



Get Certified

Your guide to the MSC and ASC Chain of Custody certification process

Chain of Custody Standard: Default Version

For single or multi-site organisations trading certified seafood such as a trader operating from one office or a processor with several factory locations.

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Welcome

Join an international community that proudly supports sustainable certified seafood.

Our Chain of Custody Standard makes sure MSC and ASC labelled seafood comes from fisheries certified to the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Fisheries Standard or farms certified to the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) Farm Standard. Together we can protect the world's seafood for the future.

This guide covers the Chain of Custody Standard: Default Version for Single and Multisite operations in the supply chain who wish to use the MSC or ASC labels.

The aim of the guide is to give you an overview of what to expect during each stage of the certification process.

If you have questions at any stage, your local MSC or ASC office will be happy to help.

Contact your local MSC office at

✉ msc.org/commercial-contacts

Contact your local ASC office at

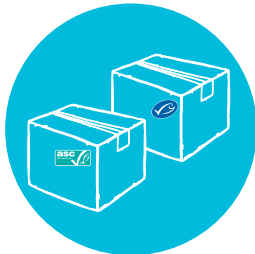
✉ asc-aqua.org/contact/regional-teams

THE CHAIN OF CUSTODY STANDARD: GROUP VERSION HAS FIVE PRINCIPLES



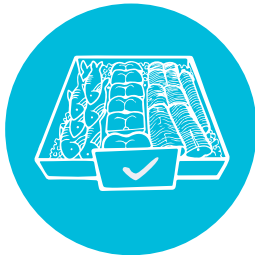
Principle 1:

Companies must purchase certified product from a certified supplier



Principle 2:

Certified products are clearly identifiable



Principle 3:

Certified products are separated from non-certified



Principle 4:

Certified products are traceable and volumes are recorded



Principle 5:

Your management system addresses the requirements of the Chain of Custody Standard

Do you need certification?

The Chain of Custody Standard documents legal ownership of a product and defines required practices for handling certified seafood, like segregation, labelling and maintaining traceability records. It is applicable to all businesses from a certified fishery or farm to final sale.

Examples of businesses eligible for Chain of Custody certification:

- A fishmonger serving final consumers and caterers.
- A seafood company with a trading office, processing facility and storage unit.

When Chain of Custody certification is not needed:

- Your company buys pre-packed, labelled certified products that will be sold to the end consumer without being opened, re-packed or re-labelled. Such items are known as consumer-ready tamper-proof products. Retail packages of frozen fish fingers or tins of smoked mackerel fillets are examples of consumer-ready tamper-proof products.
- Your company buys certified products but does not wish to sell these on as certified. In this case the chain of custody is broken and your customers may not make any claims about the product being certified.
- Your company does not take legal ownership of certified seafood. This may be the case if your company provides contracted services for certified companies and therefore can be covered by your customer's Chain of Custody certificate as a subcontractor.

Businesses not eligible for Chain of Custody certification:

- A company that has been convicted of a forced or child labour violation in the last two years.
- A company whose certificate was withdrawn for a breach of Chain of Custody in the last two years.
- A company whose certificate was suspended in the last six months.
- Enhanced fishery or farm operations that are out of the scope of the MSC Fisheries Standard or the ASC Farm Standard.

The certification process

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) have partnered to share the Chain of Custody Standard. This means you can have one certification audit that covers both MSC and ASC products. ASC Chain of Custody certificate holders must also comply with further requirements outlined in the additional [ASC Chain of Custody Module V1.3](#).

There are five steps to Chain of Custody certification:



The Chain of Custody certification process, from application to the awarding of a certificate, is managed by an independent and accredited certification body. The certification body will appoint an auditor who will become your most frequent contact throughout the certification process.

If you already have audits for other programs (for example, programs recognised by the Global Food Safety Initiative), it is worth checking with your certification body to see if they can introduce the Chain of Custody audits into your existing auditing schedule.

GOOD TO KNOW

Preparation and good project management are key to ensuring a smooth, timely and cost-effective certification. It is important to designate a member of staff or a project manager who will take responsibility for managing the certification process. This Chain of Custody contact person will liaise with the certification body and should familiarise themselves with this guide and the Chain of Custody Standard.



