



SSCI BENCHMARKING REQUIREMENTS
Version 1.0

PART I
BENCHMARKING PROCESS

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1. Introduction

The Sustainable Supply Chain Initiative (SSCI) provides buyers and suppliers with clear guidance on which third-party auditing and certification schemes cover key sustainability requirements and apply relevant governance and verification practices. By demonstrating alignment with the SSCI criteria and achieving SSCI recognition, scheme owners signal a strong commitment to raising the bar while driving harmonisation and alignment. While the decision to accept individual suppliers and schemes remains at the company level, SSCI helps to reduce duplicative, parallel work by companies to assess sustainability standards and provides a transparent reference/baseline for third-party audit protocols and certification programmes. The initiative will initially focus on social compliance with the capacity to expand into environmental compliance. The SSCI is facilitated by The Consumer Goods Forum.

The SSCI Benchmarking Requirements consist of three integral parts:

- Part I: Benchmarking Process
- Part II: Requirements for the Management of Schemes
- Part III: Scope-specific Requirements

The SSCI Benchmarking Process specifies the method under which a third-party audit or certification scheme is benchmarked against the requirements defined in the SSCI Benchmark Requirements, v1.0, Part II and III.

The SSCI Benchmarking Requirements form the basis for all SSCI benchmarking and re-benchmarking of applicant Schemes.

The systems and procedures associated with the SSCI Benchmarking Process will be reviewed and updated as required to maintain consistency and integrity.

SSCI has defined in a Glossary of Terms used in the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements. Part IV – SSCI Glossary of Terms is an integrated part of the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements and definitions shall be applied accordingly in combination with the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements (Part I, II, and III).

2. Eligibility Criteria

Schemes must meet the following eligibility criteria in order to apply for recognition by SSCI:

- The Scheme is not governed or owned by one or more audit firms.
- At least ten certificates/audit reports for single-site audits (for the relevant scope of the application) have been issued.
- The Scheme Owner has been operational for a period of at least 12 months.

Scheme Owners are required to submit supporting evidence that they meet the eligibility criteria together with the completed application form.

3. Application

3.1 Scope of recognition

In the application form, the Scheme has to clearly specify the scope of activity for which it applies for SSCI benchmarking and seeks recognition. The initial scope that Schemes can apply for covers social compliance in processing/manufacturing facilities. SSCI is in the process of developing further benchmark scopes. The scope-specific benchmarking criteria are outlined in Part III of the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements.

In order to achieve recognition, Scheme Owners also have to successfully undergo benchmarking against the Criteria for the Management of Schemes, provided in Part II of the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements.

3.2 Application for Full Benchmarking

Schemes apply for full benchmarking in the following cases:

- Initial application for a specific SSCI scope
- Non-completion and/or withdrawal of the scheme application
- Withdrawal of existing SSCI recognition
- Publication of new version of SSCI Benchmarking Requirements

Any Scheme Owner that wishes to undergo full benchmarking and ultimately achieve SSCI recognition must apply via the SSCI website. The Scheme Owner will find an application form and detailed guidance for the completion of this form on the SSCI website. In order to apply, the Scheme Owner is required to send the completed form with all required supporting documents to the SSCI Manager. The Scheme Owner's application must cover the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements Part II (Requirements for the Management of Schemes) and at least one industry scope (Part III – Scope-specific requirements). A Scheme Owner is permitted to submit multiple benchmarking applications for different scopes.

The SSCI Manager reserves the right to reject or refer an application back to the Scheme Owner if the quality of the application is poor or if the application is incomplete. The Scheme may re-apply for benchmarking once it is able to prove that the reasons for rejection have been fully addressed. If the Scheme Owner submits a new application following rejection of the initial application, the application fee is due again.

Once the SSCI Manager accepts the Scheme for benchmarking, the applicant Scheme Owner and SSCI sign a contract to progress with the steps as outlined in section 3.

When SSCI publishes an updated version of the Benchmarking Requirements, all existing SSCI-recognised Schemes are required to apply for re-assessment for all their scopes of recognition against the latest version of

the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements within nine months of the date of publication of the new version if they wish to continue to be recognised by the SSCI. The SSCI Steering Committee may extend this period under special circumstances.

3.3 Application for Re-Benchmarking

Schemes may apply for re-benchmarking for two reasons:

- Suspension of a recognised Scheme for a period of less than 12 months
- Significant change of a Scheme

SSCI decides on a case-by-case basis on the level of assessment required for re-benchmarking, e.g. desktop review, office visit, full benchmark, and informs the Scheme Owner accordingly. Schemes that apply for re-benchmarking must meet the same eligibility criteria as defined in section 1.2.

4. Suspension

Schemes that have been subject to suspension from recognition must complete all activities that remedy the grounds for suspension and submit supporting evidence.

5. Significant Change

Significant change is defined as a change to a scheme's governance or ownership, or a significant change to its management system, standard, or normative documents, which could compromise the Scheme's recognition by SSCI.

The Scheme Owner of a SSCI-recognised scheme is required to inform the SSCI Manager in writing about the significant change and start the re-benchmarking process within 9 months of the entry into force of the significant change.

5.1. Time frame and Transition Period

The Benchmarking Process must be finalised within a maximum time frame of one year from the date of application.

Scheme Owners that apply for the first time for a newly issued SSCI scope may benefit from an extended transition period, if the following conditions are met:

- Scheme Owners may take up to a maximum of 2 years to successfully finalise the Benchmarking Process and to implement any potential changes to their Scheme, starting from the date of application.
- The Scheme Owner applies to be benchmarked against a newly issued SSCI scope for the first time.

In order to benefit from the transition period, Scheme Owners are required to submit the following:

- A timeline with milestones that outline the process to achieve recognition within the 2-year time frame, for approval by the SSCI Steering Committee
- A bi-annual progress report for review and approval by the SSCI Steering Committee

If the Scheme Owner does not pass the SSCI benchmark within the defined period of 2 years, it will be removed from the "in Process" category for the respective scope. The Scheme Owner can re-apply for the benchmark and pass the benchmark within the standard time frame of one year.

