



Wilson Chowdhry

## Guarding Watch

**The Security Industry Authority has been winning many plaudits for its 'customer-facing' approach to regulation, not least the Forums it runs in relation to the Approved Contractor Scheme. Wilson Chowdhry reports from the latest gathering, where tweaks to the licensing process, rogue clients and contractors and the latest figures emerging from the first ACS audits were all on the agenda.**

## The Crime of Connivance

LATE AS I WAS FOR THE SECURITY INDUSTRY Authority's (SIA) recent Approved Contractor Scheme (ACS) Forum, the content of each speaker presentation proved to be excellent. However, whenever far-reaching questions were posed to the SIA representatives present, they were merely ushered to one side with suggestions that such enquiries were not within the remit of those Regulator employees present. More alarmingly, a recurring theme during 'Question Time' was the notion that the ACS Team had scheduled the day in such a way that there was little time allocated for queries to be resolved in any case.

Worryingly, it has emerged that less than 10% of the security industry's guarding companies have achieved a UKAS-approved BS EN ISO9001, BS 7499 and BS 7858 accreditation for their quality and operational activities and standards which would have allowed Fast-Track entry to the ACS. A frightening statistic for an industry with nigh on 2,500 registered organisations. Even more so when you consider that the British Standards have been in existence for decades.

On a more positive note, ACS assistant director Andrew Shephard informed me last month that 159 contractors have passed their initial ACS audit assessment, including 89 Fast-Track companies. The first time success rate for Fast-Track is 85%-90%, and 70% for the standard route.

### British Standards in guarding

Why have British Standards not become a greater feature of UK guarding? I would suggest this is due to the lack of previous incentive, disincentives associated with cost and the non-existent stimulus of client-driven minimum standards. Thankfully, the Regulator is fully aware of this issue. It recognises the commitment of organisations that have achieved – or are working towards – ACS.

During the Forum, I was soothed by the emollient fusillade of beneficial improvements detailed by the SIA's ACS project manager Ian Maxwell, who spoke of there being "no need to re-supply ID documents on application unless there are changes to the address details, etc." Another improvement to the ACS includes the introduction of blank Application Forms available to training providers and security companies in bulk and on request.

Maxwell also described a potential online application and payment method designed as part of a high-tech e-licensing scheme, coupled with a tracking facility for pending licence application status details available both online and via the SIA's Call Centre (more of which anon). Highly commendable solutions.

The Regulator has also indicated that it will return all original documentation by courier, and is assessing the validity of international security qualifications as part of a comparability study that may see credits afforded to SIA licence applications. Although this could be prone to abuse if not researched thoroughly, it would introduce a rational fairness to the current licensing regime.

### Online tracking of applications

With what, exactly, is the Regulator adorning the table of the carnivorous, avant-garde, ACS-approved security beast?

The already prevalent benefit concerning an allocation of 15% of staff who can be deployed to site while their SIA licence applications are pending has helped ACS companies that can expand to match demand. This aspect has also been braced by an allocation of Licence Dispensation Notices in excess of the 15% for "discernible extenuating circumstances". This would include any major commercial growth.

Directors espousing the ACS also stand to benefit significantly from major alterations to the licensing remit that will include electronic applications by companies via a basic spreadsheet or linked to their current Human Resources systems and internal ID checking facility (waivering the requisite resubmission of original documentation at renewal stage).

These two aspects would be allied to an online tracking mechanism that will, when in full effect, provide two spreadsheets – one detailing pending licence application status, the other actual status.

At the Forum this idea became something of a hot topic as most guarding company representatives in attendance could not comprehend why the SIA is so adamant that such a mechanism would be based on a two-screen data entry record.

The source of their concern centres on the pending application data screen only indicating the application receipt date, confirmation of satisfactory supplementary information in unitary check boxes and confirmation that a decision had been made. This is to be complimented by the actual licence screen listing confirmed licences.

It was suggested that correlation between the two screens would evidence the attainment or failure of an application. Confirmation of a decision without an allied entry of a successful licence on the second data screen would then signpost the failure of an applicant to achieve a licence. Ever inquisitive, I questioned the validity of such presumption based on the probability of lag time. I was curtly advised that the infallible system would be an automated one without any significant delays. Only time will tell if this whimsical response is realised.

### Rogue elements still persist

One question which remains unanswered is a poignant concern focusing on the selection of rogue security providers (who continue to breach SIA legislation) at tender time by clients who know full well they are conniving with miscreants. This collusion should be met with abhorrence by our sector, the SIA and central Government. I have been told that legislation doesn't exist to prosecute such activity which, if not curbed, will decelerate – if not halt altogether – the progress of regulation.

If the legislation doesn't exist, who better than the SIA to lobby Parliament for a review and development of the Private Security Industry Act 2001? Alternatively, the SIA could take a trial case to the Civil Courts and set a precedent under a claim against these flirtatious clients for collusion or connivance under the proceeds of crime.

In summary, then, I commend the way in which the SIA has built – and subsequently championed – an excellent interface between all stakeholders. However, I do take issue with respect to the transparency of information offered (in particular the pseudo nature of the proposals being put forward just now).

The SIA must increase the level of incentivisation for companies to adopt Best Practice at all times, particularly in relation to ACS companies actively promoting compliance and subjecting themselves to the highest degree of scrutiny within the industry. ■

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**"The conniving client companies still intent on employing rogue elements from within the private security industry may still be obtaining security on the cheap at this time. However, the long-term prognosis doesn't look so favourable for them"**