STEP 1 Choosing a certification body

The role of a certification body is to provide an independent, third-party evaluation of your company's chain of custody procedures and to appoint an auditor.

The first step is to choose a certification body that operates where your company is based. All certification bodies are approved by [an independent assurance provider](#).

We recommend that you approach more than one certification body for a quote. The total cost for full certification service is likely to include travel costs, audit fees and possibly other charges. Make sure you get a long-term picture of the cost structure. The MSC and ASC cannot influence the cost of certification, nor does the MSC or ASC receive any of this payment.

To quote on your certification, certification bodies may ask:

- Which seafood species you want to buy and sell as certified.
- What activities you perform with the certified seafood (for example packing, processing or trading).
- If you have any certified suppliers.
- Where your company is based and how many sites it has.
- If you intend to use subcontractors to process, pack, transport or store certified seafood.
- If you handle both certified and non-certified species.

Once you accept a quote, the certification body will send you a contract. Your certification body will register your company on the MSC Chain of Custody scheme database to create a unique MSC Chain of Custody Code to be used upon certification.



STEP 2 Preparing for the audit

The audit can be simple and straightforward if you have a clear plan of what needs to be done, by whom, and by when.

Training staff

It is your company's responsibility to ensure that all responsible personnel understand their role in maintaining chain of custody and traceability. The Chain of Custody Standard defines responsible personnel as those who make decisions or carry out procedures that can affect the integrity of certified seafood.

Your company may be able to incorporate Chain of Custody training into an existing staff training program.

The MSC has produced a training video that can be used by companies to help train their staff on Chain of Custody certification: please visit the [MSC Training Platform](#).

Pre-audit checklist and making changes to your operations

Use the [MSC pre-audit checklist](#) to determine how much of the Chain of Custody Standard your company already meets and if you need to adjust your operations. For ASC certificates, you can also use the [ASC Chain of Custody Module supplementary checklist](#) for supply chain companies.

If you need to introduce new procedures and systems to meet the Standard make sure these are working before your audit. Even if no changes were made, it's a good idea to conduct a practical, on-site check before scheduling an audit, as this will help avoid non-conformities being raised.

Labour Eligibility Requirements

The certification body will check whether any sites covered in the potential certificate have been convicted of forced or child labour violations. If activities such as packing, processing or manual offloading are included, the auditor may also check for a completed self-assessment of labour practices prior to the audit. Please see page 19 of this guide for more details on how to comply with the MSC Labour Eligibility Requirements.

Scheduling your audit

When scheduling a date for the audit, bear in mind it may require booking in advance, depending on the auditor's availability. Also remember to request your preferred language for the audit.

Audits occur annually with due dates calculated from the original certification date. This date will remain the same for the length of a certificate holder's continuous participation in the MSC program (see page 16 of this guide for more information).



STEP 3 The audit

The auditor will be looking for evidence that demonstrates the effectiveness and durability of the procedures, systems and training your company has in place to fulfil the requirements of the Chain of Custody Standard. The auditor will ask to review documents or records, interview staff and see your processes in action.

Audit location

Most audits will take place on-site at your company's premises and will be repeated for every site included in the certificate.

Initial audits can be conducted remotely if companies or sites meet both the following criteria:

- Companies only conduct Trading (buying and/or selling) and/or Use of Subcontractor (subcontractors will be assessed separately).
- There are no other heightened risk factors that would justify an on-site audit.

Audit duration

The duration of the audit will vary depending on the size of your company, the complexity of your operations and the number of certified species you intend to buy and sell as certified.

The MSC/ASC does not set a minimum audit duration, except for companies that:

- are a processor or contract processor
- are located in a country with a transparency score of below 41 according to the latest Corruption Perception Index (*Check your country's score on Transparency International's latest Corruption Perception Index at [transparency.org/en/](https://www.transparency.org/en/))
- handle both certified and non-certified seafood
- purchase more than 5,000 MT of seafood or more than 20 seafood batches per year (both certified and non-certified).

For companies that meet all the above criteria, the MSC sets a minimum audit duration of 12 hours on-site, spread over two working days.

GOOD TO KNOW

It's common for companies to have not bought any certified seafood by their initial audit. In this case, the auditor looks at similar products to evaluate the measures you have in place to identify, segregate and trace seafood.



