

1. Issue:

1.1. To review the oral examination process undertaken by MCA examiners as part of the process of issuing UK Certificates of Competency under Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW).

2. Background:

2.1. The oral examination process has not been revised or reviewed since its introduction and as a result it was agreed that it was an appropriate time for a full review to be undertaken. This was announced at the Merchant Navy Training Board meeting with MCA officials in autumn 2006.

2.2. The aim is to research information about the existing oral examination procedure including informal discussions with colleagues within the MCA. Based on this information a questionnaire survey of stakeholders and candidates was undertaken between January and March 2008. 945 responses were received.

2.3. The results of the survey were co-ordinated and graphed and made publicly available from May 2008. The Fyfe analysis of the wealth of additional comments received has now been completed and provides an indication of the areas for further consideration.

2.4. This draft paper draws on the research and survey results and is presented for discussion with the Steering Group to agree the key areas and make recommendations for further action.

3. Terms of Reference

Key areas to be addressed as detailed in the terms of reference are as follows:

3.1. The benefits of the existing oral examination system and any alternatives that may be available

The benefits of having an oral examination procedure as part of the STCW process provide an independent verification of the overall knowledge of the seafarer.

There is a need to question whether the MCA provides benefit in undertaking this service or whether other organisations such as the authorised training colleges would be better placed to do this as they are providing the formal course and would know the students and their strengths and weaknesses well.

There is a need to question whether the Marine Offices of the MCA are sited in the most appropriate locations to undertake the oral examinations or whether there might be other opportunities or locations that would be preferable to the customer.

There is a need to consider whether the MCA remains the most appropriate authority to provide this service or whether there are any other organisations that might be better placed to do this.

3.2. The present training and monitoring of MCA examiners and to consider whether there is a need for improvement

The oral examinations are based on the set syllabus and the questions asked cover the different areas of this syllabus. There are no standard questions nor is there any currently any benchmarking of the quality of the questions or level of pass rate to ensure that there is a consistent approach taken for fairness. This is a weakness of the current system although there are some extremely good practices within the MCA at a local level where training of examiners is carried out with four or five different surveyors before they go solo and even then they are monitored for the first few times to ensure consistency.

Some examiners have their own bank of questions that they draw from to ensure the syllabus is covered but these vary and are not often shared or pooled. The level of question may vary from person to person.

3.3. The customer service provided to candidates requiring an oral examination and to consider whether there is a need for improvement

The location of the marine offices needs to be considered as to whether these are the most appropriate for the seafarers taking the examinations.

3.4. Whether the existing system is able to provide a consistent and fair examination system

The current system is not auditable and as a result, despite the best of intentions, it is not possible to demonstrate that the standards of examination are being consistently being applied. This is a concern of the examiners and there is no best practice guidance available either.

4. Research

In considering whether the procedures for the oral examination process remains up to date with developments in marine and shipping matters it is necessary to review them and consider the demand for them and where they are undertaken and whether this is still appropriate. This has never been undertaken. It is important that this service is able to be provided in the most efficient, effective and independent way for the seafarers and to ensure consistency in the examination process. The provision of this service needs to be easily accessible and provide an excellent customer service.

4.1. Benchmarking

It is also important to consider what the MCA does and benchmark this against other organisations providing a similar service and to seek the views of the MCA surveyors currently undertaking oral examinations. This was conducted through a survey, through discussions at the MCA Examiners Seminar in May and through comments received direct. All comments received were incorporated into a Fyfe analysis and the results of the survey and the final analysis was used as the basis for the survey questionnaire.

Four case studies have been researched in support of this report as follows. The information has been prepared using publicly available information and additional information provided for this report by the organisations involved. The information provided in the case studies have all been cleared for our use in this review by the individual organisations.

Driving Standards Agency (DSA)

DSA's maxim is 'Safe Driving for Life' and they endeavour to influence drivers' behaviour for the better throughout their driving career and cut novice accidents by concentrating on the early years of driving in the run up to their test and the period immediately after. DSA primary aim is to promote road safety in Great Britain by improving driving standards and in particular by testing drivers (including motorcycle riders) and driving instructors fairly and efficiently.

The Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA)

AMSA is the national safety agency with a primary role in maritime safety, protection of the marine environment and maritime and aviation search and rescue. One of their primary responsibilities is "Enforcing training standards and competency of seafarers and coastal pilots".

The Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA)

MPA's mission statement is "To develop and promote Singapore as a premier global hub port and an international maritime centre, and to safeguard Singapore's strategic maritime interests". Singapore is a Party to the International Convention on Standards of Training, certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW). Training Standards Department oversees maritime training, certification and conduct assessments of seafarers to ensure that they have acquired acceptable standards of skills and competence to perform the required tasks on board ships. Simulator-aided assessments and oral examinations for officers sitting for the various classes of CoCs are conducted.

The South African Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA)

SAMSA's mission statement is "To efficiently and effectively raise awareness of maritime opportunities and obligations; administer safety and security at sea and prevent pollution by ships; and ensure a coherent and productive maritime policy in order to facilitate and promote South Africa's maritime interests with a committed, transparent, professional and sustainable organization".

4.2. Survey

Stakeholders and candidates were consulted and encouraged to complete a questionnaire regarding the oral examinations process. The survey was divided into key areas for consideration as a result of our research. These were:

Benefits of the existing system ~ The MCA currently conducts the oral examinations for the Certificates of Competency on an independent basis

Customer Service ~ The MCA currently conducts the oral examinations at each of its Marine Offices. Some Marine Offices conduct exams on a regular basis, others less frequently

Fees ~ The MCA currently offers an oral exam at a single charge as a package, whether you are applying for a Notice of Eligibility (NoE) or attending an oral exam.

Consistency and Fairness ~ The MCA operates a fair and consistency policy for the conduct of oral examinations, however to ensure further fairness and consistency, the following areas should be further considered:

- Resists with a different examiner
- One-to-one basis
- Preparatory work
- Multiple choice test
- Simulator test

5. Key areas for discussion

Each key area has been presented separately in a self contained and comprehensive paper and each follows the same format for discussion:

- Possible Solution
- Benefits
- Benchmark
- Data
- Comments

Each issue includes all the relevant information drawn from the surveys and extensive research and this has been collated together to enable discussion and agreement/recommendations to be sought from the Steering Group

The four issues are as follows:

Issue One: The benefits of the existing oral examination system and any alternatives that may be available

Issue Two: The present training and monitoring of MCA examiners and to consider whether there is a need for improvement

Issue Three: The customer service provided to candidates requiring an oral examination and to consider whether there is a need for improvement

Issue Four: Whether the existing system is able to provide a consistent and fair examination system

6. Additional Reports

The following additional reports have been used to prepare this discussion paper:

- Summary of MCA examiners survey comments and results
- Stakeholder and Candidate survey comments and results
- Fyfe analysis of additional survey comments received
- Case Study Driving Standards Agency (DSA)
- Case Study The Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA)
- Case Study The Maritime and Port Authority of Singapore (MPA)
- Case Study The South African Maritime Safety Authority (SAMSA)