- An exceptional extension of the transition period of two years may be granted by the SSCI Steering Committee upon justified request by the Scheme Owner. The request has to be made at a minimum of three months before the end of the initial application period.

5.2. Status on the SSCI Website

The Scheme Owner may choose how to be displayed on the SSCI Website, depending on the status of the benchmark of the scheme.

STATUS ON THE CGF SSCI WEBSITE	
SSCI recognised (per scope)	Schemes that have successfully passed the SSCI benchmark for the respective scope.
In Process	<p>Schemes may choose to be displayed as currently undergoing benchmarking to show their commitment to meeting industry expectations.</p> <p>The following conditions apply:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Application form filled in and accepted by the SSCI Manager• Benchmark entry fee paid• Schemes may stay for a maximum of one year in the “in process” category from the date of application (except when transition period applies, see below)
No information	Schemes may choose not to make public that they have applied for benchmarking. If recognition is achieved, the Schemes will be displayed as “recognised”.

6. Meeting the SSCI Criteria

6.1. The SSCI Benchmarking Requirements (Part II and III)

The SSCI Benchmarking Requirements consists of three integral parts:

- Part I: Benchmarking Process
- Part II: Requirements for the Management of Schemes
- Part III: Scope-specific Requirements

An applicant Scheme must provide evidence that all benchmarking criteria as outlined in Part II (Scheme Management) and Part III (Scope-specific requirements) are met and follow the procedure as outlined in Part I: Benchmarking Process to prove alignment.

Part II: The SSCI Scheme Management criteria as outlined in Part II of the Benchmark Requirements cover the governance structure and the management of a scheme, e.g. ownership, standard-setting mechanism, relationship with audit firms, etc.). The criteria are mainly based on the Global Food Safety Initiative Scheme Management criteria and the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative Governance and Operational Management criteria; Elements of the ISEAL Good Practice Codes are also integrated in the criteria.

Part III: The SSCI Scope-specific Criteria as outlined in Part III of the Benchmarking Requirements cover the content of a scheme. SSCI initially developed benchmarks for social compliance schemes and is envisioned to extend to environmental compliance based on the industry needs or expectations. The initial scope that was developed by SSCI covers social compliance for processing/manufacturing facilities. The social compliance criteria are informed by international reference frameworks such as principles from relevant ILO Conventions, the 1998 Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and the CGF Priority Industry Principles on Forced Labour.

In order to successfully pass the benchmark and to be SSCI-recognised, schemes must prove alignment with all benchmark criteria. Schemes that do not fully meet all criteria will not be recognised nor will the results of the benchmark be published.

6.2. Objective Evidence

The Scheme Owner is required to provide objective evidence that the scheme meets the SSCI benchmark criteria. The SSCI benchmark is a pass/fail benchmark: A criterion is either met or not met, no grades are provided per criterion. All criteria of the benchmark criteria (Part II and III) must be met in order to be recognised by SSCI. In case details in the scheme's documentation are missing or different from the SSCI criterion, the scheme's formulation can be accepted if the intent of the criterion is covered.

~~The SSCI Explanatory Note provides additional information on a specific criterion but is not binding for benchmarking purposes.~~ Clear and precise justification on how the Scheme meets each criterion is expected in the Self-Assessment form, including the exact reference to objective evidence for implementation and the document name, page and clause covering each criterion.

For Part II – Scheme Management requirements, the Scheme Owner must provide binding policies, procedures and contracts that demonstrate that the scheme is aligned with the SSCI benchmark criteria.

For Part III – Scope-specific requirements, the Scheme Owner must demonstrate that the respective criteria are verified during the audit of an organisation and verification on the ground is binding for auditors. Elements from a scheme's guidance document may be accepted as supporting evidence, yet a binding criterion must be in place that meets the requirement of the SSCI criterion.

The office visit serves to further verify alignment with the SSCI benchmark criteria and to check if the provided policies and procedures are effectively implemented as outlined in the Self-Assessment.

7. The SSCI Benchmarking Process

The following section describes the steps for the benchmarking of Schemes under SSCI. The benchmark is performed by an independent expert, the SSCI Benchmark Leader. The SSCI Manager is responsible for overseeing the Benchmarking Process and ensures that the outlined steps are followed throughout the process.

7.1. The Role of the Benchmark Leader

The SSCI benchmark is performed by an independent Benchmark Leader, who executes the Benchmarking Process as described in this document and verifies whether a Scheme is in alignment with the criteria of the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements. The Benchmark Leader reports to the SSCI Manager who supervises all the Benchmark activities and communication with the Scheme Owner.

The Benchmark Leader is the key point of contact for any questions related to the assessment against the SSCI criteria.

SSCI Benchmark Leaders have been assessed, selected and approved by the SSCI Steering Committee to perform benchmarks for SSCI. All Benchmark Leaders undergo the same initial training and annual calibration activities to maintain alignment of the evaluation. Each Benchmark Leader signs a confidentiality agreement with SSCI.

SSCI selects the Benchmark Leader for the Scheme Owner. The Benchmark Leader must declare any potential conflict of interest and signs an impartiality declaration upon each appointment as a Benchmark Leader. A Scheme Owner may object to a Benchmark Leader on the grounds of potential conflicts of interest. A Benchmark Leader may perform the benchmarking activities (initial benchmark and monitoring of continue alignment) for a maximum period of 3 years per Scheme. The SSCI Manager may reassign the Benchmark Leader at any time, at their discretion, if it is deemed necessary.

7.2. The Role of the SSCI Manager

The SSCI Manager leads the benchmarking process as described in this document and oversees the implementation of the work plan (see Appendix I. SSCI work plan). They act as the liaison between the Scheme Owner, the Benchmark Leader and the SSCI Steering Committee and ensures that all parties involved are provided with updates and relevant information as necessary. The Manager works with the communication team of the Scheme Owner and the internal CGF communication team to provide consistent and correct information about SSCI and the status of schemes to CGF members and stakeholders, in line with relevant communication guidelines.

