

SSCI Benchmarking Requirements

Version 2.0

PART I

SSCI Benchmarking Process



The Consumer Goods
FORUM

Sustainable Supply
Chain Initiative



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1. Introduction

The Sustainable Supply Chain Initiative (SSCI), facilitated by The Consumer Goods Forum, is dedicated to advancing sustainability in global supply chains and providing buyers and suppliers with clear, credible guidance on how third-party auditing and monitoring programs cover key sustainability practices. Achieving SSCI recognition demonstrates a scheme owner's commitment to upholding high standards, fostering harmonization, and driving alignment across industries. While the decision to accept individual suppliers and schemes remains with companies, the SSCI serves as a due diligence tool by providing a transparent reference and baseline for sustainability standards, helping businesses streamline their efforts.

Initially focused on social compliance, the SSCI launched its environmental sustainability scope in June 2024. This expansion reflects its commitment to addressing the full spectrum of sustainability challenges and supporting global supply chains in their transition toward more sustainable practices.

The SSCI Benchmarking Requirements consist of four integral parts:

- Part I: Benchmarking Process (this document)
- Part II: Requirements for the Management of Schemes (applicable to all scopes)
- Part III: Scope-specific Requirements (Social and Environmental)
- Part IV: Glossary

The SSCI Benchmarking Process outlines the method and process for auditing, monitoring, and certification programmes. The systems and procedures associated with the SSCI Benchmarking Process are reviewed and updated as required to maintain consistency and integrity.

In its last revision, Version 2, along with other updates, the SSCI recognizes that Scheme Owners may have different structures and ways to operate while maintaining integrity and required best practices. The SSCI acknowledges sector specificities and the use of alternatives to accreditation for the auditing firms they engage. Therefore, SSCI has developed a set of requirements tailored specifically for schemes that do not rely on accreditation. Under what SSCI refers to as "Assurance Programs," the new criteria set standards for issuing certificates without formal accreditation, ensuring they include

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essential information for transparency. These requirements were subject to Public Consultation, are outlined in Part II, Scheme Management requirements, and are available for Public Consultation at the end of this document.

2. Eligibility Criteria

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

- The Scheme Owner must be a legally recognised entity and demonstrate independence from certification activities.
- The Scheme Owner has been operational for at least 12 months.
- The Scheme Owner must conduct an initial self-assessment to confirm its adherence to the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements.

3. Application

3.1 Scope of recognition

In the application form, the Scheme Owner must clearly specify the **scope of activity** for which it is applying for SSCI benchmarking and seeking recognition. The scope-specific benchmarking criteria are outlined here:

Social Compliance:



Environmental Compliance:



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 Requirements for Recognition

Schemes owners seeking SSCI recognition are required to apply as follows:

- **Initial Benchmarking:** The Scheme Owner has not previously undergone the SSCI benchmarking and is eligible according to Section 2.
- **Re-benchmarking:** Schemes may apply for re-benchmarking in the following cases:
 - Suspension of a recognised Scheme for a period of less than 12 months;
 - Significant change of a Scheme (e.g., governance, ownership structure, management)
 - Withdrawal of existing SSCI recognition;

The SSCI decides on a case-by-case basis the level of assessment required for re-benchmarking (e.g. desktop review, office visit, full benchmark), and informs the Scheme Owner accordingly. Schemes applying for re-benchmarking must meet the same eligibility criteria as defined in Section 2.

When the SSCI publishes an updated version of the Benchmarking Requirements, all existing SSCI-recognised Schemes are required to integrate the new version into their practices, and compliance with the updated Benchmarking Requirements will be checked during the next Monitoring of Continued Alignment

3.3 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 Representative in writing about the significant change and start the re-benchmarking process within 9 months of the entry into force of the significant change.

