

Group Competence Scheme Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

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Group Competence Scheme Webinar Questions

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3. **How often are the field staff audited/assessed to gain their GCS?**
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8. **Who is responsible for the engineer that leaves British Gas if they carry out unsafe work?**

1. What is the Group Competence Scheme (GCS)?

The GCS has been developed by Energy & Utility Skills (EU Skills) to meet a demand that originated from employers. The scheme was conceived to provide an alternative approach to enable the re-assessment of Gas Safety competences for larger Gas businesses. It is however, available to businesses of any size, with the exception of sole traders. The scheme has been through all the necessary accreditations and external recognitions and is now fully available for employers to use as an alternative to the Accredited Certification Scheme (ACS). The scheme is for businesses who wish to maintain their Matters of Gas Safety (MoGS) competence through managed CPD and in house assessment processes in context with the work they do and the way they operate, rather than using the ACS approach of an external centre based snapshot assessment every five years. One of the problems with ACS is that it allows engineers to work with out of date standards for a long period of time. This can result in engineers rushing through an ACS assessment every five years. This leads to the possibility that people revert back to their previous work practice rather than working to the correct standards. GCS alleviates this risk as employees are informed as soon as revisions to standards are introduced, and monitored to ensure they operate in accordance with them.

2. Is the GCS a replacement for Gas Safe Registration?

No, you will still need to be Gas Safe Registered, but the GCS is a means of demonstrating to Gas Safe Register that your employees remain competent in MoGS.

3. If I am interested in the GCS for my organisation, what are the next steps?

To move forward you need to determine how many employees will be in scope over the next 12 months (ie. how many will need to renew their Gas Safe Competences in that period) and sign the GCS Employer Agreement to obtain a GCS Licence. You will need to sign and send back a licence agreement and complete the template document that summarises what your GCS Operations Document will need to contain.

A GCS Licence is valid for 12 months from the date that the employer GCS Agreement is signed. The Licence cost is based upon the number of Gas Safe Registered employees within the newly licensed company. The employees will need to renew their MoGS competences (ie. obtain another five years on the Gas Safe Register) during that 12 month period. Because it will inevitably take some weeks before the employer has built and prepared their GCS for external audit and subsequent certification (if their GCS meets the audit requirements), there will likely be some employees whose MoGS assessments are due prior to GCS certification. These individuals will need to renew via the existing ACS method, until the employers GCS is certified and may be used for employees' Gas Safe Register renewal.

The important point is that a GCS Licence enables the employer to use the EU Skills GCS Product (and the bundle of services) from day one (the signed Agreement). While the cost of the Licence is based upon the notional number of employees renewing each year (on a cumulative basis), there is no guarantee that all those employees in the first year will be able to use GCS for renewal. This is dependent upon how quickly the employer is able to secure certification of their GCS. There is therefore an incentive for employers to carry out the GCS build and preparatory work asap, once they have a GCS Licence.

4. Will it be expensive if I need to have site inspections?

No, as the requirements are spread over the five year cycle and should provide both cost and time savings over the period. More importantly, it ensures your competence and knowledge is maintained. EU Skills has a simple calculator available if you want to see how the scheme could be cost effective for your business.

5. Can the GCS be used to register an Apprentice instead of them doing ACS at the end of their Apprenticeship?

No. GCS is for the five year renewal of Gas Safe Register required MoGS competences. You must already be Gas Safe registered and hold either a current recognised qualification or valid ACS Certificate in order to be able to use the scheme as your re-assessment mechanism.

6. Is the GCS for commercial and domestic use, or domestic only?

The GCS may be used for all work activities and categories covered by Gas Safe Register. This includes domestic, commercial and catering, LPG applications, metering and Emergency Response categories.

7. Will the GCS require me to complete lots of additional paperwork and operate a quality management system?

There will be paperwork to complete but hopefully less than you need to for ACS. It won't create beauracracy for your business, particularly as a member of a cluster. Someone else will be managing the process for you. For a larger business running their own GCS, there will be more administration involved, but the cost savings more than cover the cost of this. Check the GCS calculator if you're unsure.

8. How can I start to use the GCS?

EU Skills is the scheme owner. To move from ACS to GCS you need to obtain a licence from them. The licence costs £50 and is renewed per Gas Safe Registered engineer in scope (the individual that will be using GCS to renew their safety competence when their five year period expires). A number of support packages are available from EU Skills to help you build and establish your GCS processes.