The Manager is the key point of contact for any procedural questions, any questions regarding (external) communication and any issues that might arise during the process. He/she is also the key point of contact for any member or stakeholder inquiries.

7.3. The Role of the SSCI Steering Committee

The SSCI Steering Committee takes the final decision on SSCI recognition of an applicant Scheme based on the recommendations of the Benchmark Leader, the SSCI Manager, and the outcome of the public consultation.

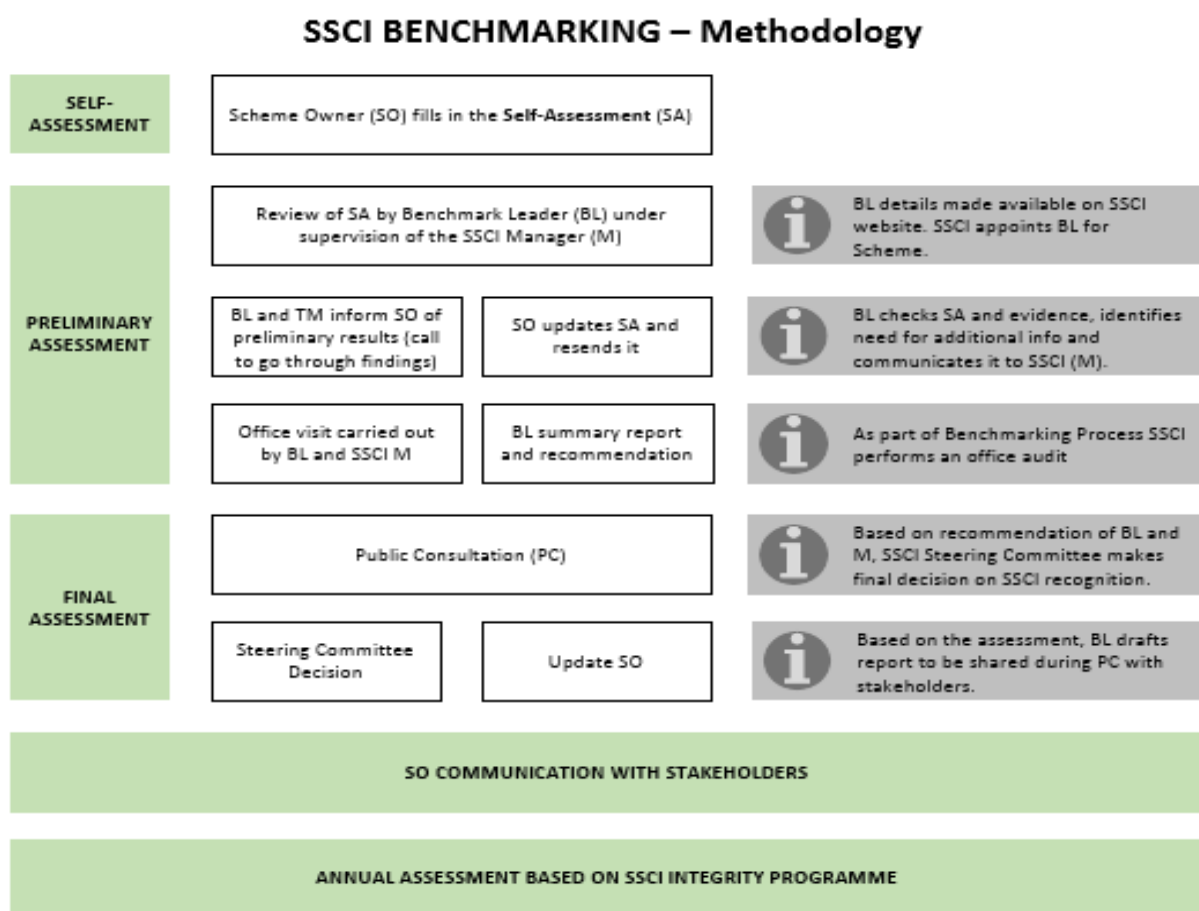
The Steering Committee is consulted for conflict resolution and in case of an appeal procedure.

7.4. Key Procedural Steps

The benchmarking process shall be carried out in accordance with the following key procedural steps:

- Application
- Self-Assessment
- Preliminary Desktop Review
- Call
- Final Desktop Review
- Office Visit
- Public Consultation
- Recognition Decision by SSCI Steering Committee
- Monitoring of Continued Alignment

The below graphic provides an overview of the Benchmarking Process.



*These steps are also summarised in Table 1 below.

Application

The Scheme Owner downloads the application form from the SSCI website, completes the form, signs the Scheme Owner Agreement, and submits these documents to SSCI. A non-refundable application fee is due at the time of application.

The Scheme Owner is encouraged to ensure that the eligibility criteria are met before applying for benchmarking (see section 1.2), that the application form is complete, and all necessary supporting documents are submitted with the application.

Self-Assessment

The objective of the Self-Assessment is for the Scheme Owner to demonstrate that the Scheme covers the criteria listed in the latest version of the SSCI Benchmark Requirements. The Self-Assessment is performed on *Part II – Requirements for the Management of Schemes* and the appropriate scope of the SSCI *Part III - Benchmarking Requirements*.

SSCI will provide a Self-Assessment form with the criteria that Scheme Owners use to self-evaluate if and how the SSCI criterion is covered by their Scheme. Clear and precise justification on how the Scheme meets each criterion is expected in the Self-Assessment form, including the exact reference to objective evidence for implementation and the document name, page and clause covering each criterion.

Approach to Good Practice

The Scheme Owner is invited to report on their good practice criteria to the Benchmark Leader where applicable. The Benchmark Leader and the SSCI will collect all reported good practice criteria for future revisions of the benchmarking criteria.

