Policies and Procedures

Evidence Quality Assurance (EQA) Policy and Procedure

Summary:

Evidence Quality Assurance (EQA) is an on-going process about understanding, minimising, and factoring in risks around the generation of evidence. EQA aims to ensure that the evidence JNCC produces and procures is of good quality and is fit for purpose.

The EQA Policy presents four principles that must be adhered to when producing evidence, regardless of whether the evidence is produced solely by JNCC, in partnership, or procured. The EQA Procedure outlines the six stages that staff should follow to quality assure the evidence. Practical instructions for following the procedure can be found in the EQA Support Manual.

'Evidence' is used throughout the EQA Policy and Procedure as a collective term for any information that JNCC produces or procures, including:

- Expert knowledge and advice
- Data
- Methodologies
- Results and interpretation of data analysis
- Summaries or syntheses of information
- Tools/websites

The definition encompasses evidence from the wide range of disciplines covered by JNCC's work, including but not limited to, natural sciences, environmental sciences, social sciences, and geospatial sciences. It includes evidence produced in all formats – regardless of whether it is formally published as a report, made available as a tool (such as a web portal), or communicated with decision-makers directly.

Scope: This document applies to all JNCC staff, contractors and volunteers producing or procuring evidence on JNCC's behalf, in line with the definition of "evidence" above.

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Related documents:

EQA Support Manual*

EQA Audit Document*

*** Links to these documents will be added when these documents are published – please contact the Chief Scientist Directorate in the meantime if required.**

Revision history			
Version	**Date**	**Author**	**Changes**
18.0	09/06/2026	Willow Outhwaite	Version 17 was thoroughly reviewed following extensive consultation with staff in 2025 and 2026. Revisions include: • Organisation of EQA documents into Policy, Procedure, and a Support Manual, in line with definitions on JNCC's Policies and Procedures Hub • Strengthened compliance measures • New content on specific topics Changes to increase user-friendliness
17.0	August 2022		Updated Section 8 only to provide guidance on publishing peer-revised literature
16.0	2018/2019		

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SECTION 1 – Evidence Quality Assurance Policy

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this EQA Policy is to ensure that the evidence JNCC produces and procures is of good quality and is fit for purpose. Following JNCC's EQA Policy and Procedure enables end-users, such as policymakers, to assess the robustness and suitability of evidence for decision-making.

1.1.1 Background

1.1.1.1 Overview of EQA at JNCC

EQA is an on-going process about understanding, minimising, and factoring in risks, to ensure evidence being generated is of good quality and fit for purpose.

The following are key for EQA at JNCC:

- This **EQA Policy** outlines the principles that all staff must adhere to.
- The **EQA Procedure** sets out the necessary actions required to quality assure evidence.
- The **EQA Audit Document** (previously known as a PAD) provides a record of key EQA actions and decisions.
- The **EQA Support Manual provides** staff with practical instructions on how to implement the Procedure and the Policy principles.
- The **EQA SharePoint site** on JNCC's intranet includes the database of EQA Audit Documents (for both completed and ongoing work)

In addition to these key documents, it is essential for effective quality assurance that there is strong team-level quality control in place and that staff are well trained and proficient in producing or procuring evidence.

1.1.1.2 Why is evidence quality assurance important?

There are multiple benefits to JNCC and to individual staff from following JNCC's EQA Policy and Procedure, including:

- **Produces better evidence:** Following a proportionate assurance process that involves others - such as through peer-review - improves the quality, reliability, and robustness of the work. It helps identify errors and ensures methods and interpretations are sound.
- **Supports better decision making:** Decision-makers need high-quality evidence to guide their actions. Clearly presenting uncertainties and limitations helps them understand how the evidence can - and cannot - be used, which supports informed decision making. Ultimately, this leads to better outcomes for nature.
- **Builds staff capability**: Engaging in the EQA process supports learning and development. Staff gain experience in rigorous review, improve their analytical and communication skills, and develop confidence in producing robust evidence.
- **Reduces risk to JNCC**: This includes reducing reputational, financial or legal risks. Following a clear and documented EQA Procedure provides partners and stakeholders with confidence that JNCC's evidence is robust, reliable, and fit for purpose. JNCC can demonstrate that all reasonable steps were taken to assure quality if ever challenged.

