Frequent concerns voiced by appraisers – and our response

The NESC appraisal service does not appear to share sufficient contact information about appraisees

The performers list information that is available in full to the PCT is only available to us with the personal data removed (for data protection reasons) when it is updated with the NESC appraisal service every quarter. New entries are therefore presented to us without e-mail, phone or address details in many cases and changes of address or personal details are not passed on to us; sometimes it is not even in alphabetical order. While the PCTs have tried to share their existing databases, this means that there are inevitably gaps that need to be filled. The administrative team spend a lot of time looking on-line for publically held information eg. practice addresses and phone numbers, where applicable, but our databases are still not as robust as they need to be.

We have defined a minimum data set about each appraisee and are working to fill the gaps where it is not met.

We know that this causes you a lot of problems when you are asked to make contact with your appraisees, and we apologise. We try to make life easier for you by sharing all the information that we have.

What can you do?

We ask for your help in populating our databases (with the appraisee’s permission) and your understanding of the difficulties.

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We have introduced an appraiser information form in which individual appraisers are asked to share information with their appraisees about themselves and their preferred methods and times of contact. We would like to ensure that the information included is information that you are happy to have publically available and to put these up on the website, but understand that this may not always be appropriate. In this case we propose that there should be a website version of information that you feel it is safe to share publically and further details that you might wish to share only with individual appraisees (eg. personal e-mail addresses).

What can you do?

Be patient with us when we ask you to complete a personal appraiser form to ensure that it contains only information you are happy to have on the website.
Review the details you have already given us and e-mail the new “website compatible” form back.

How do you allocate appraisees to an appraiser?

There is an allocation process which is set out in some detail on the website. In brief, we check how many appraisals an appraiser wishes to do and ask whether there are any appraisees with whom they could not have a satisfactory appraisal. We allocate those appraisees who had the appraiser in the previous year unless there is a reason not to do so, and then randomly allocate more appraisees to the maximum requested. The appraiser is sent the list of allocations and given another chance to point out any conflicts where an appraisal would be inappropriate. If we have not heard from the appraiser about conflicts after two weeks, we let the appraisee know who their appraiser is. The appraisee also has the chance to request an alternative appraiser and need not give a reason. Once both parties are happy, the allocation process is complete.

What can you do?

Let us know any doctors who have a relationship with you that makes appraising them inappropriate for any reason (eg. partner, spouse, lover, GP, patient, line management responsibility, already appraised three times, etc.) to help get the database populated.

Let the administrative team know promptly when you are happy with your allocations, as well as when there is an issue, so they can proceed and let the appraisees know.

The vetos I have previously expressed to not seem to have been noted

Although we have tried to set up a foolproof database that captures vetos and stops us making the same allocation twice when we have been told that it is unsuitable, we have made mistakes. Sometimes it is because we have no organisational history from the commissioning PCT. We do not know that you have already appraised someone three times unless you tell us, as the records we receive only cover one year. As the years pass we are generating our own organisational history and a more robust database.

We can only apologise when this happens and work with you to make sure that we capture information about unsuitable pairings better.

Some of my appraisees are miles away and the time to get to them is significant
Unfortunately the area we cover is not always blessed with good communication links and the patches are now significantly bigger than they were in the days of the small non-merged PCTs. In order to be fair to all appraisers we allocate appraisees within each area that has a Local Appraisal Lead. This means that all appraisers will get some appraisees that are further away than they are used to. If we allowed some appraisers to veto an appraisee on the grounds of distance we would be asking the other appraisers to do more of the travelling. This would not be acceptable.

What can you do?

If you find that we have allocated you all your appraisals very far away, then please let us know at the veto stage so that we can review the situation. We are human and we may have made mistakes.

It is the appraisee’s choice of venue for the appraisal, so please do not ask them to travel to you unless there is a very good reason and you can justify it in writing.

Setting up appraisals with the appraisees can be really difficult and the PCT used to be able to do it for us

Different groups of appraisers have different legacies of how things used to be done. Sometimes they have been very effective and (though I hate to admit it) may have been better than our systems in the NESC appraisal service. However, we have limited administrative capacity to deliver 2000 appraisals and cannot offer all the services that some of you used to have. There is a tightrope between micromanaging you as independent contractors which we do not wish to do, and leaving you with a lot of hassle that could be avoided. In areas where appraisers have been used to stating their availability and then having their slots filled centrally, it is hard to move to a system of setting up your own appraisals. Other appraisers dislike the idea of appraisal slots being filled for them and prefer to agree all the details with the individual appraisee.

What can you do?

Give this system a fair chance this year and put forward good ideas for how to improve the service. We would like to look at web-based booking systems but none of the ones we have looked at so far have been able to meet our needs.

How much effort is it appropriate to make to set up an appraisal if the appraisee is not responding?

