Section 2.
- Pricing should reflect the scope, required quality standards and represent value for money over the contract term.
- Pricing model: fixed price. Invoicing monthly in arrears; 30-day payment terms for undisputed invoices. Essential work-related travel reimbursed per JCQ policy, subject to prior approval.
- Compliance with UK GDPR and JCQ information security standards, including security requirements, breach notification and audit rights.
- Compliance with JCQ policies as detailed in the JCQ Employee Handbook.
- Insurance cover, including appropriate public liability insurance and professional indemnity insurance, maintained for the duration of the contract.
- All intellectual property created under this contract will be owned by JCQ. The Supplier must grant JCQ a perpetual, royalty-free licence to use any pre-existing Supplier material needed to make full use of the outputs.
- No change to scope, deliverables, charges, or timetable is effective unless mutually agreed in writing.
- Mutual confidentiality applies. JCQ is not itself subject to the Freedom of Information Act, but work carried out on behalf of JCQ and information shared with other organisations may be disclosable under freedom-of-information or access-to-information processes that apply to those organisations.
- JCQ will provide secure ICT systems and equipment required for service delivery. Use of the Supplier's own device may be permitted, subject to prior agreement and JCQ-approved security configuration.
- JCQ supports flexible working arrangements where compatible with service requirements; expected core collaboration hours are 09:00–17:00 UK time.
- JCQ may terminate for convenience or for cause (e.g. material breach).

5. Evaluation

Evaluation criteria (weights totalling 100%):

- Relevant Experience and Capability: 35%
- Technical Quality and Methodology (including legal and equalities approach): 35%
- Commercial Pricing: 30%

Stages:

1. Compliance check (pass/fail)
2. Technical and commercial evaluation
3. Presentations/clarifications (if required)
4. Preferred supplier selection and due diligence

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6. Person criteria – supplier guidance

The Supplier should be able to demonstrate:

a) **Senior level- experience in UK assessment, regulation or education.**

- o Significant experience (ideally 5+ years) in a senior role within a UK awarding organisation, and/or other relevant education, qualifications regulation or assessment context (e.g. awarding organisation, regulator, specialist SEND organisation) focusing on assessment, regulation, operations, or policy.
- o Examples of roles held and responsibilities.

b) **Regulatory engagement expertise**

- o Direct experience working with UK qualification regulators (e.g. Ofqual, Qualifications Wales, CCEA Regulation) on qualifications and assessment matters.
- o Examples of responding to regulatory requests, audits, or reviews.

c) **In-depth- knowledge of JCQ and awarding organisation regulation**

- o Strong understanding of JCQ requirements and awarding organisation rules on access arrangements and reasonable adjustments, and how these are applied in schools and colleges.
- o Evidence such as policy development, compliance work, or training delivery.

d) **Equality and reasonable adjustments expertise**

- o Demonstrable understanding of the Equality Act 2010 and other relevant equalities and disability legislation across the UK jurisdictions, and their application to reasonable adjustments and access arrangements in education and assessment contexts.
- o Examples of work where these legal considerations, including complex or borderline cases, have informed policy, guidance or operational decisions.

e) **Guidance development skills**

- o Ability to draft or revise qualification or regulatory guidance documents.
- o Examples of published guidance or frameworks contributed to.

f) **Consultation and stakeholder engagement**

- o Proven track record in designing and leading consultations or focus groups, synthesising findings into clear recommendations, and presenting these effectively at senior or Board level.
- o Case studies or examples of consultation projects delivered.

7. Supplier response requirements

Suppliers should structure responses under the following headings and add appendices where necessary:

a) **Executive summary**
Provide a concise overview of the proposal, unique value, ability to meet the person criteria, and key differentiators (max 1 page).

b) **Methodology and approach**
Describe the delivery approach against this specification, including governance, resourcing, risk management, and innovation. Bidders should also explain how they will ensure that revised drafting can be aligned with JCQ's corporate house style and editorial standards, including how they will work with JCQ and any appointed proof-reading or editing provider.

c) **Information security and data protection**
Confirm compliance with UK GDPR and provide security standards, certifications, and incident response procedures.

d) **Working pattern**
Confirm proposed flexible working arrangements and core collaboration hours to meet service requirements.

e) **Pricing**
Complete the pricing table below and describe any assumptions, indexation, discounts, and optional services.

Pricing table (exclusive of VAT)

Item	Description	Milestone link	Total (ex VAT)
Item 1	Project inception: agreed methodology, stakeholder-engagement plan and detailed timetable	Project inception phase	
Item 2	All evidence-gathering activities including focus groups, interviews, surveys or equivalents, with preparation materials and summary notes	16 October 2026	
Item 3	Draft written report, slide deck and prioritised recommendations for access-arrangements requirements and guidance	15 January 2027	
Item 4	Full draft of revised AARA regulations, guidance and associated materials (including editorial/house-style version, rationale documentation and equality-impact summary), tested with key stakeholders and reviewed by JCQ committees and staff	16 April 2027	

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Item	Description	Milestone link	Total (ex VAT)
Item 5	Final written report, Board-level presentation and any tailored presentations for JCQ audiences, incorporating JCQ and awarding-organisation feedback	30 April 2027	

Grand Total ex VAT	_____
VAT	_____
Grand Total inc VAT	_____

Bidders should note that JCQ reserves the right to raise clarification questions where, in its view, the pricing given for any item does not appear realistic or proportionate to the activity described. Bidders may also be asked to provide a breakdown of the roles (including experience level) and day rates used to price each item; this information will be used for contract-management purposes and will not in itself form part of the scored evaluation.

F. Compliance checklist

Confirm position on each item, with comments if "No".

Item	Yes/No	Comments if No
Acceptance of JCQ's' indicative contractual terms (to be formalised on award)		
Ability to meet the person criteria in Section 6		
Compliance with UK GDPR and relevant data protection requirements		
Ability to maintain insurance cover for the duration of the contract, including appropriate public liability insurance and professional indemnity insurance.		
Agreement to JCQ's change control procedures for this contract		
Acceptance of JCQ's intellectual-property terms (all deliverables owned by JCQ, with the Supplier's background IP licensed to JCQ as needed to use those deliverables).		
Agreement to JCQ's travel and expenses policy		
Proposed working pattern is compatible with the timetable and service requirements		

Authorised signature

Name: _____

Position: _____

Organisation: _____   Date: _____

8. Instructions and declarations

- Submission format: Word document and/or PowerPoint sent via email.
- Deadline: 17:00 UK time, 2 April 2026 – late submissions will not be accepted.
- Clarifications: submit questions by 27 March 2026 to billy.goodall@jcq.org.uk; a Q and A log will be published to all bidders.
- JCQ reserves the right to exclude from further evaluation any bid where the total pricing is, in JCQ's reasonable view, not proportionate to the scope and value of the contract, or where pricing for individual items does not appear realistic.
- Bids must remain valid for 90 days.
- Conflicts of interest: declare any actual or potential conflicts of interest.

Mandatory declarations include:

- Compliance with UK laws and relevant sections of the JCQ Employee Handbook (internally facing, provided on request).
- Acceptance that the terms herein are indicative and will be formalised in the contract on award.

JCQ may amend the ITT prior to the submission deadline and may cancel the procurement at its discretion.