- **Reduces risk to staff**: Sharing responsibility for quality assurance ensures that responsibility for the quality of the evidence does not rest solely with the individual who produced it.

1.1.1.3 Who is responsible for evidence quality assurance?

As outlined in Together for Nature 2023-2030, JNCC's role is to provide robust scientific evidence and advice to help decision-makers turn science into action. This means all staff have a role to play in ensuring evidence is of good quality. This includes those involved in:

- Producing evidence
- Managing the production or procurement of evidence
- Providing leadership and guidance on quality assurance
- Providing peer-review, technical clearance and final sign off
- Providing operational support such as budgeting, procurement and administration
- Ensuring JNCC's EQA Policy and Procedure is fit for purpose

1.1.2 Scope of policy

The policy presents four principles that must be adhered to by all staff. Following the principles will reduce the risk of JNCC producing or procuring evidence that is incorrect, misleading, or inconsistent.

The policy is relevant to all types of scientific evidence – regardless of whether it is formally published as a report, made available as a tool (such as an online database), or communicated with decision-makers directly. The policy applies regardless of whether JNCC are producing the evidence, it is being produced in partnership, or someone else producing it on our behalf.

JNCC produces and procures a wide range of evidence – it would not be possible to provide in a single document detailed guidance for every role and team regarding how to produce good quality evidence. Individuals and teams have the flexibility to develop quality assurance processes that follow the EQA Policy and Procedure which are appropriate for their work areas - communication with teammates, line managers, and other colleagues is strongly encouraged to help develop these. The acronym RIGOUR can be used as a general guide - all evidence should be produced in a way that is:

Repeatable, **I**ndependent, **G**rounded in reality, **O**bjective, have understood and managed **U**ncertainty, and results should address the initial question **R**obustly.

1.2. Principles

All staff should adhere to the following four principles when producing or procuring evidence to ensure it is of good quality and fit for purpose. Further instructions can be found in the EQA Support Manual.

1) Proportionate EQA

Design a quality assurance process that is proportionate to the risks associated with the intended use of the evidence and the complexity of how the evidence is being produced. Consider the breadth of risks to JNCC, including operational and reputational, and the risks to nature from decisions being made based on poor quality evidence. The quality assurance process for a low-risk project should look very different to that of a high-risk project.

2) EQA throughout the lifecycle

Apply quality assurance in a proportionate manner throughout the whole life cycle of evidence production. Adequate quality assurance should be planned (and budgeted) for, with an understanding that the approach to quality assurance may need to change if the associated risks change. Regular communication with all those involved in quality assurance is key to successfully adapting throughout the lifecycle.

3) Verify and Validate

Apply proportionate verification and validation measures in order to assure quality. Quality assurance of evidence is more than checking that the evidence is error-free and satisfies its specification (verification). It should also include checks that the analysis is appropriate and fit for the purpose of its intended use and audience (validation).

4) Communicate uncertainty

Present uncertainty in an open, proportionate, and understandable way so that decision-makers and other users know how the evidence can and cannot be used, allowing them to make informed decisions. Uncertainty is inherent in evidence generation - what matters is how uncertainty is managed and communicated.

1.3. Compliance

1.3.1 Monitoring

The Chief Scientist Directorate (CSD) are responsible for monitoring compliance with the EQA Policy and Procedure. Compliance will be monitored using the following two approaches:

- **Sample audit of 10% of EQA Audit Documents uploaded or updated on the EQA SharePoint site in the past three months.** The purpose is to monitor whether staff are complying with the EQA Procedure, and the CSD are responsible for undertaking this audit.