Please note that any reported good practice criteria will not affect any decisions on the granting of SSCI recognition. The Scheme Owner must still meet all SSCI Benchmarking Requirements in order to be recognised.

Desktop Review

Once the Scheme Owner submits the completed Self-Assessment for review, the Benchmark Leader performs a Preliminary Desktop Review under the supervision of the SSCI Manager.

For each SSCI criterion, the Benchmark Leader reviews the evidence provided by the Scheme Owner to verify if it fully meets the respective benchmarking requirement.

The Benchmark Leader takes note of any criteria where additional information is needed and/or where he or she does not agree with the conclusions of the Scheme Owner. These comments are supported by comprehensive explanations. All these findings are sent back to the Scheme Owner in writing and form the basis of the conference call.

Desktop Review/Conference Call

In a conference call, the Benchmark Leader and the SSCI Manager discuss the findings from the desktop review together with the Scheme Owner. The objective of the call is to clarify any questions regarding the outcome of the desktop review and what additional information/documents are required. The call also gives the Scheme Owner an opportunity to further clarify the submitted evidence. During the conference call, the time frame for the update of the Self-Assessment and, potentially, the work plan is agreed.

Final Desktop Review

Within the agreed time frame, the Scheme Owner provides an updated version of the Self-Assessment as well as any additional documentation as agreed. The updated version of the Self-Assessment must be completed and formally approved by the Director of the Scheme Owner.

Once the desktop review has been completed, the Benchmark Leader may recommend proceeding to the Office Visit, request the Scheme Owner to further improve the Self-Assessment, or recommend discontinuing the Benchmarking Process. The decision on how to proceed is made with the agreement of the Scheme Owner, if no agreement can be reached, the SSCI Manager refers the matter to the SSCI Steering Committee for resolution.

Office Visit

The Office Visit is conducted by the Benchmark Leader and the SSCI Manager. The office visit takes place in the headquarters of the Scheme Owner or in another office location as relevant for the benchmarking process and as agreed with the SSCI Manager. The purpose of the visit is to verify the evidence provided in the Self-Assessment through a sample record review.

The applicant Scheme Owner ensures that all resources including expert staff members, documentation and records are readily available to support the visit and criteria verification process.

An office visit report that clearly outlines any non-alignment(s) with the SSCI benchmarking and any observations is signed by the Scheme Owner, the Benchmark Leader and the SSCI Manager at the end of the office visit.

Based on the desktop review and the Office Visit report, the Benchmark Leader prepares a benchmark report.

If non-alignments between the Scheme Owner's documentation and the SSCI Benchmark Requirements are found, the Scheme Owner prepares a corrective action plan. The Scheme Owner, the Benchmark Leader and the SSCI Manager agree on a time frame to address the non-alignments. All open non-alignments must be closed before a Scheme can be recognised.

The Benchmark Leader prepares a recommendation to the SSCI Steering Committee to proceed to the public consultation or to discontinue to Benchmarking Process. Upon approval by the Steering Committee, schemes will proceed to the next step, the public consultation.

Public Consultation

Upon approval by the SSCI Steering Committee and the Scheme Owner, the benchmark report is made available on the SSCI website for stakeholder consultation for a period of four weeks. Any comments on the benchmark report are shared with the Scheme Owner. The Scheme Owner is asked to review the comments and provide a reply to the SSCI Manager and the Benchmark Leader. The Benchmark Leader under the supervision of the SSCI Manager will evaluate the responses from the Scheme Owner and prepare a final benchmark report. A final summary report, including a recommendation for recognition for consideration by the Steering Committee will be prepared. If no consensus can be reached with the Scheme Owner on the final recommendation, the matter will be referred to the SSCI Steering Committee for resolution.

Final Decision

Based on the final recommendation for recognition, the SSCI Steering Committee takes a decision by consensus. If a vote is necessary, the SSCI Steering Committee determines the final decision by majority vote. Records are kept of the numbers of votes for, against and abstaining. The SSCI Steering Committee decision is communicated in writing to the Scheme Owner by the SSCI Manager, as soon as practicable after the SSCI Steering Committee decision.

If the final decision of the SSCI Steering Committee is non-recognition, the reasons for the decision are clearly documented and communicated to the Scheme Owner. The Scheme Owner has the right to appeal against the SSCI Steering Committee decision. Stakeholders who submitted comments during the stakeholder consultation receive feedback on their submissions.

If the Steering Committee approves recognition of the Scheme, the confirmation on recognition, the Benchmark report, including the public comments, and a response to the public comments will be published on the SSCI website. Any public communication on the recognition decision by SSCI or the Scheme Owner and the timing of these announcements is agreed by the Scheme Owner and the SSCI Manager. SSCI will publish a news release announcing the recognition in cooperation with the Scheme Owner. The Scheme Owner is expected to issue a similar news release.

Monitoring of Continued Alignment

SSCI checks continued alignment with the mandatory SSCI Benchmark Requirements on an annual basis (SSCI Integrity Programme). The monitoring is performed by the independent Benchmark Leader who performed the initial benchmark of the Scheme, under the supervision of the SSCI Manager.

Elements and Frequency of the Integrity Programme

The SSCI Integrity Programme consists of three elements:

- | | |
|------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Random Record Review | twice a year |
| 2. Scheme Owner Office Visit | once a year |
| 3. Complaint Investigation | incident driven |

Random Record Review

The random record review is based on a sampling exercise. Twice a year, the Benchmark Leader reviews five randomly selected audits of a Scheme, performed by various audit firms. The Scheme Owner will receive a list with request for objective evidence of files related to these audits. These requests are all related to Part II Requirements for the Management of Schemes and to the scope(s) against which the Scheme is benchmarked, for example:

- Certificate and report and/or auditor notes
- Contract with the audit firm
- Training/examination file of the auditor
- Scope allowance of the auditor
- Etc.

The Benchmark Leader will share the findings of the random record review with the SSCI Manager and the Scheme Owner. If required, they will be further discussed during the office visit.