The contracts with the PCTs say that we will make three separate attempts to contact an appraisee before letting the PCT know that there is a communication / engagement issue.
We try to go further. The appraisal administrators will contact the appraisee centrally initially. We have to give at least two months notice of the appraisal being due. If the appraisee does not contact you first, we ask you as an appraiser to try on three different occasions by at least two different methods (from among e-mail and telephone, home or practice addresses as available). If, and only if, you feel another attempt would be appropriate (eg the appraisee has been away) then you may on occasion try more than three times; however, there is no obligation that you should do so. If the appraisee has not returned your e-mails / calls, please refer the individual back to the appraisal administrator. We generate a standard second request to set an appraisal date. Sometimes the local lead even calls the practice manager to highlight the issue. If there is still no response, the final request is made by recorded delivery and the appraisee is informed that their appraisal will be referred back to the PCT if they do not respond within two weeks.

At this stage, we feel that we have made all reasonable attempts to engage with the appraisee.

What can you do?

Make your three attempts by two methods and if you are unsuccessful, let us know and we will take over. Many of you have taken on too great a personal responsibility and if our contact details are wrong then the sooner we find out, the better.

However, if at any point the appraisee does make contact we do ask you to let the appraisal administrator know as soon as possible to avoid embarrassing miscommunications.

Does the appraisal documentation have to be typed?

Yes. It will be returned if any part, including the PDP, is handwritten as this is considered unprofessional in a document that is getting increasingly important.

There are different methods for signing off the documentation, aren’t there?

When an appraisal is done on the NHS Toolkit it is signed off on-line and a change by one party or the other, even altering a typo, undoes the sign off. Two sign offs on-line are therefore an absolute guarantee that this version has been approved by both parties. However, we know that there can be a delay of up to 24 hours between signing it off on the Toolkit and the sign off appearing in the preview version that you download and send to us.

For non Toolkit users (and there are still a few), there has to be a signed off paper copy with proper dual signature on the same copy, otherwise there could theoretically be amendments between one party signing off and the other sending it in.
What can you do?

For the Toolkit: please wait to send us the Form 4 and PDP until after both signoffs have appeared, otherwise we cannot accept the documentation and have to ask you to resend it.

For paper copies, make sure that the version you send us is the original with both signatures.

How do I reassure myself and my appraisee that the information is looked after with appropriate data protection?

We have a detailed data protection policy and take the security of information very seriously. We attempt to follow best practice in all areas.

We have recently acquired an electronic system for anonymising information so that the summaries of discussion and PDPs used for quality control purposes can be anonymised before they are assessed (by taking out proper nouns and other identifying details).

What can you do?

Please familiarise yourself with the policy on the website and follow it at all times.

Please think about the security of the data that you hold. Give any notes you may make during preparation to the appraisee or destroy them appropriately. Make sure that you do not hold any information on your computer or laptop in an unprotected format and that you delete it once you have finished with it.

Invoicing for appraisals is an extra burden, could the completed post appraisal documentation not just trigger the payment?

The administrative team would love to be able to trigger payment themselves rather than logging invoices etc., but this is not possible within the Strategic Health Authority payment systems which require an audit trail that includes an invoice.

What can you do?

Please submit your invoices in a timely fashion (and we will undertake to sign them off in a timely fashion so that payment is not delayed).

Please put your unique identifier on the invoice so that the payment can be identified and cross referenced with your invoice. There have been occasions when you have put on a reference and the
financial services department (Shared Business Services - SBS) has omitted to put it on your payment, but this is the exception.

Let us know if your reference was omitted, or there were any other problems with your payment so we can feedback to SBS and monitor the service.

**What is the CPD requirement?**

You are all busy clinicians and we know that appraisal is only a small part of your portfolio of work; your continuing professional development as an appraiser needs to be proportionate. On the other hand, at the moment there is significant change as we move to revalidation and more than usual to learn to keep up to date. Some appraisers have been very well supported over the past few years and others less so but the pace of change is hotting up for us all (and for our appraisees).

To get the continuing professional development (CPD) payment there is a requirement that you attend at least six hours of appropriate CPD. You should choose activities appropriate to your personal development plan as an appraiser.

In order to meet the requirement to benchmark your practice, you should also be an active member of an appraisal support group. Each group will meet at least four times a year, one of which will be during the annual refresher event, and you should aim to attend at least two appraiser support group meetings.

The CPD payment in no way covers the time that you will spend on your support and CPD as an appraiser, but it is offered in recognition of the fact that you are making a commitment that is appreciated.

**There is a rumour that there is not one rate of pay for all**

NESC Appraisal Service pays exactly the same amount per appraisal within NESC to all appraisers irrespective of the PCT from which they originally came.

However, one PCT had differing contractual arrangements with appraisers in different areas and as a result there were employment law considerations to take into account when the service was commissioned from NESC. There is an independent arrangement between those appraisers affected by the contractual change and the PCT involved to compensate them for the loss of their employment status. This is outside the NESC appraisal service.
In addition, very occasionally we make a particular request for an experienced appraiser to do an appraisal that is likely to be more complex in terms of time taken or issues addressed (usually at the request of the PCT), and we offer an enhanced rate for these complex appraisals. It is then up to the appraiser to decide whether or not to accept this appraisal.

What can you do?

Relax in the assurance that the requirements of you and the rewards for you as a NESC appraiser are the same across the whole team.


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