- **In-depth quality assessments of at least three JNCC projects annually.** The purpose is to check whether the principles in the EQA Policy are being adhered to and if the quality of the evidence is suitable for its intended purpose. The CSD will coordinate the process but staff with the required technical knowledge will be asked to take part in assessing the quality.

The CSD will follow a process for selecting work for the sample audits and in-depth assessments that represents the breadth of JNCC's activities. Both completed work and that which is still in progress will be within scope.

1.3.2 Reporting

Quarterly results will be shared by CSD with all staff, and with the Programme Boards for their consideration and escalation (if required) to the Delivery Assurance Board (DAB), Executive Committee (ExCo) and the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC). In addition, the CSD will provide annual reports directly to ExCo and ARAC.

The CSD will review this policy every two years in line with JNCC internal processes and, if necessary, update it. The EQA Support Manual may be updated more frequently if required, for example if inclusion of new instructions on fast-moving topics such as Artificial Intelligence is deemed useful.

1.4. Relevant legislation

- The policy is in line with the Government Chief Scientific Adviser's Guidelines on the Use of Scientific and Engineering Advice in Policy Making (2010) and the Defra Joint Code of Practice for Research (2012).

- The Freedom of Information Act 2000 (FOI) gives the public a right of access to information held by all public authorities in the UK. The Environmental Information Regulations 2004 (EIR) deal with environmental information held by public authorities in England, Northern Ireland and Wales. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) is an independent authority promoting openness by public bodies. Scotland has its own Scottish Environmental Information Regulations and the Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002. These are regulated by the Scottish Information Commissioner. The purpose of the legislation is to make public bodies, such as JNCC, more transparent and accountable. The right to information is subject to certain exemptions and exceptions

- The Government Functional Standard - GovS 010 (2025) is part of a suite of management standards that promotes consistent and coherent ways of working across government, and provides a stable basis for assurance, risk management and capability improvement.

- The Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007 and the resultant Code of Practice for Statistics apply to Official Statistics produced and/or made available by JNCC.

SECTION 2 – Evidence Quality Assurance Procedure

2.1 Purpose

The aim of this procedure is to set out the necessary stages required to quality assure evidence and comply with the principles in the EQA Policy. It should be read in conjunction with the EQA Support Manual, which includes practical instructions on how to implement the procedure.

In line with the principles set out in the policy, each stage of the procedure should be applied proportionately, taking into account the risks associated with the intended use of the evidence and the complexity of its development. For example, some low-risk work may not require peer-review (Stage 4) or may have one person performing technical clearance (Stage 5) and final clearance (Stage 6) simultaneously.

2.2 Overview of procedure

Table 1 provides an overview of the six stages of the procedure and an explanation of their importance. Table 2 provides a checklist of the EQA actions required at each stage which are to be applied proportionately.

Table 2 also includes relevant actions under other non-EQA policies, procedures and processes. Though these do not form part of the EQA procedure itself, they are included to help staff understand how these fit together to support effective quality assurance.

JNCC produces and procures a wide range of evidence. There is flexibility in how the procedure should be applied – see the EQA Support Manual for instructions on this – but the principles in the EQA Policy must always be adhered to.

Table 1. Overview of the six stages of JNCC's EQA Procedure

Stage	Explanation
1. Planning for EQA	EQA must be built into planning from the outset and adequate time and resources for EQA factored in. Compressed or omitted assurance stages increase the risk of avoidable mistakes and could weaken confidence in the evidence.
2. Adhere to EQA process when producing evidence	The EQA process agreed at Stage 1 must be adhered to when producing the evidence. Where risks or circumstances change, Stage 1 should be revisited to confirm that the selected EQA process remains fit for purpose and proportionate.
3. Pre-review quality checks	Key staff involved in the production or procurement of evidence undertake quality checks before the work is shared for peer-review or technical clearance.
4. Internal and/or external peer-review	Assessment of a draft by one or more internal or external reviewers intended to evaluate the quality, accuracy, clarity, and robustness of the work and provide constructive feedback for improvement.
5. Technical clearance	A formal check by staff with the necessary expertise to ensure that the evidence is scientifically robust and suitable for its intended purpose.
6. Final sign off	The formal approval by one individual at JNCC that confirms all required quality assurance actions have been completed and that the work is authorised for publication or other method of external release

Table 2. Actions to be taken at each stage of the EQA Procedure.