9. Who are the Certification Bodies (CB's) currently involved in the GCS?

There are three CB's currently participating in the implementation of GCS, and all of them are either accredited or working towards accreditation to offer GCS audit and certification. Contacts in each of the CB's are included below:

Stroma Certification
4 Pioneer Way, Castleford, West Yorkshire, WF10 5QU
01977 665420
Andy Sharp
07794 150664
a.sharp@stroma.com

Certsure (NICEIC) Certification
Paul Collins, Technical Services Manager
Certsure LLP
Warwick House, Houghton Hall Park, Houghton Regis, Dunstable
LU5 5ZX
01582 539 076
07956 220 469
paul.collins@certsure.com
www.certsure.com

Blueflame Certification Ltd
Andy Durber
0845 194 90 38
andy@blueflamecertification.com

10. How does the GCS audit process work?

The audit works in the following two stages:

- a desktop exercise that reviews your documentation (ie GCS Operations Manual) to enable the auditor to understand exactly how your GCS operates (and who is in scope etc)
- a field based check that your GCS operates in line with what is declared at stage one

For a GCS that only includes direct employees, this stage two exercise will involve sampling to check that the whole operation is consistently applied across the business. In a cluster model like the proposed CORGI GCS, while the stage one element is identical, it would be necessary for the auditor to (stage two) audit each of the employers involved to ensure that everyone is compliant.

11. I am a one man band. How can I assess myself?

Unfortunately you can't, because the GCS is a group scheme and therefore isn't suitable for sole traders.

12. Does an employer need to buy a GCS licence for all Gas Safe Registered engineers or just the ones that are in scope for the first year?

The employer is required to buy a GCS Licence that covers all the Gas Safe Registered engineers due for Gas Safe Register renewal in the first year. When the licence is renewed after 12 months, the second year licence needs to include the first year cohort, plus those engineers who will renew in the next year. This is repeated every

year until all in scope engineers are included in the licence (which will take five years).

Once this position is reached, the annual licence will include all engineers every year. The employer may, for a number of reasons, wish to exclude some employees from their GCS. In these circumstances, such excluded individuals will continue to use the ACS route for Gas Safe renewal when due. The employer's GCS Operations document, which must define the scope in terms of employees included, categories they hold, locations etc. is absolutely key to enabling the audit body to understand the "how, who and where" of the employer's GCS operation.

13. Do Energy and Utility Skills (EU Skills) require an organisation to declare the names of the additional engineers and their Gas Safe registered categories? If yes, will EU Skills pass this list to the relevant CB, (or require the organisation to provide the same list to the CB)?

Yes, on both counts. EU Skills will hold, via our own register (EUSR), a complete list of the employees in scope each year. We will need this to facilitate GCS Licence renewal (as employers will add new individuals every year for the first five years and there may be new recruits and some leavers who will need to be removed). The CB's will have access to this information as they will need to know when each employee's renewal date is due.

14. If an employee has competence categories listed on the Gas Safe Register that include aspects that they no longer need, can the GCS be used to renew only those competences that are needed?

Normally the GCS may only be used to renew MoGS competences in the categories already held by the individual employee. However, for some specific job roles (eg. First Call Operative) there may be an alternative limited scope category that would be more appropriate and better aligned to the work your employees carry out. Provided that this alternative Gas Safe Register category

- contains fewer MoGS criteria than the one the employee was originally registered in and
- is related to the same work activities then it is possible to renew via GCS in the new category. Please note however that it would not be possible to make this journey in the other direction when further renewal is required five years later

For more specific advice you should discuss this with EU Skills.

15. Can EU Skills assist organisations with putting their GCS system together and are EU Skills able to progress this so that the organisation can speak to somebody about the support package needed?

Yes, EU Skills will help you to establish your GCS. Once you have signed the GCS employer agreement and purchased the first year's licence, you are entitled to two days consultancy from EU Skills, which may be used for a number of aspects (depending on your requirements). In addition EU Skills has a number of support packages available that can cater for any level of support you need. The packages include aspects such as the mapping of your existing processes, creating your GCS Manual, briefing of staff and managers, advising on how best to gather the evidence of competence in matters of gas safety. Contact Lucy Ritchie at EU Skills for more information on 07850 203 755 or email lucy.ritchie@euskills.co.uk

16. Are there any additional costs associated with EU Skills aside from the £50 per engineer license or any further consultancy/set-up costs?

No, apart from the GCS Licence (£50 per in scope engineer) there are no additional charges or costs from EU Skills (unless you choose to purchase an additional support package, which is not mandatory).

17. Does the GCS Provisions document cover all the criteria to meet the ACS standard meaning no further documents are required?

The GCS Provisions document covers all the criteria necessary for engineers that undertake domestic work. If you have any employees that carry out either LPG or Commercial gas work then there will be additional criteria that they will have to meet (GCS Provisions documents to cover LPG, Commercial and Emergency as well as the existing domestic one will be developed as required).

18. What is the definition of employed as described within EN/ISO/BS 17021?

The definition we have used in the GCS has come from UKAS and is someone "directly employed by the GCS operating organisation" Our advice from UKAS is that this type of scheme (ie. a management system) may not be used for associates or others not under the direct control of the organisation. You may involve your contractors

or supply chain employers via a cluster arrangement whereby all organisations share a common approach, documentation and processes, but each employer is subject to audit on an individual basis. This protects you from any risk that, should one of the other employers in the cluster fail the stage two audit, this will not affect your own certification (assuming that your GCS audit is successful)

19. Do you know roughly how much the external auditors would charge?

This depends upon the number of audit days needed, which in turn depends upon the size and complexity of the GCS being audited. Audit charges should be similar to those for the 9001 or 14001 scheme audits. You would have to speak to one (or more) of the three CB's currently involved with GCS to get a more accurate estimate of actual costs.

