

SPECIFY THE STANDARD, NOT THE SCHEME

Pre-qualification and the Common Assessment Standard: the FIS position in brief

FIS summary position, October 2026.

BACKGROUND

The construction industry has been trying to end duplicated pre-qualification for nearly 30 years.

- **Single registers (1990s).** Clients each ran their own pre-qualification questionnaires, so contractors filled in the same information again and again. The Latham (1994) and Egan (1998) reports called this out, and national registers were set up in response. Other schemes followed, clients chose different ones, and contractors ended up joining several.
- **Mutual recognition (2007–2010).** The 2007 Construction (Design and Management) Regulations set common health and safety “core criteria”, and SSIP launched in 2009 so that member schemes would recognise each other’s assessments. Even so, a 2009 industry survey put the cost of duplicated pre-qualification at up to £5,000 per small or medium-sized enterprise (SME) a year.
- **One standard (2017 onwards).** Industry identified clients specifying a particular scheme as a core cause of duplication. CAS launched in 2019, free data sharing between assessment bodies followed, and Procurement Policy Note (PPN) 03/24 made CAS the default for in-scope public bodies. More than 22,000 firms now hold CAS.

Each fix was meant to end duplication, and each time it returned in a new form. Over the same period, the schemes moved from public hands into commercial ownership, much of it private equity, and became businesses whose income comes largely from supplier fees.

THE NATURE OF THE CHALLENGE

The Common Assessment Standard (CAS) and Safety Schemes in Procurement (SSIP) were set up so that a specialist contractor proves its competence once and every buyer accepts it. FIS supports CAS. But many FIS members tell us the system is not working as intended. Clients and main contractors often name a particular scheme or provider rather than the standard, and the supply chain pays the cost.

Members report that:

- they pay more than once for the same assurance, holding several schemes to work for different clients;
- valid CAS certificates are turned down because a client has asked for a named provider;
- CAS and SSIP do not formally recognise each other, so firms holding CAS can still be charged for SSIP;
- the CAS questions are not applied consistently across assessment bodies, so the same evidence can get different results;
- data sharing between assessment bodies is hard to follow, and suppliers cannot see where their information goes or who can view their documents.

A 2024 FIS survey of 78 members found that only about 40% of tenders requiring pre-qualification referenced CAS, and that members held almost three named schemes each. Nearly two-thirds had never tried to offer CAS in place of a named scheme, and more than two in three of those who had were refused.

HOW DUPLICATION HAPPENS NOW

Duplication used to come from clients' own questionnaires. Now it comes mainly from how pre-qualification products are sold and specified.

- **Free to the buyer, paid by the supplier.** A provider can offer a client a portal and supply-chain checks at little or no cost, funded by subcontractor fees. Once the client names that provider, its supply chain becomes, in effect, a captive market, whatever equivalent assurance a subcontractor already holds.
- **CAS is rarely sold as CAS.** It usually appears as a level inside a provider's own product range, and the product name, not the standard, becomes what clients specify. Each newly recognised assessment body has the same incentive to launch its own branded tier.
- **In-between tiers and add-ons.** Products offering more than SSIP but less than CAS, separate building safety checks on top of the Building Safety section already in CAS, and extras bundled into fees all make prices hard to compare.
- **Recognition is free in one system and paid for in the other.** CAS data is shared between assessment bodies at no cost in principle. SSIP "deemed to satisfy" certificates are priced by each scheme with no published rate, and fees for the same administrative check can vary more than tenfold depending on which scheme the client names.
- **No common rules for assessment bodies.** The rules allow bodies to use their own versions of the CAS questions, there is no shared marking guide, and there is no code of conduct on how bodies advise suppliers. An SME that does not know CAS well can be sold something it does not need.

WHY IT PERSISTS

The people choosing the scheme are not the people paying for it, and those who pay often have no choice.

- **Cheap for the main contractor.** Running supply-chain checks through a provider's portal saves staff and systems, and the cost moves down the chain.
- **Buyers know brands, not the standard.** The people setting a requirement may not understand CAS or what its levels mean, so they name the scheme they know.
- **Building Safety Act caution.** "Enhanced" products are marketed into concern about the competence duty, even though CAS already has a Building Safety section and requiring CAS can help clients show they have met that duty.
- **Inertia.** Requirements set years ago are rarely reviewed, and portal links make switching look costly.
- **The supply chain cannot push back.** Subcontractors fear losing work if they challenge a requirement in a live tender.
- **Nobody owns the problem.** SSIP says it cannot intervene on price, Build UK sees scheme choice as the client's commercial decision, and the clients who choose do not bear the cost.

THE COST TO SPECIALISTS

Each extra certificate adds no new assurance, but brings another annual fee, another portal and more management time. Where a named certificate is made a condition of payment, contractors may pay fast-track fees to release money for work already done. SMEs that cannot carry several schemes may drop out of supply chains, duplicated cost flows back into project prices, and time spent proving the same systems again and again would be better spent on supervision, training and installation quality.

WHY NOW

CAS Version 6 is published on 1 November 2026, and work on Version 7 will begin soon. The Building Safety Act requires clients to seek better evidence of competence. That calls for better, more portable assurance, not more branded gateways around it. The Version 6 launch is the moment to fix the gaps.

OUR FIVE ASKS

One principle runs through all five: specify the standard, never the scheme. If a subcontractor holds the required assurance through a recognised body, it should be accepted.

1. **Specify the standard, not the scheme.** Clients and main contractors should ask for “CAS from any Recognised Assessment Body” at the level they need, review older requirements that name a provider, and train procurement teams on what each CAS level means.
2. **Make CAS and SSIP work together.** Build UK and the SSIP Board should issue a joint statement that CAS certification satisfies any SSIP requirement. Where a “deemed to satisfy” certificate is still needed, its fee should be published, reflect the cost of the check and be kept separate from optional add-ons.
3. **Apply one consistent standard.** Build UK should publish a clear matrix showing how CAS levels line up across every assessment body, introduce a shared marking guide and cross-body calibration, and require bodies to market CAS as CAS rather than as a tier in their own product range.
4. **Put suppliers in control of their data.** Every assessment body should offer the same free, simple route for sharing CAS data, with no linked purchase. Suppliers should be able to see who their data is shared with, when and why, and buyers should see supporting documents only with the supplier’s consent.
5. **Stop passing costs down the supply chain.** Clients that want a portal or additional service should pay for it directly. Payment for completed work should never depend on registering with a particular provider, and assessment bodies should work to an enforceable code of conduct that rules out client exclusivity and unnecessary upselling.

WHAT MEMBERS CAN DO

When a client or main contractor names a single scheme, use the Responsible No: politely offer the standard, ask for “CAS from any Recognised Assessment Body” and share the CAS certificate you already hold. The FIS template email and CAS Toolkit can help. If an assessment body advises you to buy another product when you already hold CAS at the right level, ask it to explain in writing why. Where a client keeps insisting on a single scheme, report it to FIS so we can build the evidence.