3.4 Time frame and Transition Period

The Benchmarking Process is expected to be finalised within a 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 have a maximum of two years from the application date to complete the Benchmarking Process, including implementing any required Scheme adjustments.
- 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 progress report for review and approval by the SSCI Steering Committee

Should the Scheme Owner fail to achieve the SSCI benchmark within the defined two-year period, it may re-apply, but must achieve recognition within the standard one-year timeframe.

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 transition period.

3.5 Status on the SSCI Website

The Scheme Owner may choose how to be displayed on the SSCI Website, depending on the scheme's benchmark status. The public status on the SSCI website is subject to the following prerequisites:

- Submission of a completed application form, accepted by the SSCI Representative.

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- Payment of the required Benchmark application fee.

The possible status are:

- **SSCI Recognised:** Schemes that have successfully passed the SSCI benchmark for the respective scope.
- **In the Benchmarking Process:** Schemes may choose to be displayed as currently undergoing benchmarking to show their commitment to meeting industry expectations.
- **Conditionally Recognised:** This form of recognition signifies that the scheme is recognised, provided that specific corrective actions to address minor gaps that do not compromise the scheme’s overall alignment with SSCI requirements will be completed within an agreed-upon timeline.

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”.

4. Meeting the SSCI Criteria

The SSCI Benchmarking Requirements consist of three integral parts:

- Part I: Benchmarking Process (this document)
- Part II: Requirements for the Management of Schemes
- Part III: Scope-specific Requirements (Social & Environmental)
- Part IV: Glossary

The SSCI **Scheme Management Criteria (Part II)**, covers the governance structure and the management of a scheme, (e.g., ownership, standard-setting mechanisms, relationships with audit firms, etc). Where applicable, the criteria are intended to align with the Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) Scheme Management criteria and the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI) Governance and Operational Management criteria. Elements of the ISEAL Good Practice Codes are also integrated, while maintaining the integrity of SSCI-specific requirements.

The SSCI Scope-specific Criteria as outlined in Part III of the Benchmarking Requirements cover the technical content of a scheme.

SSCI initially developed benchmarks for social compliance schemes and has extended to environmental compliance based on the industry needs.

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.

The **Environmental Compliance** criteria are grounded in a comprehensive framework of internationally recognised references and sustainable practices. This includes adherence to major international agreements and conventions, such as the UN Conventions on biodiversity, climate change, and chemical pollutants (Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions), alongside regional regulations like the EU Anti-Deforestation Regulation. The criteria also draw from leading industry standards and best practices and remains open to regular reviews.

The Glossary serves as an essential reference, providing clear and concise definitions for key terms used throughout the document. It supports users in understanding and interpreting the requirements by offering standardized terminology that ensures consistency and clarity.

4.1 Objective Evidence

The Scheme Owner is required to provide objective evidence that the scheme meets all the applicable SSCI benchmark criteria (depending on the scope).

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**. If during the assessment period changes are required and a draft language is presented as evidence, the endorsed draft must **gain acceptance** before the office visit, and will be evaluated during the monitoring of continued alignment.

For 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 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.

During the office visit (refer to section 5.2), a review will be conducted to verify the Self-Assessment policies and procedures align with the SSCI benchmark criteria, and to confirm their **effective implementation**.

5. The SSCI Benchmarking Methodology

The following section describes the steps for the benchmarking process and who is involved in each of the steps.

5.1 Who is involved

The SSCI Representative

The SSCI Representative oversees the benchmarking process and the implementation of the work plan (see Appendix I: SSCI Work Plan). They serve as the liaison between the Scheme Owner, the Benchmark Leader, and the SSCI Steering Committee, ensuring all involved parties receive necessary updates and relevant information. The SSCI Representative participates as an observer in all assessment activities (in person or remotely) to ensure

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 aligns with the criteria of the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements. The Benchmark Leader reports to the SSCI Representative.

SSCI Benchmark Leaders are assessed, selected, and approved by the SSCI Representative and the Steering

relevance and alignment, and is allowed to intervene if deemed necessary. They ultimately validate action plans and reports before the results are shared with the Steering Committee.

