

SSIP – good news for contractors during difficult times

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A Chartered Engineer with around 30 years' experience of supplier management, Gary Plant's career has enabled him to play a major role in shaping supply chain processes in Construction, Engineering, Quality, Safety and Procurement environments. As Managing Director of Altius he has built on this experience and combined it with sophisticated, user-friendly and robust IT systems to a market leading supplier management service.

Construction clients have always faced the problem of knowing which contractors are good and which are not. Nobody wants to find out the hard way, so proactive clients undertake an assessment to see which contractors can demonstrate they are capable of delivering the work in a safe and reliable manner.

The need to undertake these assessments became mandatory in April 2007 with the introduction of the revised Construction (Design and Management) Regulations. These now include Stage 1 Core Criteria for assessing health and safety competence of contractors and consultants working in the construction industry.

Faced with a scenario where every client needs to undertake assessments of all of their contractors, and potential contractors, it's not surprising that many of them choose to subscribe to specialist service providers that undertake assessments on their behalf. As well as considerably easing the client's burden of doing the assessments, there are also efficiency advantages because the results of the independent assessments are shared by multiple clients.

So far so good then? Well, almost.

The success of this approach has led to some disquiet from contractors whose clients have chosen independent service providers. Why? Well, there are a number of service providers doing the same thing, and unless all your clients happen to choose the same one then you're faced with multiple, similar assessments. On top of that, the standard required to 'pass' the assessments will almost certainly vary to some degree. Some contractors have reported standards varying quite a lot.

If this all sounds familiar, you will be pleased to know that there is some good news. In April 2007, an initial meeting was held at the HSE's Headquarters, which included representatives from the Contractors' Health and Safety Assessment Scheme (CHAS), Constructionline, Exor Management Services and the National House-Building Council (NHBC) to discuss the potential for a new forum to be known as Safety Schemes in Procurement (SSIP). The purpose of the forum is to:

- act as an umbrella organisation to facilitate mutual recognition between health and safety pre-qualification schemes wherever it is practicable to do so;

- actively advise and influence clients about acceptable interpretation and appropriateness of health and safety competence standards in UK schemes; and
- embrace the core guidance on competence and training in the Approved Code of Practice (ACoP) of the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations 2007.

The introduction of the Stage 1 Core Criteria for assessing health and safety competence of contractors and consultants working in the construction industry provides the opportunity for existing health and safety prequalification

schemes to build on and formalise mutual recognition already in operation amongst some schemes. SSIP, as an umbrella organisation, is in the perfect position to facilitate this mutual recognition, and indeed requires it as a condition of membership. The original founder members have since been joined by several others including Altius, BSI, HVCA and NQA (a full, up-to-date list can be found on SSIP's website: www.ssiip.org.uk).

Many people have quite rightly asked: 'What is the HSE's view of SSIP?' Without the support of the HSE, the efforts so far could be in vain after all. The good news is that the HSE welcomes the initiative and has said it "actively supports the work of the SSIP Forum, and the arrangements put in place by the member schemes of the Forum to achieve mutual recognition in relation to

stage 1 of the Core Criteria established in the Approved Code of Practice (ACoP) for the Construction (Design and Management) (CDM) Regulations 2007. Mutual recognition by the schemes is closely based on proposals suggested by independent research funded by HSE."

HSE recognises that an accreditation assessment carried out by any of the member schemes satisfies the requirements of the Core Criteria. Any client wishing to procure the services of a business that has achieved accreditation can be confident that a reasonable and robust judgement has been made that the standards for competency in CDM 2007 have been met, for the first stage of procurement.

HSE encourages clients to accept a valid accreditation from any of the SSIP Forum member schemes as having met Stage 1 of the Core Criteria and should not then require any further evidence in relation to Stage 1.

So what does this mean to contractors in practice? Consider the following example.

Contractor A works for a range of clients and is the subject of various assessments by them, or by service providers working on their behalf. One service provider, Altius, undertakes a broad ranging assessment, including the CDM core criteria, on behalf of a large private client. Another client, this time in the public sector, requires Contractor A to hold a CHAS registration, which also

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includes CDM core criteria assessment. Prior to SSIP, Contractor A would have been assessed by Altius and CHAS, but SSIP mutual recognition now means that Contractor A can get CHAS registration without the need for an assessment, because CHAS recognises the assessment undertaken by Altius.

Clients who undertake their own CDM core criteria assessment can now waive this for any contractor who holds an accreditation from an SSIP member, further reducing the burden on contractors.

It's good to hear good news about pre-qualification schemes for a change. We mustn't forget that they perform a valuable purpose in safeguarding health and safety and minimising the opportunity for 'cowboys' to win work, but with SSIP the efficiency with which we do this is vastly improved. The next time your client asks you to undergo a health and safety pre-qualification assessment, including CDM core criteria, and the assessment body isn't a member of SSIP, maybe you could give your client some good news; tell them about SSIP.