Office Visit

The focus of the annual office visit is to check the implementation and effectiveness of the Scheme's policies and procedures towards audit firms. The Benchmark Leader will randomly select two audits performed under the respective Scheme at the beginning of the office visit. The check includes:

- An investigation of the findings of the random record review (if applicable)
- All mandatory criteria of the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements - Part II
- The implementation of the corrective action plan from previous office visit (if applicable)
- Use of the SSCI logo

The Benchmark Leader prepares a report with the findings of the office visit. In case of non-alignment with the SSCI requirements, the Scheme Owner is required to prepare a corrective action plan. The timeline for preparing the corrective action plan and any follow-up actions are agreed with the Scheme Owner and will depend on the type of finding.

Table 1: the SSCI Key Procedural Steps

STEP	DESCRIPTION	DETAILED INSTRUCTIONS/FOLLOW-UP
A. Application	1. The Scheme Owner downloads and completes the application form and submits these documents and supporting documents to ssci@theconsumergoodsforum.com .	Scheme Owner defines the scope they apply for: SSCI Scheme Management (Part II) and At least one SSCI scope of recognition (Part III).
	2. The SSCI team sends an invoice for the application fee; process progresses once the invoice is paid.	The application fee is non-refundable.
	3 - SSCI team reviews the application and confirms within 2 weeks of receipt that the application is accepted.	If the information is complete and complies with the eligibility criteria defined by SSCI, the application is accepted, move to step A-4. If the information is incomplete or does not satisfy the eligibility criteria defined by SSCI, the application is rejected. Feedback is sent to the Scheme Owner, back to step A-1. NB: Scheme Owner may address concerns regarding the eligibility criteria and re-apply. Application fee would be invoiced for this new application. If the application is complete - meets the requirements and is eligible for benchmarking - SSCI approves the application and sends a contract (Scheme Owner Agreement).
	4. A contract is signed between SSCI and the Scheme Owner.	SSCI provides an agreement that must be signed by an authorised officer or representative of all

	<p>– SSCI appoints a Benchmark leader.</p>	<p>Scheme Owners applying for recognition.</p> <p>Once the contract is signed by both parties, the SSCI team sends the Self-Assessment form and appoints a Benchmark Leader. The Scheme Owner is informed about the choice and may reject the Benchmark Leader on the grounds of a demonstrated conflict of interest of the expert regarding the applicant Scheme.</p> <p>The appointment of the benchmark leader must ensure impartiality and independence of the benchmark leader from the Scheme Owner.</p>
	<p>5. A work plan is agreed between the Scheme Owner and the appointed Benchmark Leader.</p>	<p>The Scheme Owner is accountable for their workplan:</p> <p>The work plan should allow the completion of the assessment and recognition process within 12 months (24 months in case of transition period) from the signing of the contract between SSCI and the Scheme Owner</p> <p>The work plan must be agreed with the Benchmark Leader based on the number of scopes included in the application, the amount of time needed to perform the benchmarking assessment, and the estimated cost.</p>
<p>B. Self-Assessment</p>	<p>1. SSCI sends a Self-Assessment form(s) for the scope(s) included in the application form.</p>	<p>The information included within the self-assessment is the content of the Benchmarking Requirements (Part II and respective scope(s) of Part III).</p>
	<p>2. The Scheme Owner completes the Self-Assessment form(s) and submits them to the Benchmark Leader and SSCI with supporting evidence.</p>	<p>The Scheme Owner evaluates their Scheme against the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements.</p> <p>For each requirement, the following must be included:</p>

		<p>Whether and how the SSCI requirement is covered in the Scheme;</p> <p>The name of the Scheme's document covering the requirement with reference to the exact page and the clause;</p> <p>The relevant documents as objective evidence.</p> <p>Files must be numbered and a list of submitted documents provided together with the Self-Assessment.</p> <p>All documents may be submitted by email or a secured document sharing platform agreed with SSCI and the Benchmark Leader.</p>
<p>C. Desktop Review</p>	<p>1. The Benchmark Leader reviews the Self-Assessment:</p> <p>The information is complete and allows a comprehensive review by the Benchmark Leader – the Benchmark Leader sends the self-assessment with their analysis and comments, move to step D.</p> <p>The information is incomplete, and / or the evidence provided is insufficient – the Benchmark Leader sends feedback to the Scheme Owner, back to step B-2.</p>	<p>The Benchmark Leader assesses the alignment of the submitted information from the Scheme Owner with each criterion of the Benchmarking Requirements and rates them as follows:</p> <p>Aligned: the provided information addresses the criterion.</p> <p>Partly aligned: the provided information addresses some aspects of the criterion. The Benchmark Leader highlights the unaddressed element in their comment.</p> <p>Not aligned: the provided information does not address the criterion. The benchmark leader clarifies the expected information in their comment.</p>
	<p>2. The findings of the desktop review are discussed and clarified through a call with the Benchmark Leader, SSCI team, and the Scheme Owner.</p>	<p>The SSCI team will facilitate the scheduling and IT tools necessary for the execution of the call.</p> <p>The following points will be discussed:</p> <p>review of Benchmark Leader's assessment and clarification of any findings;</p>

		<p>agreement on a timeframe for the completion of the self-assessment;</p> <p>review of the workplan considering the results of the self-assessment.</p> <p>It is the Scheme Owner’s responsibility to ensure that the relevant and competent staff are present during the call.</p>
	<p>3. The Scheme Owner updates (where applicable) and re-submits the final Self-Assessment and additional supporting documents to the Benchmark Leader.</p>	<p>Within the agreed timeframe the Scheme Owner sends the final version of the Self-Assessment to the Benchmark Leader, signed by the Director or the authorised officer of the Scheme.</p> <p>The Desktop Review must be finalised before the Scheme can move to the next step of the process, the Office Visit, except for minor open elements.</p>
	<p>4. The Benchmark Leader reviews the additional information provided:</p> <p>If the information is complete and addressing the findings would not require a significant re-write of the programme – the Benchmark Leader sends the final validation of the self-assessments and a completed list of findings to the Scheme Owner and SSCI, move to step D “office visit”;</p> <p>If addressing the findings would require a significant re-write of the programme - the Benchmark Leader sends the final validation of the self-assessments and a completed report including the list of findings to the Scheme Owner and SSCI, move to step E;</p> <p>information is incomplete or unclear – back to step B-2.</p>	
	<p>5. Transition Period (if applicable): The Scheme Owner may submit a request to the SSCI Steering Committee to extend the time frame for completion of the process for an</p>	