The SSCI collaborates with the Scheme Owner's communication team and the internal CGF communication team to provide consistent and accurate information about the SSCI and the status of schemes to CGF members and stakeholders, in line with relevant communication guidelines.

The SSCI Representative is the key point of contact for procedural questions, communication inquiries related to the process, and any issues that might arise. They also serve as the primary contact for all member and stakeholder inquiries.

The SSCI Steering Committee

The SSCI Steering Committee oversees and leads all SSCI activities. This includes defining the Coalition's objectives and strategy (subject to approval by the CGF Board), overseeing strategy execution and agreeing on necessary actions, steering strategic directions through sub-groups, guiding local steering committee governance,

Committee to perform benchmarks for the SSCI. All Benchmark Leaders undergo initial training and annual calibration activities to maintain alignment and sign a confidentiality agreement with SSCI.

The SSCI Representative assigns the Benchmark Leader for an assessment. The Benchmark Leader must declare any potential conflict of interest and sign an impartiality declaration upon each assignment. A Scheme Owner may object to a Benchmark Leader based on potential conflicts of interest. A Benchmark Leader may perform the benchmarking activities (initial benchmark and monitoring of continued alignment) **for a maximum period of three consecutive years per Scheme**. The SSCI Representative may reassign the Benchmark Leader at any time, at their discretion, if it is deemed necessary.

The Technical Committee

Under the strategic guidance of the SSCI Steering Committee and the SSCI Representative, the Technical Committee is a sub-committee and will support the oversight of the benchmarking process and its requirements. The Committee is also

objectives and progress, and supporting the development of fact-based progress reports and external communications. Furthermore, it takes the final decision on SSCI recognition of an applicant Scheme based on the recommendations of the Benchmark Leader, the SSCI Representative, and the outcome of the public consultation. The Steering Committee is consulted for conflict resolution, in cases of appeal procedures, or when the process identifies findings that could compromise the SSCI's integrity or when a scheme owner risks losing recognition. The Steering Committee may also be consulted when existing SSCI procedures do not provide clear information to address a particular situation that may arise during a benchmarking process (this may include interpretation or applicability of SSCI criteria within a particular Scope).

expected to facilitate partnerships by actively engaging with certification bodies, organizations, and relevant stakeholders to foster collaboration. It will provide support to the Steering Committee in managing technical decisions to ensure coherence and progress within the Benchmarking process. This involves offering expertise, guidance, and recommendations on technical matters to facilitate informed decision-making and consensus-building among members. Additionally, the Committee will support the reviewing of the benchmarking requirements to ensure alignment with objectives and industry standards.

5.2 The Benchmarking Process - Key Steps

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



After **Recognition is granted**, the **Monitoring of Continued Alignment** will take place every year to verify the corrective actions proposed during the process and assure continued alignment with SSCI requirements.



Please see Appendix for **Table 1: The Benchmarking Process Key Steps** with detailed information.

A. Application

Any Scheme Owner that wishes to undergo full benchmarking must apply by contacting the SSCI team directly (ssci@theconsumergoodsforum.com). The Scheme Owner will find an application [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 Representative. The Scheme Owner's application must cover the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements for the Management of Schemes and at least one industry scope (Social and/or Environmental). A Scheme Owner is permitted to submit multiple benchmarking applications for different scopes.

The Scheme Owner completes the application form, and submits these documents to SSCI along with a preliminary self-assessment to the SSCI Team. 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 2), that the application form is complete, and all necessary supporting documents are submitted with the application.

The SSCI Representative 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 Representative accepts the Scheme for benchmarking, the applicant Scheme Owner and SSCI sign a contract to progress with the process.

B. Desktop Review

Following the application and submission of the Self-Assessment by the Scheme Owner, a Benchmark Leader will be assigned by the SSCI Representative to conduct a preliminary review of the 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. 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 each SSCI criterion, the Benchmark Leader examines the evidence submitted by the Scheme Owner. The purpose is to verify whether the scheme fully satisfies the corresponding benchmarking requirement and to define the level of alignment.