Audit process

The audit begins with an opening meeting, during which the auditor confirms your company's eligibility to continue in the audit process, including:

- confirming the Labour Eligibility Requirements are met,
- the audit plan, and the scope of the audit (the products and activities to be audited),
- the type of documentation for review, and
- visits to subcontractors or other sites where relevant.

In addition to your appointed Chain of Custody contact person, we recommend inviting other relevant members of staff to this meeting.

Use the opening meeting to clarify any questions you have regarding your audit or the certification process.

During the audit, the auditor will:

Check

- The measures taken by your company and any subcontractors to segregate, identify and prevent mixing between certified and non-certified seafood.
- The permission to use the MSC label and ASC logo by asking for proof of approved packaging designs covered by a valid licence agreement, (see page 15 for more information).

Review

- The management system/s for each activity in scope (for example trading, distribution, processing).
- The content and implementation of written procedures (for example protocols for maintaining segregation, approved buying lists, training manuals).
- The contract processing of certified seafood for others (if applicable).
- The records showing purchase, receipt, sale and physical handling of certified species.

Interview

- A sample of responsible personnel on their competency, understanding and application of the Chain of Custody procedures (for example the auditor may ask members of staff to explain their role in ensuring traceability).

Verify

- Your company and any subcontractor's records, where relevant:
 - Traceability tests – linking input and output through delivery numbers and records of internal traceability, purchase, handling and supply.
 - Matching purchase with delivery records against the product.
 - Input-output reconciliation based on a time-period and/or batch, which includes a conversion rate (yield) calculation and evaluation.
- Your company complies with the relevant MSC Labour Eligibility Requirements.

Traceability tests

Under specific circumstances, your auditor may take small samples of certified seafood for DNA testing, to check that it matches the species labelled on the product.

Audit closing meeting

At the end of the audit, the auditor will call a closing meeting to summarise their findings. They will also confirm that the scope, supplier and subcontractor list is correct and that you know when to inform the certification body of any changes to your certificate.



STEP 4 After the audit

Your auditor will send you a summary of all audit findings within 10 working days that will detail any non-conformities.

Non-conformities

An auditor can raise a non-conformity when they find a deviation from any of the requirements in the Chain of Custody Standard. You will be given a specified timeframe to review the findings and decide how to address them.

	Required actions
<p>Minor non-conformities</p> <p>Where your company does not comply with the Chain of Custody Standard, but the integrity of the chain of custody is not jeopardised.</p>	<p>Send the certification body an effective action plan and proof of effective implementation (i.e. corrective actions evidence) within 60 days of the closing meeting.</p> <p>Your company will not be certified until the non-conformity has been effectively addressed.</p>
<p>Major non-conformities</p> <p>Where your company does not comply with the Chain of Custody Standard, and the integrity of the chain of custody is jeopardised.</p>	<p>Send the certification body an effective action plan with root cause analysis, corrective actions and timeframes to address them, in order to close the non-conformity within 90 days of the initial audit.</p> <p>If this cannot be done, your company will need to have another initial audit.</p>

Examples of non-conformities

If your auditor finds your staff show insufficient knowledge and understanding of their role related to the Chain of Custody Standard that could compromise product integrity.

GOOD TO KNOW

If your staff do not know how to tell apart certified from non-certified seafood, this is likely to lead to a non-conformity. Using labels, codes, and markings to help differentiate them are ways of maintaining the chain of custody.

Determining certification

Your certification body must decide if they grant certification within 30 days of the audit or within 30 days of receiving evidence that leads to the closure or downgrading of a non-conformity. The certification body will send you a finalised version of the audit report within 10 days of this decision.

Where necessary, you will be asked to sign off some sections of the audit report to confirm its accuracy. Your certification body will then upload information to your unique chain of custody code in the MSC scheme database covering scope, subcontractors, suppliers, audit date, the final audit report and your certificate.

Congratulations, you're certified!

Once certified, your status should appear as valid on the [MSC Find a Supplier directory](#) and/or [ASC Find a Supplier directory](#). You can now officially sell MSC and/or ASC certified seafood.

The MSC and ASC Find a Supplier directories are the official sources of certificate validity. Companies that do not appear with a valid Chain of Custody certificate status on these directories cannot be used as a certified supplier. The audit report and confidential information will not be displayed on the MSC and ASC Find a Supplier directories.

