## Executive summary

### Introduction

In December 2023, the Care Quality Commission (CQC) commissioned Ipsos to undertake an evaluation of the split of the previous role of inspector into the two new roles of assessor and inspector (referred to hereafter as ‘the role split’).

The role split formed one element of a wider transformation of CQC’s assessment and inspection processes for health and social care providers. The assessor role was designed to focus on remotely collating and assessing a wide range of evidence about provider services and planning assessment activities. The inspector role was designed to focus on on-site evidence gathering activities. Together, the roles would be responsible for an overall effective assessment of quality and risk. In August 2024 (after evaluation fieldwork with CQC colleagues had been completed), CQC took the decision to revert to a single inspector role.

The evaluation was underpinned by three key objectives, which were agreed by all internal parties, including CQC’s Assessor and Inspector Role Evaluation Group and Trade Union representatives:

* + - * 1. Did the role split of inspector achieve the intended outcome of the design?
        2. Did the role split of assessor achieve the intended outcome of the design?
        3. Do the roles require any revisions or reversions?

### Purpose of this report

This is the final report for this evaluation, produced for CQC. The evaluation examined the implementation and early outcomes of the role split. Evaluation fieldwork took place between January and July 2024. Findings from this report are based on: evaluation scoping activities, carried out with a wide range of internal stakeholders to develop a theory of change for the role split and the evaluation framework; analysis of CQC colleagues’ feedback forms; qualitative interviews with assessors, inspectors, and colleagues from the wider team; a survey of CQC operational colleagues; and analysis of CQC management information (MI). There are some limitations to the study, most notably that, throughout the initiative, many assessors and inspectors were operating in a hybrid role, taking on responsibilities outside those originally intended for their nominal role.

### Background and development of the role split

#### Context and rationale

The role split formed part of CQC’s broader strategic shift towards a more data-driven and risk-based approach to regulating health and social care services in England. This was influenced by CQC’s 2021 strategy and a need to align with Integrated Care Systems. Development of remote monitoring and inspection methods during the Covid-19 pandemic further accelerated this shift. Operationally, the role split aimed to increase the number of assessments completed, and address concerns about inspector workload and wellbeing, shifting risk management away from individual colleagues to the team level. However, the evaluation found a lack of a clearly communicated business case or stated objectives for the role split, creating confusion and uncertainty among the operational colleagues.

#### Development and set-up

The lack of a widely communicated rationale for the change created challenges. The simultaneous introduction of the Regulatory Platform and the Single Assessment Framework (SAF) added complexity to the rollout of the role split. A lack of clarity about the roles and their responsibilities influenced colleagues’ choice of new role, often driven by personal circumstances rather than a clear understanding of the new roles.

#### Staff engagement, training and guidance

Feedback on the training and guidance on the new roles indicated that it failed to adequately prepare inspectors and assessors for their new roles. Interviewees reported that training primarily focused on the use of the Regulatory Platform, with insufficient focus on practical application to the new roles and ways of working. Some assessors and inspectors found the primarily online format did not suit their learning style. Participants felt guidance documents were unclear and lacked detail and specificity about the assessment process and the interplay between the roles.

Participants’ suggestions for improvement included: clearer communication of the rationale for the role split; more detailed job descriptions and process maps; sector-specific case-study based training; and a blended learning approach incorporating in-person elements.

### Rollout of the role split and its early outcomes

#### Assessor and inspector understanding of the roles

Evidence gathered by the evaluation suggests that there was a widespread lack of clarity about the roles and how they should work together in practice. Interviewees could describe the basic, high-level idea of the new roles – that is, the assessor role being focused on remote assessment activities, and the inspector role focused on “crossing the threshold” and gathering data about services on-site. However, interviewees in both roles consistently described a lack of understanding about both the rationale for the role split and how the roles should work together effectively in practice to complete assessments.

#### Assessors, inspectors and Integrated Assessment and Inspection Teams (IAITs) working in line with the intended design

As noted, many inspectors and assessors were operating in a hybrid role, and CQC made several operational decisions regarding the role split which amended the original plans during the evaluation. Survey responses indicated that roughly a third of assessors and inspectors identified that they were working in each of the three types of role – i.e. as an assessor, inspector, or in a hybrid role. Interviews with assessors highlighted that for some, the reasons for not taking on a hybrid role echoed their reasons for choosing the assessor role in the first place – concerns about the frequency of travel and on-site visits, and balancing this with their personal circumstances and/or caring responsibilities.