	<p>additional 12 months in cases where significant changes are required in order to meet the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements.</p> <p>If SSCI Steering Committee approves:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Update workplan; – Scheme Owner to submit bi-annual progress reports to the SSCI team/Steering Committee. <p>SSCI Steering Committee rejects, end of process.</p>	
D. Office Visit	<p>1. The Benchmark Leader and the Scheme Owner plan a visit to the nominated offices of the certification programme owner:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the date is agreed based on availability – the Benchmark Leader sends a proposed agenda 	<p>The office visit focuses on record reviews as evidence of the implementation of the governance reviewed during the previous steps.</p> <p>All resources needed to support the office visit process must be available during the visit, including expert staff members, documentation, and records.</p>
	<p>2. The office visit happens at the Scheme Owner’s main office:</p> <p>The Benchmark Leader completes the final list of findings and presents it to the Scheme Owner;</p> <p>The Scheme Owner representative signs the list of findings;</p> <p>A copy of the signed list of findings is left with the Scheme Owner, another copy is sent to SSCI.</p>	<p>The Benchmark Leader leads the office visit and determines its length. The duration of the office visit depends on the complexity of the certification programme, the number of scopes to cover, any needs for interpretation, etc.</p>
	<p>3. The Benchmark Leader completes the Benchmark Report:</p> <p>The Benchmark Leader sends the Benchmark Report including the list of findings to the Scheme Owner.</p> <p>The Scheme Owner confirms that the content of the report is accurate.</p> <p>any dispute of the findings must be made in writing to the SSCI team within 14 days.</p>	<p>The benchmark report consists of an executive summary of the desktop review and office visit, as well as the detailed findings from the desktop review and office visit, per applied for scope.</p>

E. Corrective Actions	<p>1. The Scheme Owner sends the Benchmark Leader a corrective action plan to address any findings raised during the assessment</p>	
	<p>2. The Benchmark Leader reviews the corrective action plan:</p> <p>The corrective actions address the findings – the Benchmark Leader accepts the corrective action plan, move to step E-3;</p> <p>Some of the corrective actions do not address the findings – the corrective action plan is rejected, back to step E.1.</p>	
	<p>3. SSCI validates the agreed report and action plan:</p> <p>The Benchmark Leader sends the final report agreed with the Scheme Owner to SSCI;</p> <p>SSCI reviews the report and validates its content.</p>	
F. Public Consultation	<p>1. SSCI prepares the documentation for public consultation, this includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – An announcement statement; – A summary benchmark report with the findings per criterion. 	<p>The Scheme Owner is asked to approve the documents for public consultation. The Benchmark report includes a summary of findings and the outcome of the benchmark per criterion. If the Scheme Owner is not in agreement with the findings of the Benchmark Leader, the Scheme Owner can appeal to the SSCI Steering Committee.</p>
	<p>2. The Scheme Owner reviews the proposed documentation for the public consultation:</p> <p>The Scheme Owner approves the documentation: move to step F-3;</p> <p>The Scheme Owner has concerns over the content of the report, they submit their suggested changes to SSCI, back to step F-1.</p>	

	<p>3. The SSCI team makes the approved documentation available for stakeholder consultation on the SSCI website for 20 business days.</p>	<p>Comments are sent to ssci@theconsumergoodsforum.com using the template provided.</p>
	<p>4. SSCI closes the public consultation and sends the list of received comments to the Scheme Owner and the Benchmark Leader.</p>	
<p>G. Completion of Corrective Actions</p>	<p>1. The Scheme Owner completes all required corrective actions and:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – answers to any comments from the public consultation requiring an action or comment; – provides evidence of implementation for all corrective actions for the findings of the assessment. <p>The Scheme Owner sends the final report with their above addition, and any required supportive documents, to the Benchmark Leader.</p>	
	<p>2. The Benchmark Leader reviews the answers from the Scheme Owner to the comments and findings of the assessments:</p> <p>The Benchmark Leader accepts the comments and completion of the corrective actions from the Scheme Owner – move to step H.</p> <p>The Benchmark Leader rejects the comments and evidence of completion of corrective actions from the Scheme Owner – back to step G-1</p>	<p>All findings must be addressed with the corrective action plan completed before the process can progress.</p>
	<p>3. The Benchmark Leader sends the final assessment report with the completed corrective action plan to the SSCI team:</p> <p>SSCI accepts the completed corrective action plan: move to step H.</p>	

	SSCI rejects the completed action plan and/or asks for more information: back to step G-1.	
H. Final recognition decision and communication	1. The Benchmark Leader sends the final assessment report, including the executive summary with their recommendation for recognition, to the SSCI team.	
	2. SSCI reviews the final assessment report: SSCI accepts the recommendation from the Benchmark Leader: move to step H-3; SSCI challenges the recommendation from the Benchmark Leader: feedback is sent to the benchmark leader for consideration, back to step H-1;	
	3. SSCI submits the recommendation to the SSCI Steering Committee who votes to accept or reject this recommendation. A decision is taken by majority vote.	Vote may be organised during a face-to-face meeting of the SSCI Steering Committee where the quorum is present, or by email. In the latter case, SSCI must gather enough written answers back from SSCI Board members to respect the SSCI governance rules.
	4. SSCI informs the Scheme Owner of the final decision and confirms next step: The Scheme Owner agrees to communicate publicly the result of their assessment – move to step H-5. The Scheme Owner does not want the result of their assessment publicly communicated – move to step H-6 In either case, a signed statement of alignment will be posted on the SSCI website.	The SSCI Manager will inform the Scheme Owner of the reasons for the decision. The certification programme owner has the right to appeal the SSCI Board decision (see appeal procedure in the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements process manual).
	5. The SSCI team and the Scheme Owner agree upon a press release	SSCI and the Scheme Owner will both publish a press release.