Understanding your Chain of Custody certificate:

- **Certificate scope:** Your certificate's scope will include the certified species handled and the activities carried out in relation to certified seafood. Scope activities are defined in a table at the end of this guide.
- **Products in scope:** Not all your seafood products need to be MSC/ASC certified to proceed with Chain of Custody certification.
- **Sites in your certificate:** Every location that is taking physical possession or legal ownership of certified product must be included in the certificate. These locations (facilities, plants, warehouses, offices) are called sites in the Standard.
- **Certificate types for the Default Standard:**
Certification of one site is called a single-site certificate.
Certification of more than one site is called a multi-site certificate.



STEP 5 Using the MSC and ASC trademarks to sell certified seafood

The MSC and ASC labels are effective tools to communicate sustainability to seafood consumers. Your company must sign a licence agreement if you wish to use any of the MSC's and/or ASC's trademarks on any materials that will be seen by end consumers or used by business customers for promotional purposes.

The licence agreement may be signed while your company is applying for certification or after your first audit. This enables your company to acquire high-definition files of the MSC label and/or ASC logo to use in packaging design. In addition to signing a licence agreement, your company will have to submit the packaging designs and a completed [Product Approval Form for both the MSC and ASC](#) containing information about the product you intend to sell with the MSC and/or ASC trademarks. If you are using the ASC logo for business-to-business trading, you will also need approval. You do not need approval if you use the MSC and/or ASC acronyms for internal traceability or identification training purposes.

Visit [msc.org/msc-label](https://www.msc.org/msc-label) or [asc-aqua.org/business/our-label](https://www.asc-aqua.org/business/our-label) for more information.





Maintaining certification

Your certificate is valid for three years. During this period, your company will receive surveillance audits. Re-certification audits take place every three years.

Surveillance audits

Surveillance audits are annual. This can be changed to every 18 months if **any** of the following criteria are met and no other heightened risk factors are identified:

- All seafood handled is certified.
- Your company or site acts only as a trader (buying/selling) of certified products.
- Certified seafood is handled only in sealed boxes or containers and is not repacked, processed or altered in any way.

Surveillance audits can be conducted remotely if **all** of the following criteria are met:

- Your company or site acts only as a trader (buying/selling).
- The country of operation has a transparency score above 41 according to the latest Corruption Perception Index.
- No other heightened risk factors are identified.

There is a chance that your company will receive an unannounced audit. Each certification body must conduct unannounced audits for at least 1% of their clients. If this happens, you will not be given notice of which day the audit will occur (but you will know the six-month window of when your surveillance is due). An unannounced audit will replace your next scheduled surveillance audit.

Scheduling surveillance audits

Surveillance audits should be scheduled 12 or 18 months from the certification date and they can be conducted 90 days before or after the audit due date giving you flexibility to schedule a date that's convenient.

Non-conformity at surveillance

During the surveillance audit, the auditor may raise a non-conformity when there is a deviation from the Standard. In this case, your company is required to take the following actions:

Minor non-conformities

Within 60 days from the closing meeting, send an effective action plan and proof that the non-conformity has effectively been addressed to the certification body. Minor non-conformities can be upgraded to major and corrected as such if not effectively or in a timely manner.

Major non-conformities

You must send the certification body an effective action plan with root cause analysis, corrective actions and timeframes to close the non-conformity within 30 days of the audit.

If this cannot be done, your certificate will be suspended.

Certificate suspension

The non-conformity grading system gives your company warnings and opportunities to implement improvements to avoid a certificate suspension. If there have been breaches of product integrity or the chain of custody, your certificate could be immediately suspended.

A certificate can be suspended for any of the following reasons:

- There is a demonstrable break in the chain of custody caused by the company's actions or inactions. The company has sold non-certified seafood as certified.
- The company cannot prove that seafood sold as certified is in fact certified.
- The company has not addressed a major non-conformity within the specified timeframe.
- The company does not agree to a surveillance or re-certification audit within the necessary timeframes.
- MSCI or ASCI has withdrawn a company's licence agreement and the company has not complied with the instructions in the given timeframe.
- The company does not comply with the MSC Labour Eligibility Requirements.

From the day of suspension, product cannot be sold as certified and you must inform your customers in writing within four days of your suspension.