As the relationship owner function was not in the remit of either role, portfolios and risk could be described as held at the IAIT level, rather than by individual inspectors or assessors. However, across all evaluation activities, CQC colleagues raised concerns about the oversight of risk. These concerns stemmed from the shift away from having designated relationship owners, the lack of a consistent approach to implementing the role split across different teams, and technical problems with the Regulatory Platform.

#### Tools and systems

Data gathered across evaluation activities indicated that, at that time, the Regulatory Platform was not working in a way that was fit for purpose. Both assessors and inspectors consistently felt that it was not enabling them, but instead making their roles harder. The lack of a functional system forced operational colleagues to develop their own workarounds, using spreadsheets and shared documents outside the Regulatory Platform, to manage information and planning of assessment activities.

Data gathered suggested that while theoretically a promising initiative, the SAF was not enabling inspectors and assessors to carry out their roles effectively. Three main challenges emerged from interviews: the SAF’s current lack of practical usability within the Regulatory Platform; the large number of evidence categories; and a lack of sector-specific guidance about how to apply the SAF in practice.

Participants’ suggested solutions for the Regulatory Platform included: improving upload speeds, data quality and search functionality; simplifying the user interface; and increasing system flexibility to allow users to navigate the assessment process more easily.

Participants’ suggested solutions for the SAF included: streamlining the number of evidence categories to simplify the process and reduce duplication; and developing sector-specific training and guidance, including what ‘good’ looks like for different specialisms and services.

Other tools participants felt they would benefit from included: developing templates to support consistency in report writing; and improving planning tools to support the flow of information between colleagues preparing for and carrying out an assessment.

### Expected outcomes of the role split over the medium term

#### Inspector and assessor activities

One of the aims of the role split design was to minimise the time inspectors spend reviewing documentary evidence, allowing more time for on-site observations of care and engagement. The majority of inspectors reported decreased time spent on-site observing care and engaging with service users or staff, and increased time collating and reviewing documents. This contradicts the intended design of the role split. This finding was supported by CQC management information on the number of hours spent on-site. Whilst challenges with the Regulatory Platform have undoubtedly had a negative effect on the delivery and completion of assessment activities, qualitative data gathered by the evaluation also suggested the role split has contributed to the reduction in on-site inspection activities.

The role split design also aimed to increase the number of data sources used as part of assessments, with a longer-term goal of increasing data-driven decision making within CQC regulation. While some assessors reported using more data sources for assessments than in previous inspections, these were not necessarily new sources of data (as was assumed when the roles were designed).

CQC MI indicated that the percentage of time spent on gathering evidence remotely (i.e. documentary evidence) was broadly similar between the roles. This suggests the allocation of remote evidence gathering exclusively to the assessor role (in the role split’s design), did not align with the real-world context or requirements of the assessment process. Alongside the challenges associated with the Regulatory Platform, participants described the barriers to the new ways of working under five themes: the uneven distribution of tasks; process bottlenecks; overlap and duplication of effort; the assessment backlog; and limited availability and low-quality data.

#### Assessor and inspector confidence, job satisfaction and wellbeing at work

Overall, nearly two thirds (63%) of assessors and inspectors that responded to the survey felt not very or not at all confident in carrying out their responsibilities for assessments. This proportion was consistent across roles, sector specialisms, geographical networks, length of time working at CQC, and for respondents with disabilities or long-term health conditions, and caring responsibilities.

Survey responses on job satisfaction and wellbeing at work were also poor. Interview data strongly supported these findings: both assessors and inspectors expressed concerns about becoming deskilled due to the narrower focus of their new roles. Some inspectors were unhappy that assessor colleagues, who are their peers, were now responsible for allocating tasks to them. These factors, coupled with the overall frustration with the other implementation challenges, contributed to low morale and job dissatisfaction.

Some participants raised particular concerns about the wellbeing of colleagues in the assessor role. These concerns were not only due to their workload, but also the nature of the work they were responsible for in managing incoming cases and notifications. Participants noted the risk of elevated stress levels through reading ‘bad news’ all day, and the additional challenge of accessing emotional wellbeing support when home working and feeling isolated.

#### The IAIT as an enabler to the roles

Interview data indicated that the new IAIT structures and resourcing were not enabling inspectors and assessors to effectively perform their roles. Four key themes emerged: inadequate resources; geographic challenges; an imbalance between the sector specialisms; and inconsistent processes.