	<p>text and publish it jointly through their respective channels.</p> <p>Move to step H-6.</p>	
	<p>6. SSCI updates the SSCI website and checks that the Scheme Owner updates their own website when applicable.</p>	
<p>I. Monitoring of continued alignment</p>	<p>1. Once a year, the Scheme Owner completes a monitoring record and sends this to the SSCI team and the Benchmark Leader.</p>	<p>The monitoring record is issued by SSCI and asks for schemes to declare:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Any significant changes in the Scheme Owner governance, including changes in procedures, ownership, organisation etc. – Any requested scope extension – Any planned or published new programme version
	<p>2. The Benchmark Leader and the Scheme Owner schedule the required activities of the monitoring of continuous alignment.</p>	<p>The SSCI monitoring of continuous alignment includes the following activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Desktop review: gap analysis against a potential new sub-version of the Benchmarking Requirements; – Random record review: desktop audit based on sampling exercise. This should occur twice a year: before and after the office visit; – Office Audit: review of certification programme owner's records based at their main office. This should occur once a year.
	<p>3. The Benchmark Leader carries out the first random record review.</p>	<p>This will include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A gap analysis against a potential new sub-version of the Benchmarking Requirements; – A desktop review of records associated with 5 randomly selected audits.

	<p>4. The Benchmark Leader carries out an office visit.</p>	<p>The office visit focuses on record reviews as evidence of the implementation of the programme's governance (part II). All resources needed to support the office visit process must be available during the visit, including expert staff members, documentation, and records. Findings from the desktop review may be discussed at the office visit.</p>
	<p>5. the Benchmark Leader carries out a second random record review.</p>	<p>This is a repeat of the first desktop review on another 5 randomly selected audits.</p>
	<p>6. The Scheme Owner and Benchmark Leader ensure that an acceptable corrective action plan is completed for any findings from the monitoring activities.</p> <p>If any findings raise concerns to the Benchmark Leader on the recognition status of the Scheme Owner, the Benchmark Leader sends their recommendation on reviewing this status to the SSCI team.</p>	<p>At each stage of the monitoring of continuous alignment, the Benchmark Leader will document and agree a list of findings with the Scheme Owner and communicate this to the SSCI team.</p>
	<p>7. The SSCI team validates that the results justify maintaining the Scheme Owner recognition.</p> <p>If any findings raise concerns the SSCI team recommends next steps to the SSCI Steering Committee.</p>	<p>If a programme is de-recognized, they must remove any mention of their prior recognition from their website or promotional materials within 30 Days.</p>

For further information and support: ssci@theconsumergoodsforum.com

Complaint Investigation

The SSCI Manager has to investigate any serious complaint or suspected non-alignment of a SSCI-recognised Scheme with the *SSCI Benchmarking Requirements*. The investigation may take the form of a desktop investigation and/or an office visit.

If the SSCI Manager receives a complaint regarding the non-conformity of a Scheme with the *SSCI Benchmarking Requirements*, the Manager will promptly acknowledge, in writing, the receipt of the complaint or report to the party concerned.

When a complaint is received, the SSCI Manager will initiate investigative procedures to verify the accuracy of the complaint.

The Manager shall ensure that the details of the complaint are clearly understood and documented and that any claims or comments made by the complainant are properly authenticated and appropriately documented. This authentication shall be verified as being accurate and correct by independent sources, in addition to the complainant. It is the responsibility of the complainant to provide information that can be appropriately authenticated. It is at the discretion of the SSCI Manager to appoint the Benchmark Leader or an independent assessor at any stage during the investigation process. The SSCI Manager must ensure impartiality and preserve confidentiality.

If the Benchmark Leader or an assessor is appointed, he or she shall carry out a thorough investigation of the complaint and, where possible, provide a resolution for the issues, fully document the complaint process, and provide a detailed report to the SSCI Manager.

8. Sanctioning

Activities of the SSCI Monitoring of Continued Alignment may lead to sanctions for the Scheme Owner. If evidence of non-conformity against the requirements specified in the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements is found by a Benchmark Leader during the annual assessment, the SSCI Manager shall promptly contact the Scheme Owner concerned.

The SSCI Manager shall fully document the process of investigation and decision-making. The SSCI Manager shall take a decision after the review of the submitted evidence and will either:

1. take no action against the Scheme Owner,
or
2. convene the SSCI Steering Committee to agree on one of three possible outcomes - continued recognition, suspension of recognition, or the withdrawal of recognition.

Irrespective of the decision taken by the SSCI Steering Committee, the Scheme Owner and the SSCI Steering Committee members shall be informed in writing of the decision, including a full explanation of the actions taken.

8.1. SSCI Suspension of Recognition Procedure

If, following the review of the evidence gathered and submitted by the SSCI Manager and consultation with the Scheme Owner, the SSCI Steering Committee considers that a period of suspension of recognition shall be imposed, the Scheme Owner shall be informed of this decision, and any remediation conditions imposed by the SSCI Steering Committee to regain recognition status. The period of suspension of recognition and remediation action shall be made known to the Scheme Owner. If the necessary changes are not implemented within 12 months, recognition will automatically be withdrawn.

The Scheme Owner shall confirm to the SSCI Steering Committee that these remediation conditions can be achieved within the timescales set out by the SSCI Steering Committee and when evidence of the results of the corrective action can be expected.

If the SSCI Steering Committee is not satisfied with the commitment of the Scheme under suspension to take the appropriate corrective action, they shall withdraw recognition.