For a suspension to be lifted within 30 days a corrective action plan, including a root cause analysis, must be accepted by your certification body and implemented by your company.

What to do when non-conforming products are found in your company?

Where your company finds mislabelling or non-conforming product and reports it to the certification body, the certification body will not suspend your certificate if you followed the non-conforming product procedure correctly, as this shows that you are willing to maintain product integrity. If the mislabelled or non-conforming product reoccurs, your company may be suspended.

Complying with requirements on labour eligibility

The MSC and ASC have introduced eligibility requirements to provide greater assurance that MSC/ASC products are not associated with forced or child labour. This means that you may need to complete a self-assessment of sites in your certificate prior to receiving your Chain of Custody certification and listing on the MSC or ASC website.

If any part of your company has been convicted of a forced or child labour violation in the last two years, you will not be eligible for certification.

Additionally, if your potential certificate covers certain activities, you will need to complete an [MSC Chain of Custody Labour Self-Assessment](#) form and sign an agreement to undergo an MSC-commissioned labour audit if asked.

The self-assessment details the policies, practices and measures in place to prevent or reduce the risk of forced and child labour and covers all applicable sites and subcontractors within the certificate scope. You are required to provide the necessary information to the certification body showcasing the policies, measures, and practices in place to mitigate forced and child labour.

Alternatively you can provide evidence of having completed an on-site labour audit that complies with the MSC third-party labour audit requirements. A self-assessment or labour audit is required for any applicant or certificate holder with one or more of the following activities in the scope of their Chain of Custody Certificate:

- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
| – Contract Processing | – Secondary Processing |
| – Manual off-loading | – Processing - preservation |
| – Packing or repacking | – Other Processing activities |
| – Primary Processing | – Use of subcontractors |

On-site labour audit requirements:

- The labour audits should cover all applicable sites and subcontractors within the certificate scope.
- If sites in your certificate participate in a recognised labour audit program, completing the self-assessment is optional for those sites.

Labour audit programs recognised by the MSC	Within these programs, you will have to meet these performance criteria
Amfori Business Social Compliance Initiative	Complete amfori audits and have no Zero Tolerance issues
SEDEX SMETA	Complete and an annual audit and have no Business Critical Issues
Social Accountability International's SA8000	Hold a valid SA8000 certificate
BRCGS Ethical Trading and Responsible Sourcing Standard (ETRS)	Hold a valid BRCGS certificate
SSCI recognised program (manufacturing and processing)	Hold a valid certificate of the recognised program

Zero Tolerance and Business Critical issues are serious labour issues that require immediate action. You can find out more about the [amfori BSCI Zero Tolerance Protocol](#) and the [SEDEX-SMETA Non-Compliance Guidance](#) on their websites.

You will need to follow the audit schedule set by the labour audit program you choose. The audit might be every six months, year or two years. Regardless of third-party labour audits, you must still meet the deadlines for MSC audits. If you are not covered by a recognised third-party labour program, the self-assessment will have to be submitted annually alongside your MSC audit.

For more information on the self-assessment and third-party labour audit requirements, please refer to the [MSC Labour Eligibility Requirements v1.0](#).

Why did the MSC choose these labour audit programs?

The MSC chose to recognise these programs because they are:

- globally recognised
- commonly used in the seafood industry.

How will you demonstrate to your Chain of Custody auditor that you comply with the relevant programs (when applicable)?

To show that you comply with the relevant labour audit programs, you may be asked to provide a certificate to your auditor. You may also need to log onto the program's platform or portal.

Social compliance audits and access to this platform may be the responsibility of another individual at your company. If this is the case, you need to make sure that person is available on the day of the Chain of Custody audit to show the labour audit findings.

What happens if you do not comply?

If you opt for a labour audit, and at any point you do not meet the labour performance criteria in the Labour Eligibility Requirements (for example a Zero Tolerance Issue is found during your amfori BSCI audit), then you must inform your certification body within two working days. You will then have 30 days to address the issue to maintain your Chain of Custody certificate.



Staying in touch with your certification body

Although most communication with your certification body will relate to your audit, there are times you need to contact them outside of your audit schedule.