The primary solution suggested by participants across evaluation activities was to increase staffing levels in the IAITs. Beyond this, participants reported that improved processes to support more efficient, productive working would be the most valuable additional resource for their team.

#### Assessment completion and consistency

The intended outcomes relating to assessors’ and inspectors’ activities and the function of the IAITs were expected to result in assessments being completed for an increased volume of services. There is no evidence that these outcomes have been realised.

Interviewees described the assessment process as having “ground to a halt”, with tasks taking significantly more time than before the role split. MI provided by CQC supported this. The evaluation found no evidence to suggest that the role split had enabled any efficiencies. Data gathered across evaluation activities indicated that the role split did not result in quicker response to risk, more timely identification of good practice, or access to more recent ratings and information for provider services. Potential efficiencies from having IAITs focused on specific local areas were not observed. This is likely due to staffing shortages requiring CQC colleagues to cover assessment activities across wider geographical footprints.

Increased consistency in assessments across teams and specialisms was another expected outcome of the role split – primarily through the use of the SAF, However, qualitative data suggested there was wide variation in how assessments were being completed, with individuals and teams adopting different workarounds to the technological and staffing challenges they faced. MI demonstrating any indicators of assessment consistency was not available in the timeframe of the evaluation.

### Conclusions and recommendations

This report has documented the delivery and early outcomes of the role split of the inspection workforce into assessors and inspectors. The role split of the inspection workforce into assessors and inspectors has faced significant delivery challenges and did not deliver the expected outcomes. These delivery challenges relate to:

The lack of a clear, and clearly communicated, case for change. This meant assumptions about how the role split would work were not tested, and the colleagues affected did not feel consulted.

Delivering the change, over a relatively short space of time, in a very challenging organisational context, with resourcing gaps and other major change initiatives (facing their own challenges) impacting on the role split.

Some significant issues with the design of the role split affected the experience of many assessors and inspectors.

The evidence compiled in this evaluation therefore supports the CQC decision to revert to a single role.

CQC should consider the following steps in future change initiatives:

* + - * Conduct detailed assessments of the case for change, ensuring the considerations are widely communicated. As part of this, it is necessary to balance the strategic, economic and quality case for change, alongside the benefits for CQC colleagues. Consult widely with those affected in developing this case. Establish a small number of measurable objectives for the initiative, and consult on these. Consider the practicalities of delivering the change, including support for colleagues, at this first stage. Communicate a consistent message on the case for change throughout.
      * Use theories of change (or similar approaches) to interrogate the logic, feasibility and evidence, underpinning the design of future initiatives. Such an approach can identify design issues / logic gaps early. Engage with operational colleagues to ensure the logic and processes accurately reflect the realities of their day-to-day work.
      * Carefully consider the scheduling of any future staffing restructures alongside policy changes and the introduction of new tools or technologies. Establish the dependencies each has on the other in this scheduling process.
      * Future training offers relating to change initiatives should include: a focus on the case for change; a face-to-face element, particularly if the initiative has set out to move people into new teams; a high degree of tailoring of content to colleagues’ sector specialisms; and, a strong focus on new processes, and how colleagues should interact to deliver these.
      * Schedule a more measured rollout of change. Pilot the approach in small areas, and study the outcomes closely; use this to develop the next phase of rollout, and so on.

CQC should consider the following steps to learn from the role split, and any future initiatives with similar aims:

* + - * Conducting a formal review of what aspects of the role split should remain under consideration for CQC’s future strategy. This evaluation report provides the basis for this exercise and would suggest the following:

Continuing to explore whether a predominantly desk (and / or home) based assessment role, with more manageable expectations, greater transition support, and a review of skill requirements, is suitable to CQC’s objectives. This should interrogate whether and how such a role can contribute to a recovery in assessment numbers and efficiency, and improve staff wellbeing. A thorough assessment of people’s suitability and level of preparedness for the role as defined should be conducted.

Considering which elements of the end-to-end assessment process could be supported by another role or roles, without introducing double-handling of information or other duplication of effort.

Examining other ways to introduce risk sharing, while maintaining the consistency of relationship ownership.

* + - * In relation to any future role linked to the original assessor role:

Clarify the additional data, data flows, usage, purpose of data collection, use and analysis in any new role. Develop practical tools, reports and training to support its collection, analysis and integration into assessments.

Consider carefully the accessibility and training needs of the assessor role, and its day-to-day requirements.

Consider assessment-related responsibilities holistically. This includes workload (for example, the management of incoming cases and notifications), and risks of elevated stress.