20. Does the GCS apply to Scotland and Wales?

Yes, GCS applies to the whole of the UK including Northern Ireland; GCS is applicable to all areas that Gas Safe Register covers (ie. Channel Islands).

21. Who selects the CB?

The employer may select any of the UKAS GCS Accredited CB's. Currently there are three CB's participating (see Q9).

22. Are there any time constraints (or requirements) related to the GCS?

No. The employer decides how long it takes to build their GCS. The main point is that, until a successful audit has been completed and the employer's GCS is certified, none of the engineers in scope may renew their Gas Safe Register competences via the GCS. If engineers' five year expiry occurs before this point, those engineers must renew via ACS. Once the GCS is certified, it will be subject to surveillance by the CB and must be re-certificated by them every three years.

23. Can the scope of my GCS be amended?

Yes, but only at GCS Licence renewal time, which is annual. At that point the employer may add engineers, locations, categories etc, or make amendments to their GCS processes. If the latter involves material changes that may impact on the maintenance of MoGS competence, it is advisable to notify the relevant CB to ensure that the GCS remains compliant with the scheme requirements.

24. Why does EU Skills claim that the GCS is more robust than ACS?

Because unlike ACS, the GCS requires the employer to have processes in place that continually maintain the competence of employees. While ACS operates as a snapshot assessment every five years, GCS ensures that any changes in legislation or Codes of Practice are communicated and implemented on a real time basis. This aligns GCS with the requirements of the H&SWA that requires employers to ensure that their workforce is competent to undertake work on their behalf.

Group Competence Scheme Webinar Question

1. What system can be used for capturing the evidence provided by the engineers?

All businesses will operate differently, some will use their own paper based system on assessments in paper based form, which can then be stored electronically. If businesses do not currently use or have an electronic system to capture the evidence, businesses can use through Energy & Utility skills, a database available for capturing information on EUSR.

2. If an engineer leaves the business in which they have renewed under GCS is their certificate of competence still current/valid?

Yes, the qualification is valid for five years from the certification date. If an engineer leaves the business since qualifying under GCS, they take their certificate with them and it is valid for five years, on par with ACS. They also show on the gas safe register website. They will have to renew their gas safe registration to whichever company (or if self-employed, register themselves).

3. How often are the field staff audited/assessed to gain their GCS?

They are assessed a minimum once every six months, however on average engineers are having six to eight assessments to gather information and capture their competency (on appliance types). The beauty of the GCS is it can be tailored to suit your business.

4. As all engineers need to be assessed in customer's homes undertaking their work, and as this is a rolling programme, how many assessors do you have undertaking this rolling assessment of competence for 7,000 engineers?

We have 70 safety assurance engineers on a national basis. As well as assessing, they also observe on other business tasks.

5. What external validation is carried out?

Registered with NICEIC, certification body. This is part of the scheme, acts as an annual surveillance, looks at processes fit for purpose. A sense check forms internal validation. It is important to mention that there are other certification bodies available.

6. If an engineer while being assessed has proved incompetent in an area of gas safety, will they be removed from the Gas Safe register. Theoretically they are still competent for five years?

No, we do not remove them from the gas safe register. British Gas have a corrective action procedure, any failures/violations that are identified through GCS working progress assessments, a process in place that will correct to that action. There can be training, debriefing etc. Depending on severity – the engineer can be stopped carrying out certain tasks, or suspended from working until they have been retrained and reassessed and deemed competent again. Follow up assessments to make sure lessons have been learnt and training is successful. This is a robust process, identifying the fault, giving the correct level of training and then reassessing.

7. Is this a cheaper way of achieving staff competency than the normal ACS?

GCS is more robust than ACS, there are cost savings. These include, reduction in down time of engineers and “lost opportunity” costs, the continually assessment methods removes the need to take the engineers out of work every five years. Cost savings as a business, will vary on companies depending on safety and quality assurances that you have in place. Although cost savings were not a priority when changing to GCS for British Gas

8. Who is responsible for the engineer that leaves British Gas if they carry out unsafe work?

The engineer and the company they are working for are responsible. Liken to ACS, what's being measured: assessors are validators engineer proves competence and ability to carry out tasks correctly. British Gas under GCS will measure their competence on the day of assessment, but clearly cannot be responsible for what an engineer does whilst not with our assessors.

For example, British Gas have said the engineer is competent on the day in question, like an ACS centre. This is renewal only and not for new entrants – if an engineer proves competence during assessment then that's competence approved. (Even if they make a mistake a few months down the line).