Informing your certification body about changes

You will need to inform your certification body if you:

- Find non-conforming product (within 2 days).
- Receive a new certified species (within 10 days).
- Receive certified product from a new certified supplier (within 10 days).
- Appoint new staff as your Chain of Custody contact person (within 10 days).
- Failed to meet the performance criteria in the Labour Eligibility Requirements (for example a Zero Tolerance issue is found during your amfori BSCI audit) (within 2 days).
- Change certification body.
- Wish to complain about your auditor or certification body.

Request written approval from your certification body if you plan to:

- Undertake a new activity that is not already in your certificate's scope.
- Use a new subcontractor for processing or packaging of certified seafood.
- Buy product certified to a program that shares the Chain of Custody Standard (e.g. ASC).
- Add a new site to your certificate. (This will also require a full initial audit of the new site.)
- Handle under-assessment fish.
- Change a site address or company name.

Scope activity definitions: Your company's activities will be classified in your Chain of Custody certificate. The most common activities and definitions are listed below:

Trading fish (buying/selling)

This is likely applicable to all companies, except for subcontractors that do not take legal ownership of certified product. (there are also scope sub-categories for trading fish meal and trading fish oil).

Storage

Companies that hold certified product in a storage area.

Transportation

Companies responsible for the transport of certified product they legally own.

Distribution

Companies that receive sealed containers, pallets, etc. of certified product that they do not legally own (that may or may not be broken down into smaller units) and deliver them to customers or other members of their group.

Wholesale

Companies that receive sealed containers, pallets, etc. that they legally own and sell to customers or other members of their group.

Packing/repacking

When the packaging is changed but the product remains the same.

Processing

Includes primary or secondary processing, value added processing, fish preparation or any other activity where the product is changed (except for 'retail to consumer' and 'restaurant/take away to consumer').

Contract processing

Any certificate holder that carries out processing on behalf of the legal product owner (does not legally own the seafood).

Use of subcontractors

Any certificate holder that uses a subcontractor (certified or non-certified) to process, repack or transform certified product on their behalf.

Retail to consumer

Where the product is purchased, taken away and prepared by the consumer. This includes fish counters at retailers, fish mongers, and markets selling directly to consumers.

Restaurant/take away to consumer

Any foodservice situation where the product is prepared on-site and sold directly to consumers.

The Chain of Custody Standards

	Default Version	Consumer-Facing Organisation Version	Group Version
Who is it for?	For single or multi-site organisations trading certified seafood, such as a trader operating from one office or a processor with several factory locations.	For retailers, restaurants, caterers and fresh fish counters of any size looking to sell certified seafood directly to final consumers.	For organisations with a central office and many locations distributing, processing or trading certified seafood such as co-operatives, franchises and vertically-integrated companies.
Record keeping	Records must be kept for 3 years or longer if the certified product's shelf life is longer.	Records must be kept for 18 months.	Records must be kept for 3 years or longer if the certified product's shelf life is longer. The central office/group manager must keep an up-to-date site register.
Audit frequency	All sites have a regular audit. Audits can be onsite or remote at a frequency of 12 or 18 months, depending on risk level of business.	The central office, operations sites and a sample of consumer-facing sites are audited onsite annually. Depending on the CFO's risk level, a certain percentage of sites will be audited at short notice (48 hours).	The central office/group management and a sample of sites are audited onsite annually. The sample size depends on the risk level of the group.
Non-conformities at audits and suspension rules	All sites can have non-conformities raised against them. All sites can be suspended from the certificate separately.	Non-conformities are raised against the central office. Suspension affects the entire CFO certificate. In case of non-certified product being sold as certified as a one-off human error at a site, a major non-conformity is raised rather than an immediate suspension.	Non-conformities can be raised against the individual sites and/or the central office/group management. Suspensions can be specific to a site, strata or the entire group.
Internal audits and reviews	No internal auditing requirements.	Optional internal audits.	Mandatory internal audits and reviews.
Training	All responsible staff must be trained.	Strict training requirements for all responsible staff. Training records must be kept.	All responsible staff must be trained. Training records must be kept.

Get in touch:

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The guide relates to the Chain of Custody Standard: Consumer-Facing Organisation. All details within this document are accurate at the time of publication. This is a guide document only, and if any interpretative issues arise in relation to the content covered in the publication, the text of the English MSC program documents will prevail in all instances.