Stage	Checklist of EQA actions to take ☒	Relevant section in EQA Support Manual
1. Planning for EQA	☐ 1.1. Determine if the work is going to produce or procure evidence as defined by the EQA Policy.	Stage 1 Action 1.1.
	☐ 1.2. Undertake an evidence risk assessment	Stage 1 Action 1.2.
	☐ 1.3. Create an EQA Audit Document and upload to EQA SharePoint site	Stage 1 Action 1.3.
	☐ 1.4. Determine if following JNCC's EQA Procedure or that of a partner organisation	Stage 1 Action 1.4.
	☐ 1.5. Design an EQA process that is proportionate to the level of risk	Stage 1 Action 1.5.
	☐ 1.6. Strengthen project design by getting early cross-team and cross-disciplinary input	Stage 1 Action 1.6.
	☐ 1.7. Choose an evidence production method that is fit for purpose	Stage 1 Action 1.7.
	☐1.8. Plan roles, responsibilities, costs, and timelines with those involved in Stages 2-6	Stage 1 Action 1.8.
	Relevant actions under non-EQA policies, procedures and processes	**Responsible JNCC Team**
	☐ Set up a Project Initiation Document outlining the objectives and scope of the work	Portfolio Management Office
	☐ Set up a Project Risk Assessment	Portfolio Management Office
	☐ If procuring evidence, ensure all minimum quality controls are specified in the Annex A 'Invitation to Tender' document or other relevant procurement documents, and contract specification	Finance & Planning Team
	☐ Determine if the work will require ethical approval	Chief Scientist Directorate
	☐ Consult JNCC's Science Impact Staff Handbook for guidance on how to maximise the impact of the work	Chief Scientist Directorate

Stage	Checklist of EQA actions to take ☒	Relevant section in EQA Support Manual
	☐ Draft a communications plan and plan how to design impactful and well targeted outputs	Communications Team
2. Adhere to EQA process when producing evidence	☐ 2.1. Follow, and adapt where necessary, the EQA process designed at Stage 1	-
	☐ 2.2. Update the EQA Audit Document where necessary	-
3. Pre-review quality checks	☐ 3.1. Staff producing the evidence undertake quality checks in line with “pre-review clearance checklist”	Stage 3 Action 3.1.
4. Internal and/or external Peer-review	☐ 4.1. Provide peer-reviewers with clear instructions for their review	Stage 4 Action 4.1.
	☐ 4.2. Peer-reviewers undertake quality checks in line with “peer-review checklist”	Stage 4 Action 4.2.
5. Technical Clearance	☐ 5.1. Provide staff responsible for technical clearance with clear instructions for their review	Stage 5 Action 5.1.
	☐ 5.2. Staff responsible for technical clearance undertake quality checks in line with “technical clearance checklist” and clear the evidence for final sign off	Stage 5 Action 5.2.
	Relevant actions under non-EQA policies, procedures and processes	**Responsible JNCC Team**
	☐ Produce evidence in line with JNCC’s Guidance on Creating Accessible Documents	Communications Team
	☐ Complete a JNCC Publication Risk Assessment and Checklist Form	Communications Team
6. Final sign off	☐ 6.1. Finalise EQA Audit Document, including completion of the EQA Statement	-
	☐ 6.2. Provide staff member responsible for final sign off with clear instructions for their review	Stage 6 Action 6.2.
	☐ 6.3. Staff member responsible for final sign off undertakes quality checks in line with “final sign off checklist” and clears the evidence for publication/external release	Stage 6 Action 6.3.