If a period of suspension is imposed, the SSCI website shall clearly specify the details and conditions of the suspension.

8.2. SSCI Withdrawal of Recognition Procedure

If following the review of the evidence gathered and submitted by the SSCI Manager and consultation with the Scheme Owner, the SSCI Steering Committee considers that a withdrawal of recognition is required, the Scheme Owner shall be informed of this decision.

In the event that SSCI recognition is withdrawn, SSCI shall issue a news release and the SSCI website shall clearly specify the details and conditions of the withdrawal.

A Scheme Owner may choose to voluntarily withdraw from SSCI recognition when unforeseen circumstances put the Scheme into contravention of SSCI requirements. In this instance, the Scheme Owner will make a request to withdraw voluntarily, and a full dossier of the circumstances at the disposal of the SSCI Manager.

The SSCI Manager will inform the SSCI Steering Committee regarding the circumstances and convene a meeting to discuss the issue as soon as possible. It is at the discretion of the SSCI Steering Committee to grant voluntary withdrawal or to launch the suspension process.

8.3. SSCI Appeals Procedure -SSCI Recognition

The Scheme Owner has the right to appeal against any decision made by the SSCI Steering Committee, the SSCI Manager or any person contracted by the SSCI in relation to the Benchmarking Process, associated systems and procedures. Only the Scheme Owner to which the decision relates to has the right to appeal to the SSCI Steering Committee.

The Scheme Owner shall submit an appeal to the SSCI Manager within 30 days of the matter in dispute occurring. The appeal shall be submitted in writing to the SSCI Manager and shall clearly describe the reason and provide a full explanation together with substantive evidence to support the thorough investigation of the appeal.

When the appeal procedure is initiated, the status of the Scheme shall be amended on the SSCI website to reflect that the Scheme is subject to an appeal.

Any appeal shall be heard by a Committee (the Appeals Committee), which is a body specifically assembled by the SSCI Steering Committee for the purposes of hearing an individual appeal. The SSCI Steering Committee shall ensure that such an Appeals Committee should not include any person or SSCI staff member involved with the decision that is being appealed. The Appeals Committee shall be assembled from members of the SSCI Steering Committee and shall consist of a minimum of three members of the Steering Committee. The SSCI shall ensure that the investigation is conducted in an impartial and professional manner and without any actual or perceived conflict of interest.

The final outcome of the investigation by the Appeals Committee shall be heard by the SSCI Steering Committee, and the decision made by the Appeals Committee shall be upheld by the SSCI Steering Committee.

The decision submitted to the SSCI Steering Committee by the Appeals Committee shall be conveyed to the Scheme Owner that has raised the appeal. The decision of the Appeals Committee shall be final and the appeal process will then be closed.

9. Appendix I

The work plan of SSCI

PROCESS STEP	RESPONSIBILITY	DESCRIPTION	TYPICAL TIMESCALE FOR ACTIVITY	AGREED COMPLETION DATE	WORKING DOCUMENTS
Application	Scheme Owner	Payment of application fee	Due at time of application		
	SSCI team	Review of application upon receipt of application fee.	2 weeks after receipt of application fee		Application Form
		Signature of Scheme Owner Agreement Transferring Self-Assessment Form Selection of Benchmark Leader Suggestion work plan by Scheme Owner	2 weeks after approval of application		Scheme Owner Agreement Benchmark Leader Agreement Conflict of Interest form Self-Assessment Form
Completion of Self-Assessment	Scheme Owner	Submission of Self-Assessment	As agreed in work plan, typically 3 months		Self-Assessment
Preliminary Desktop Review	Benchmark Leader	Completion of desktop review	4 weeks		Self-Assessment
Call	Benchmark Leader	Sending desktop review to Scheme Owner	2 weeks ahead of the call		Desktop Review
	Benchmark Leader Scheme Owner SSCI team	Discussion of desktop review Agreement on follow-up actions and timelines	Depending on findings: 1 to 4 hours		Desktop Review
Final Desktop Review	Scheme Owner	Submission updated final Self-Assessment	As agreed during call, typically 4 weeks		Self-Assessment

	Benchmark Leader	Review of updated final Self-Assessment If requested, a second call to go through the updates can be held	3 weeks, depending on changes		Desktop Review
Office Visit	Benchmark Leader	Detailed agenda shared with Scheme Owner	2 weeks ahead of the office visit		Agenda office visit
	Benchmark Leader Scheme Owner SSCI team	Completion office visit Signature of office visit report at the end of the visit	1 - 2 days		Agenda office visit Checklist office visit
	Scheme Owner	Submission Corrective Action Plan to Benchmark Leader	2 weeks after office visit		Corrective Action Plan
	Benchmark Leader	Completion Benchmark Report based on desktop review, office visit; including recommendation to SSCI Steering Committee	4 weeks after office visit		Benchmark Assessment Template
Public Consultation	SSCI Steering Committee SSCI team	Informed on opening public consultation by SSCI team	1 week after recommendation from Benchmark Leader		
	SSCI team Scheme Owner	Validation of public consultation document with Scheme Owner Publication benchmark report for public consultation	2 weeks after finalisation of public consultation document		Public consultation template
	Stakeholder	Input Benchmark report	4 weeks		
	Scheme Owner SSCI team	Scheme Owner addresses comments; If applicable, agreement on remediation	2 weeks after end of public consultation		
	Benchmark Leader	Recommendation to SSCI Steering Committee	2 weeks after submission of reply to comments		

Completion of Corrective Actions	Scheme Owner	Implementation of remediation actions	Up to 3 months		* Note: Implementation required before recognition will be granted.
Steering Committee Decision & Communication	SSCI Steering Committee	Decision on recognition of Scheme by majority vote	2 weeks after submission of recommendation		
	Scheme Owner SSCI team	In case of recognition: Publication of a news release and update website	2 weeks after decision		
	Scheme Owner	In case of non-recognition: Option to appeal to the Steering Committee	Up to 4 weeks after decision		