

ACS versus the Group Competency Scheme (GCS)

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ's)

A significant number of Assessment centres are receiving enquiries from their customers regarding the Group Competency Scheme which they are finding difficult to answer. The following FAQ's have been produced by all of the UKAS Accredited Certification Bodies delivering ACS, to provide ACS Assessment centre staff with information which provides a balanced view of the operation of both the ACS and the Group Scheme enabling them to answer their customers' questions.

Q Who owns the Group Competency Scheme?

A Energy and Utility Skills

Q Who is the Scheme aimed at?

A Gas businesses that directly employ a large* workforce of engineers (large means hundreds*), it does not apply to engineers who are employed on a sub-contract or casual basis, nor is it not suitable for smaller gas businesses (SME's) due to the complexity and costs of set up and operation

Q Will it a replace ACS?

A No, ACS will remain as the primary route for gas engineers to demonstrate their initial and ongoing competence in matters of gas safety and apply for Registration with Gas Safe Register.

Q Will it be any cheaper than ACS?

A No, case studies of publicised claims to savings over ACS have been exaggerated and disproven. Businesses will have to consider the following ongoing costs to them if they go down the route of the Group Scheme:

- Certification Body fees for their initial approval, annual audit and monitoring of engineers (fees will be dependent upon company size, number of employees and all locations where competency of their operatives is determined)
- Certification Body fees for updating Gas Safe Register
- Energy & Utility Skills annual licence fee @ £50.00 per engineer (eg: with 500 engineers this is likely to be around £25,000/annum) which when compared to ACS, will equate to £125,000 over the 5 year cycle for the licence alone)

- Additional staff, facilities and quality management system set up and maintenance (cost depending on size of business and range of work)
- Additional ACS certification costs where engineers are extending their scope of work (existing negotiated contracts may well be voided) as these extensions require the engineer to undertake an ACS assessment.
- Gas Safe Registration fees will still apply

Q What about ACS costs, how can they be cheaper than the Group Scheme?

A ACS is an assessment only scheme; large businesses can and should, as a duty of care, already provide technical training and updates to their employees on a regular basis, and if they are confident in the training and knowledge of the operative, can opt for assessment only. They can do this without employing additional staff, facilities and an expensive and complex quality and administrative management systems and leave the competence assessment to an independent ACS centre. ACS NG core and appliance(s) Reassessment can be completed within 1½ - 2 days which is in effect 2-3 hours of assessment time /year. Assessment costs are market driven and not controlled by the Certification Body.

Q What's the difference between ACS and the Group Scheme?

Gas businesses will have to set up their own in house assessment processes and facilities (which may include their own Assessment centre) and employ sufficient assessors and verifiers to be able to assess and verify the competence of their own workforce in the workplace on an ongoing basis. Where evidence of competence cannot be obtained from the workplace engineers will have to demonstrate it in another way, whereas ACS is a one off assessment occasion remote and independent from the gas business completed every five years using realistic workplace simulation within an approved assessment centre. A business may wish to consider where this expensive and scarce resource is best focused, on running an increasing business or assessing operatives and having to run another quality and administrative management system.

In the event that the competence of an engineer is questioned in a court of law, the employer will be responsible for demonstrating how competence was measured across the full range of ACS criteria and how any changes to that criteria is incorporated and measured across their workforce. It may be extremely difficult to claim or prove that any assessment was independent and impartial due to the vested interests of the employer.

Q Is the group scheme easier to pass than ACS?

A No, the Group Scheme requires engineers to meet the same assessment criteria as ACS, however, as competence assessments are carried out internally by the businesses own

assessment staff (who may indeed be supervisors or line managers), it may be perceived as such due to the lack of independence and Impartiality.

Q Does the Group Scheme cover both initial assessment and reassessment?

A No, the Group Scheme only covers the re-assessment of expiring gas qualifications recognised by Gas Safe Register for registration e.g. ACS or QCF; those engineers who want to extend their scope of certification will need to undertake ACS assessments

Q As an employer will I be committed to the Group Scheme or could I change back to ACS?

A All businesses operating the Group Scheme will have to enter into a legally binding contractual arrangement with a UKAS accredited Certification Body. Due to the financial and operational commitment to the setup, obtain approval and operate the scheme (for both parties) it is unlikely that it will be easy or financially viable to withdraw from the Group Scheme or change Certification Body once committed.

Q Is there anything else I should consider?

A Yes, look outside the box and think about the consequential effect the Group Scheme could have on a business including;

- Gas businesses are experts and focused on installing, servicing and/ or maintaining gas appliances and installations, not assessing the competence of their workforce. Operating the Group Scheme could be a serious distraction which could cause real organisational problems for the business
- The Group Scheme is unfamiliar, untried and unproven there are no guarantees that it will suit a business
- ACS provides value through public confidence and trust which relies on a valid assessment of competence, by a third party. This is based on objective evidence obtained through a fair, valid and reliable assessment, and not influenced by other interests or by other parties. The Certification Body and all assessment personnel act in a responsible manner so as to provide confidence to interested parties in its competence, impartiality and integrity.
- ACS provides an element of risk management for gas businesses as a third party has conducted the assessment, carried out the quality assurance and issued a Nationally accepted Accredited Certificate of Competence. With the Group Scheme this is all carried out in house and there lies the responsibility with all the implications that entails.

End