

September 2004

## Presentation on "Contractors Health and Safety Assessment

Scheme (CHAS)", by John Murphy,  
London Borough of Merton,

John introduced his subject with some choice photographs from the Construction Industry "Black Museum", as telling evidence of the need to improve control of safe working methods on sites. He went on to explain that CHAS was a tool to enable the selection of contractors against a consistent standard of safe working behaviour and was a complete prequalification package. The CHAS system was a live, Internet-accessed database of information about contractors, accumulated as a result of a desktop health and safety assessment. It is growing, he added, as a result of 'word-of-mouth' recommendations

One of its prime objectives is to achieve real improvements in the health and safety performance of SMEs but, at the same time, it also wants to avoid the repetitious submission of the same information to a succession of clients. Similarly, it aims to reduce the time spent by clients requesting a mass of pre-qualification information from contractors submitting tenders for each project. It is important to clients and contractors alike, that the underlying standards are transparent and acceptable.

John continued by saying that he expected the scheme to grow strongly from the present level of 140 Members and 6,300 Contractors, to 200 Members and 9,000 Contractors by the end of the year. The Members group consist of Councils, Universities, Housing Associations, Health Trusts and also the private sector firms such as Inspace, McAlpine Capital Projects, Mitie Group and J.N.Bentley. It is 'Not-for-profit' and self-financing, reliant on the Members' Fee of £600, not Contractors, and is run by the Merton Council and National Management Group comprising: -

- Chair – John Murphy
- 12 Regional representatives (including BHSEA Member John Leather for the West Midlands)
- 2 Procurement Advisors
- Industry (Federation of Master Builders, National Federation of Builders, Electrical Contractors Association, National Home Care Association)
- TUC (UCATT and GMB)
- Legal Advisor
- Co-opted Membership from HSE.

As an example of their success at achieving objectives, John quoted some figures from **Essex County Council** where, eight months ago, there were 582 contractors on their list, of which 271 were CHAS Assessed, giving a success rate of **46.5%** NOW, there were an additional two contractors on the list, but there were 377

CHAS Assessed, raising the success rate to **65%**, with an estimated £20,000 saving for contractors. He quoted similar coverage rates for other Councils near London, where the hit rate was expected to be high and relatively lower figures for Councils in the North.

The CHAS Assessment is arranged into the following three stages: -

**1. Stage One**

This is a questionnaire filled in by the contractor and assessed by CHAS. It identifies the administrative adequacy of the contractor's policy and arrangements by demonstrating compliance and satisfactory health and safety management.

**2. Stage Two**

This is a work specific assessment, undertaken by a Member, or their agent. It may include a review of method statements, safety plans, previous similar work, work history and training. John emphasised that this stage should **never** be combined with Stage 1 because approximately 80% of Contractors on a Client's approved list will not progress to the shortlist or 'invitation to tender' for assessment of competence. This saves a lot of time for all involved.

**3. Stage Three**

The final stage is active, on-site checks throughout the duration of the contract by the member, or their agent. It is important to remember that assessment at any stage must take account of risk and should be proportionate to it.

The Assessments are made by a health and safety professional who receives the questionnaires and supporting documents such as training records and risk assessments. He adds the company details to the database and includes requests for information, guidance about areas for improvement and the results of the assessment for client information. Access to all this on-line also avoids unnecessary repeat assessment.

The basic compliance assessment includes these areas: -

- Policy Statement
- Training
- Consultation
- Risk Assessment and PPE
- Health Surveillance
- COSHH
- Manual Handling
- Workplace
- Electrical Safety
- Work Equipment
- Fire Risk Assessment
- Control of Contractors
- Asbestos Management
- DSE
- Accident Reporting and Accident Investigation Statistics

It is important that the applicant can show that there is a system in place and that this includes adequate control measures. Failures at this stage are mainly due to: -

- Risk Assessments: -
  - Inability to distinguish between ‘Hazard’ and ‘Risk’
  - Poor use of Hierarchy of Risk Control
  - Low standard of risk assessment (John mentioned a useful tutorial on the Leeds City Council Website)
  - Use of third party ‘Generic Assessments’ taken ‘off-the-shelf’
- Sub-contractors are not assessed by Contractors.
- To improve COSHH Assessments, John recommended the COSHH Essentials HSE Website.
- John also recommended a visit to the HSE website for help with improving Manual Handling assessments.

John went on to show a special questionnaire for firms with fewer than five employees, which included useful guidance on risk assessment and supporting information needed for training. He also displayed a sample page from the database for a company that was judged to be ‘**Compliant**’. He added that there was also a built-in Quality Feature on the database to record the results of a 5% – 6% sample of all assessments. Added to this was a ‘user-friendly’ review of the questionnaire.

John added that CHAS was actively seeking partners with similar standards so that the approval could be given to mutually acceptable, external assessments. One example was “Constructionline”. As far as Training assessments were concerned, he mentioned that Construction Skill Certification Scheme cards were accepted. He added that standards were being developed in new pre-qualification areas and mentioned Designers, in particular.

Regarding the costs, John said that they were as follows and applied Nationwide: -

- Members - £600 p.a.
- Assessments to Contractors
  - £100 (> 5 employees)
  - £50 (< 5 employees)
  - Free of Charge, if requested by councils.

Assessments completed through arrangement with the Councils could take some time, because of the high number of applications being considered. Those done on a fee paid basis, however, should be returned by the assessor within 10 days. On average, they took about 1½ hour to complete.

*Members' Questions*

**Mark Hoare of Birmingham University** asked what the review period for an assessment was. John replied that it could be 15 or 21 months, depending on the circumstances.

**Graham Richardson of Kendrick Construction Ltd.** asked if the standards allowed for generic risk assessments that may be modified on site. John replied emphatically that the questionnaire required that risk assessments were site specific.

**David Hughes of Hughes Business Services** asked if SMEs could have access to assess contractors. John explained that they could have access to the relevant data for £600. Members with an approved list would make assessments free of charge, as would the councils.

**Dennis Walley of Homeserve plc.** commented that the large Insurers disapproved of firms with, 5 employees who did not have written Health and Safety Policy Statement, because this meant that there was no audit trail. John expressed extreme surprise at this and said that he thought it might even be ‘anti-competitive’.

**Chris Peck of the University of Central England** enquired if it was possible to demonstrate rising standards. John said that there were strong indications of continued compliance with time.

**Warwick Adams of Interserve Project Services** asked about compliance standards for occasional or ‘one-off’ use of contractors. John stated that there was a **Day Rate Membership** available for **£200** but access was limited to 20 days p.a.

**Mark Hoare** commented that the Construction (Design and Management) Regulations had brought the subject of competence strongly to the forefront of contractors’ minds and that John’s recent talk in Birmingham University had been very helpful in explaining what needed to be done.

As there were no more questions the Chairman closed the meeting by thanking John Murphy for a very informative presentation and asked the members to join in showing their appreciation.