In the SSCI benchmark process, the following terms are used to describe the level of compliance for each criterion:

- **Fully Aligned:** The scheme fully meets the SSCI requirement without any gaps or deviations, demonstrating complete adherence to the criteria.
- **Partially Aligned:** The scheme meets the general intent of the SSCI requirement, but is missing critical or essential elements necessary for full compliance, and therefore requires improvements or adjustments.
- **Not Aligned:** The scheme does not meet the SSCI criterion or demonstrates significant deviations from the required criteria, indicating a lack of compliance.

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.

Note: 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 SSCI Benchmarking Requirements in order to be recognised.

B1. Alignment/Conference call

Following the preliminary desktop review, the Benchmark Leader will organize a conference call, lasting a **maximum of four hours**, to discuss the findings with the Scheme Owner (the SSCI Representative will also be present during this call). The objectives are to address any questions regarding the desktop review results, identify additional information or documentation needed to clarify potential gaps, and provide the Scheme Owner with an opportunity to further explain the submitted evidence. During this call, the time frame for updating the Self-Assessment and, if necessary, the work plan will be agreed upon.

Alternatively, the desktop review may be conducted on-site at the Scheme Owner's expense. This option is available when challenges arise, such as limited understanding of requirements, low internet connectivity, inadequate IT resources, or at the specific request of the Scheme Owner. If an on-site review occurs, the time frame for updating the Self-Assessment and, if necessary, the work plan will also be discussed again during the subsequent conference call.

B2. 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 Scheme Owner.

The Benchmark Leader will review the final document and 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 Representative refers the matter to the SSCI Steering Committee for resolution.

C. Office Visit

The Office Visit is conducted by the Benchmark Leader in the presence of the SSCI Representative (in person or remotely). 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 Representative. 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 Representative at the end of the office visit.

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

D. Outcomes of the Process and Benchmark Report

Following the completion of the Office Visit and Desktop Review, the Benchmark Leader issues the Benchmark Report. This report documents the findings and outcomes of the benchmarking process.

D1. Corrective Action Plan

If any non-alignments are identified between the Scheme Owner's documentation and the SSCI Benchmark Requirements, the Scheme Owner must develop a corrective action plan. This plan requires approval from both the Benchmark Leader and the SSCI Representative.

The Scheme Owner, the Benchmark Leader, and the SSCI Representative will agree upon a time frame for the implementation of corrective actions.

The Benchmark Report will grant **conditional recognition** to the scheme until these corrective actions are implemented and full alignment is achieved. The implementation

and effectiveness of these actions will be verified during the next Monitoring of Continued Alignment (MoCA).

This approach allows SSCI to recognize schemes with non-critical gaps, ensuring rigorous standards while enabling their continuous improvement through regular follow-up and assessment.

Based on the Benchmark Report, the Benchmark Leader will recommend to the SSCI Steering Committee whether to proceed to the public consultation phase or discontinue the Benchmarking Process. Upon Steering Committee approval, schemes will advance to the public consultation.

E. Public Stakeholder 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 Representative and the Benchmark Leader. The Benchmark Leader under the supervision of the SSCI Representative 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.

F. Final Decision

The final decision on SSCI recognition is made by the SSCI Steering Committee (Industry Validation). This decision is based on the comprehensive benchmark report, the recommendation from the Benchmark Leader, and the outcomes of the public consultation. The Steering Committee strives to reach a decision by consensus. Should a vote be required, the final decision will be determined by a majority vote. Detailed records of the voting, including the number of votes for, against, and abstaining, are maintained. The decision of the SSCI Steering Committee is formally communicated in

writing to the Scheme Owner by the SSCI Representative as soon as is practicable following the decision. The final decision can be:

- **Recognition**

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 Representative. The SSCI team 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.

- **Conditional Recognition**

The Benchmark Leader and the SSCI Representative conclude that only minor gaps exist, which do not compromise the scheme's overall alignment with the requirements. The Steering Committee has the authority to grant **Conditional Recognition**. This form of recognition signifies that the scheme is recognised, provided that specific corrective actions to address these gaps were presented and will be completed within an agreed-upon timeline. The progress and effectiveness of the defined corrective actions will be monitored through the Monitoring of Continued Alignment (MoCA) process and ideally should not take longer than 12 months. Upon the successful resolution of all gaps, or sooner if the scheme demonstrates readiness, the scheme will transition to full recognition. The reference to Conditional recognition will be added to the Benchmark Report.

- **Non-recognition**

In instances where the final decision of the SSCI Steering Committee is non-recognition, the rationale for this decision will be thoroughly documented and formally communicated to the Scheme Owner. The Scheme Owner retains the right to appeal against the SSCI Steering Committee's decision. Furthermore, stakeholders who submitted comments during the public consultation phase will receive feedback on their submissions.

G. Monitoring of Continued Alignment

The Benchmark process is based on continuous alignment and will therefore have annual assessments to check the continued alignment with the mandatory SSCI Benchmark Requirements on an annual basis (SSCI Integrity Programme). The monitoring is performed by the independent Benchmark Leader (usually who performed the initial benchmark of the Scheme) under the supervision of the SSCI Representative.

G1. Elements and Frequency of the Integrity Programme of the Monitoring of Continued Alignment

The SSCI Integrity Programme consists of three elements:

- Random Record Review: once a year
- Annual Assessment (Office visit or online) assessment: once a year
- Complaint Investigation: incident driven

Random Record Review

The Benchmark Leader will randomly select a sample (between two and ten audits) conducted under the scope of the Scheme in the last 12 months, based on the total number of audits performed;

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 Representative and the Scheme Owner. If required, they will be further discussed during the office visit.

Annual Assessment (Office Visit or Online)

The annual assessment is designed to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of the Scheme's policies and procedures as they pertain to audit firms and scheme operations as well as to check for the implementation and effectiveness of action plans from previous assessment.

The first annual assessment will be conducted in person during the initial year of monitoring. For the following two years (Years n+1 and n+2), the visits can be conducted remotely depending on the SSCI Representative decision. In the third year after recognition (Year n+3), the office visit will be conducted in person again. This cycle will then repeat.

During the assessment, the Benchmark Leader will check:

- An assessment of the findings of the random record review (if applicable)
- All mandatory criteria of the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements
- The implementation of the corrective action plan from previous office visits (if applicable)
- Use of the SSCI logo
- Records or updates regarding any changes since the last SSCI Benchmarking report or CAP

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.

Complaint Investigation

The SSCI Representative 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 Representative 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 Representative 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 Representative to appoint the Benchmark Leader or an independent assessor at any stage during the investigation process. The SSCI Representative 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 Representative.

6. Sanctioning

The SSCI Representative is responsible for the investigation of any suspected non-alignments in relation to the compliance of an SSCI-recognised scheme with the requirements specified within the SSCI Benchmarking Requirements.

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

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

- take no action against the Scheme Owner, or

- 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.

6.1 SSCI Suspension of Recognition Procedure

If, following the review of the evidence gathered and submitted by the SSCI Representative 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.

6.2 SSCI Withdrawal of Recognition Procedure

If, following the review of the evidence gathered and submitted by the SSCI Representative and consultation with the Scheme Owner, the SSCI Steering Committee considers that a withdrawal of recognition is required—particularly in cases where the Scheme Owner has been granted Conditional Recognition but has not closed the gaps identified in the initial assessment— the Scheme Owner shall be informed of this decision.

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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 Representative.

The SSCI Representative 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.

6.3 SSCI Appeals Procedure - SSCI Recognition

The Scheme Owner has the right to appeal against any decision made by the SSCI Steering Committee, the SSCI Representative 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 Representative within 30 days of the matter in dispute occurring. The appeal shall be submitted in writing to the SSCI Representative 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.

SSCI Benchmark Requirements

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.